

A vertical photograph of a snowy street at night. The street is covered in a layer of snow and leads into the distance, flanked by trees. The trees are decorated with white lights, and there are streetlights along the sides. The sky is dark blue with falling snow. The overall mood is mysterious and serene.

Luke's wife just vanished

IN AN INSTANT

TRACY
WAINWRIGHT

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Tracy Wainwright

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Dedication

To Gary: Thank you for loving me no matter what.

ONE

A demanding voice broke through Terrence's concentration.

"I don't care if your policy says to wait forty-eight hours. I want someone to help me look for my wife."

He glanced up from the stack of paperwork to the man berating the front desk clerk. Late twenties, he guessed. About five foot ten, dark blond hair, fit. Probably worked with his hands, judging from the calluses visible on his palms from across the room. The man's face shone beet red, and he glared at the poor rookie. Jack turned from the angry man and met Terrence's gaze. He raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes.

Terrence groaned, handed the file he'd been flipping through to Officer Clark, and sauntered over.

The distraught man shifted his gaze to meet his straight on. Terrence ignored the pain reflected in the man's eyes. Anyone could fake emotion.

"What's the problem, sir?" He steadied his voice, exuding calm instead of the irritation bubbling inside. The best way to get someone to placidity was to lead them there.

The man spoke through clenched teeth. "My...wife...is...missing. I want someone to help me find her."

"OK. Let's start with the basics. What's your name?"

“Luke Montgomery. My wife’s name is Julie.”

He held the man’s challenging stare. Mr. Montgomery refocused the conversation off himself and back to his wife. Interesting. Most missing wife cases turned out to be the husband. Deflection could be a cover. “OK. Your wife is missing. How long has she been gone?”

“About two hours.”

He blinked several times instead of rolling his eyes as he wanted. Montgomery’s wife probably decided to take a long breakfast with a girlfriend or do some early morning Christmas shopping. The possibilities were endless. “Two hours? She could be anywhere, passing time, goofing off with a friend.” He took a deep breath. “Give her some more time. She’ll show up, and you’ll laugh about it over turkey in a couple weeks.”

Terrence turned to leave, but a hand gripped the sleeve of his uniform, spinning him back around. Heat seared through his veins. “Remove your hand, sir.”

Tears pooled in the man’s eyes, throwing Terrence off balance. He stepped back, and Mr. Montgomery let go of his shirt.

“You don’t get it.” Mr. Montgomery raked his fingers through his hair. “She should be at work. Her car’s where she always parks it. She’s as reliable as a clock. She’s missing, and I know every minute ticking by means the chances of finding her diminishes.”

Terrence’s blood cooled to a simmer. He glanced at Jack and met sympathy in the young cop’s eyes. Great. This guy isn’t going away until someone talks to him. “All right, Mr. Montgomery. Why don’t we get some coffee, sit down, and tell me about your wife.”

The man’s shoulders dropped. “Thank you.”

He turned to the rookie. “Jack?”

“Interview room two is open.”

“This way, Mr. Montgomery.” Terrence led him through the desks, paused to fill two cups of coffee, then continued down a hallway and into the room with a large “2” pasted on the door. He closed the door, flicked his hand toward the metal chair on the opposite side of the table, and plunked down. He glanced behind him. Jack would have sent someone to observe from the other side of the two-way mirror in case this guy got a little too passionate about his missing wife.

He sipped from one of the steaming cups and set the extra one on the table in front of the troubled Mr. Montgomery. The man shook his head.

“OK, tell me more about your wife. When did you last see or talk to her?”

Montgomery splayed his fingers flat on the cold, hard table and stared at them. “About six-thirty when she left for work.”

“What about before that? Did y’all have a fight?” He slurped from his cup again. Black and strong. How he perceived himself. How he preferred his coffee.

Montgomery’s jaw twitched. “No. The morning went great. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until her coworker Sue called to say Julie never showed up.”

He studied the man. Creased brow, open arms. He didn’t appear to be hiding anything.

Terrence leaned back in his chair and ran his thumb along the top rim of the Styrofoam. “Let’s go back to before she left. Give me the play-by-play of the morning.”

The muscles in Montgomery’s face relaxed, and he also leaned back. “We got up at five and went for a run, like we do every weekday morning. I fixed breakfast while she took a shower. We ate together,

and she finished getting ready while I showered. We kissed good-bye, got in our cars, and headed to work."

Ugh. How disgustingly bland. No one could be that boring. He had to be leaving something out. "But she never made it."

He scrunched his eyebrows. "No."

"And her coworker called to tell you?" Terrence drained the rest of the bitter coffee.

"Yes, our friend Sue works with her. When she hadn't shown up by seven thirty, a half hour late, she texted me."

"Um hmm."

"I texted and called Julie, but she never answered. I left my job site and went to hers. I found her car in the parking lot in her usual location. I followed the path she walks every day to her shop. Sue was there, busy getting ready for the day. She hadn't seen or heard a word from Julie. Nothing." Tears filled his eyes, and he released a shuddering sigh. "It's like one instant she was there and the next she was gone."

Terrence tapped his fingertips together. The man certainly gave a good impression of being worried. If someone had abducted this woman and she hadn't simply decided to take a break, she made it simple. A creature of habit. They were the easiest to scout. A stalker had no problem tracking down and finding an effortless path to a person who never varied from routine. Terrence didn't believe in deviating from the law, but in matters of patterns and habits, doing things differently not only kept things interesting, but could also keep someone safe.

He needed time to think.

"You gonna drink that coffee?"

The grieved man shook his head.

Terrence reached for the cup. A tepid sip bought him a few more seconds. Under most circumstances, he wouldn't even consider following up on something like this. They didn't start investigating a missing person unless much more time had passed. Or they found evidence of foul play. A wife didn't show up for work, but her car did. She followed the same routine every day, until today. It could be a case of a bored woman in need of escape. Except for the car.

An affair was always a possibility. A secret plan to sneak off with a boyfriend. It'd been known to happen.

"You contacted anyone else? See if she's talked to someone?"

"Sue texted a couple of friends but tried not to scare them. I called Julie's mom. Asked her what time we're supposed to take her to dinner later this week for her birthday, so I could schedule a job. She said nothing about Julie, so I knew she hadn't talked to her. There's no one else to call. Not without alerting everyone she's missing." Mr. Montgomery lowered his head bracing it with his hands.

Not bad. He didn't seem to be some ignorant, overly trusting husband. But still, a missing person in two hours was a hard sell. "No other family? No one else Julie might contact if something upset her?"

"No. Her dad's been out of the picture for twenty years, and she doesn't have any siblings. Something's happened." His voice cracked, and he glanced up. "Please. Help me find my wife."

Logic told Terrence to stick to protocol. Nothing specifically screamed foul play. But he hadn't looked for any evidence either. Maybe he could go to the work site and check things out. The trip wouldn't take up too much time and nothing else pressed him at the

moment. Just paperwork waited for him that morning.

"You said job site. Where do you work?"

"I'm a carpenter. I'm working at a house in Queen's Lake right now."

"And your wife?"

"Julie works at Colonial Williamsburg. She's an interpreter at one of the small houses." He leaned forward. "She loves her job. She wouldn't miss a day on her own accord. She's never even taken a sick day."

"All right. You've caught me on a slow day. As long as nothing else comes over the line, I can ride out with you and take a look around."

Mr. Montgomery's eyes widened, and his eyebrows lifted. "You believe me? You're going to look for her?"

"I can't promise anything, but I'll check it out." Terrence stood.

The man reached across the table, grasped his hand, and shook it. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

~*~

Terrence steered his cruiser into the busy parking lot and pulled in three spots down from Mr. Montgomery. Plucking his pad and pen out of his pocket, he stepped out of the car and locked the door. "Where's your wife's car?"

"Not here. Julie parks in an employee parking lot."

OK. I get it. Mr. Montgomery wanted him to use her name. Making it more personal. "Can you show me where it is?" He followed in silence as they wove through the old buildings and across several streets, some open to traffic, some not, to a gravel lot labeled

Employee Parking Only.

Mr. Montgomery stopped by a red Honda Civic about ten years old. "This is it."

Terrence noted the car's condition, location, and license plate in his book. He inspected the ground around the car. No rocks scraped or piled. No signs of a struggle. He peeked in the windows. A Bible sat on the passenger seat. Other than that, the car held no clutter. Not one receipt, discarded fast food bag, or sales ad. "Her car always this clean?"

A grin broke through the man's concern. "Yes. Julie's methodical. I told you. Same schedule. Same parking spot. Same thing every day. She's predictable."

"Hmm." That may be what got her in trouble, if she was in trouble. "Do you have a key?"

Mr. Montgomery dug in his pocket, flipped through a set of keys, and handed Terrence the one with a black gripper on the end.

Unlocking the door, he slid into the driver's seat with his legs turned out. Mrs. Montgomery wasn't very tall. He'd have had to move the seat several inches back to accommodate his long legs. He reached under the seat. Nothing. He dug into the storage compartment that doubled as a console. A handful of CDs, a map, and some index cards. He flipped through the index cards. Half were blank. The others had Bible verses written on them. He replaced them and closed the hatch. Next, he inspected the glove box. The manual from the manufacturer, some napkins, and a couple of cards completed his inventory. A quick perusal of the cards showed they were keepsakes from Mr. Montgomery.

He rolled his eyes. No one could be this neat and squeaky clean. He patted the floor under the passenger

seat and pulled out an umbrella. An inspection of the backseat proved fruitless. Not one thing out of place.

He pulled the lever to pop the trunk and walked around to the back of the car and peered in. Two wrapped packages were held in by a flexible netting in the trunk. He checked the tags. *To my one and only love, L. Your wife, J.*

His face was hidden from Mr. Montgomery, so he didn't hold back the grimace. Overly ritualized and sappy sweet. He closed the trunk and handed the keys back to their owner. "Everything looks fine here. Can you show me the building where she works?"

"Sure." He locked the car and turned to cross the parking lot.

Terrence kept his attention alert to the route. He didn't come to Colonial Williamsburg often. Hadn't been there since his last field trip in middle school. He'd never been a fan of history. It didn't take going back too far into the past until things got ugly and he got mad. No, CW would never make it on his list of favorite places to go. Although, he had to admit the holiday decorations adorning all the buildings and street lamps reminded him of the fresh cookies his mom baked every year in preparation for Christmas. He made a mental note to call her once he'd convinced Montgomery he had nothing to worry about.

"This is it," the man told him.

Terrence scanned the small building. Like many of the others, wreaths and garland called travelers in. The smell of cinnamon wafting from inside made the invitation nearly impossible to resist. His growling stomach reminded him he'd skipped breakfast. Too bad Julie Montgomery didn't work in one of the taverns, so he could order something to eat.

He ducked his head and stepped inside. A pale, soft skinned woman dressed in eighteenth century garb grinned a greeting from behind a weaver's wheel. Her gaze shifted to Luke, and her smile faded. Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked them away and pasted the smile back on as she wrapped up a discussion on traditional weave with the couple of older ladies watching her work.

"Thank you." A woman in a gray jacket glanced over her shoulder at the two men, her eyes grazing over Terrence's uniform. She tugged on her friend's arm and quickly exited through a second door.

Terrence met the young woman's gaze. "You're Sue?"

"Yes." She let the wheel go still, yarn resting on her legs. "You're here about Julie? I'm really worried."

"I understand she's usually here by seven?"

"Yes. Every day. I always run late." She blushed and looked at her hands, resting on her swollen stomach. "But not Julie. She's always here on time and gets things started." Her tear-filled eyes met his. "Something's wrong. I know it."

"When did you talk to her last?"

"Last night around eight. We were planning her mom's birthday dinner for later this week. Ms. Fran has adopted us all, and we were going to take her out to celebrate."

He raised his eyebrows. "Us all?"

"Yeah. Several of us who've been friends for several years."

"Her mom's last name?"

She glanced at Luke then answered. "Byers."

He scribbled the name in his notebook. "And Julie seemed OK. Nothing was wrong? She didn't appear

concerned or upset about anything?"

Sue scrunched up her nose. "No. She sounded tired, but we'd had a long day. Julie was excited. She'd ordered balloons and flowers and made the reservations for dinner on Thursday. I tried texting her this morning at least a dozen times. She never answered. That's not like her." A lone tear escaped and trickled down her cheek.

"Did you talk to any of the other workers? Ask if anyone saw her?"

"A few. We don't have a chance to socialize outside of breaks and lunch. We all keep to our own buildings once the work day starts."

He clicked his pen shut. A dead end. No one had seen this woman. Nothing at her car indicated foul play. She simply hadn't shown up for work. She deviated from the norm for a break, and the people around her weren't used to that. He closed his notebook. "Thanks, ma'am. I appreciate it." He turned to Luke. "I think that's about it."

"That's it? You're not –"

"You here about Julie?"

Terrence swiveled toward the voice coming from the open doorway. The young man staring back at him couldn't have been a day over nineteen. He wore a fife costume, complete with white breeches, red coat, and black tri-corner hat. Must be a musician. "You are?"

"Ken."

"Do you know anything about Mrs. Montgomery's whereabouts?"

"I'm not sure. The rumor mill just got around to me, and I came by to see if she'd shown up. We all love Mrs. Julie."

Biting his tongue, Terrence held back a

chastisement. Youth. They always wanted to be involved in something exciting. "So you don't have any pertinent information?"

The boy shrugged, his hands quivering. "I don't know..."

Terrence tapped his foot. "OK. What do you know?"

"I didn't think anything about it, but on my way to work this morning, I found a Starbucks coffee cup on the path. I picked it up and threw it away."

Sue gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

Luke paled.

Terrence studied their faces. "A coffee cup. Does that mean something?"

"Julie—" Luke cleared his throat. "Julie always stopped at Starbucks on her way to work. Always."

Terrence flipped open the notebook and clicked out his pen. "Where was this cup?"

"A few doors down, that way." He motioned the direction Terrence and Luke had come from.

"Show me."

Four buildings down Ken stopped in the path. The pool of coffee had been trampled, but the cold had kept it in place. He noted the location in his book. "And where did you throw the cup away?"

"Over there." Ken pointed to a trash can across the path.

He walked over and peeked in. Trash. He really should carry gloves at all times. He had plenty stashed back in his car. He pulled a flashlight from his belt and peered in. Sure enough, half of a white paper cup with a green logo peeked through a handful of discarded items. Now he was glad he hadn't waited until later in the day to pursue this. The hour still being early just

became a benefit. "Ken. Go find me a clean plastic bag."

Moments later the enthusiastic youth returned. Using the plastic bag, Terrence reached in and retrieved the cup. A lipstick stain shone on the rim, ensuring he'd get DNA. Hopefully, prints, too. He turned to the young man. "I'm going to need you to come back to my car to give me fingerprint samples. I'll need to compare them with anything we find to isolate them from Mrs. Montgomery's or any others."

Ken stared.

"You need to tell anyone?"

"Oh. Yeah. I'll be right back." He sped off.

"You won't find Julie's prints," Luke voiced, heavy with emotion.

"No?"

"She'd have had gloves on."

Of course. "We'll still check. Do you have a hairbrush with some hair in case we don't get prints? We can most likely get DNA from her lipstick imprint."

A weak smile crept on Luke's face. "No. The hair will be in the trash. She cleans her brush every morning, but it'll be there." The smile faded. He reached out but stopped short of grasping Terrence's arm and let his fall to his side. Hope and desperation mixed in the lines creasing his brow. "You think something happened to her? You believe me."

He inspected the plastic encased cup in his hand. "A dropped coffee cup doesn't mean much."

Luke Montgomery's eyes beseeched him.

Normally, none of this would warrant investigation. If only Julie Montgomery hadn't been such a creature of habit. He sighed. "I'll look into it."

TWO

Luke eased up behind the three tourists interested in Sue's weaving demonstration. She prattled on, although less enthusiastically than she normally would, describing her technique and the history behind it. His gaze shifted to the second wheel, which sat still and cold. His chest tightened and his nose burned as he fought a new set of tears. Where could Julie be? No one had any reason to kidnap her. He shook his head and swallowed the growing lump in his throat. It didn't make sense. But neither did her not showing up for work.

As a carpenter, life seldom stayed predictable. He'd always liked it that way. New jobs. Carving wood to create houses, kitchens, furniture. Something different to do every week if not every day.

He swallowed again and stepped forward, catching Sue's gaze as she answered questions.

He glanced away. He couldn't stand to think about never seeing Julie again. Too many hours spent watching crime shows haunted him. Women brutally abused and murdered for some sicko's pleasure.

He flung away the images. He couldn't allow himself to go there. They'd get Julie back. He had to believe that.

But nothing explained her disappearance.

Once again, his life had been turned upside down.

The most unpredictable thing in his life had come

before Julie was in it. His father's sudden heart attack when Luke was twenty-five. One day his dad worked next to him, still pretending he needed guidance in putting together a set of cabinets. The next they were planning his dad's funeral. He looked at the ceiling. He still didn't understand that one.

He worked his jaw. He didn't understand this either. Julie had brought so much stability into his life. A steady calm, as sure as the tides of the river they sometimes went out on with friends. He loved her predictability and steadiness. He loved everything about her.

Swallowing the lump in his throat again, he shifted his weight. At least someone finally listened. The officer had thought he was crazy at first, but it seemed like he would actually look into what had happened to Julie.

He had no idea what would occur next. The coffee cup might help. He couldn't figure out how but clung to hope that it would.

He sucked in air, battling against the pain in his chest. It felt like someone had hammered nails into his heart, piercing him, then plugged up the holes so he couldn't bleed.

Finally, all the customers cleared out. Sue raised her eyebrows, but she didn't ask the question.

He took a deep breath. "We found the cup and think it's hers. Officer...I don't even know his name." Luke shook his head. "Anyway, he's taking the cup back to test it for fingerprints and DNA. At least it convinced him something's off. I'm supposed to get a hair sample from home and meet him at the station."

"Then what? Can I do anything to help?" She fingered the loose yarn in her lap.

He struggled against the urge to scream. He didn't have answers. Helplessness filled him. Meeting the concern in Sue's cobalt eyes, he sighed. "I don't know. Right now, just pray."

"Of course. Keep me updated? You have my number?"

He pulled his cell from his back pocket and scrolled through his contacts. He got to "Mark & Sue." He punched a couple of buttons to make sure he had her number as well as Mark's. "I've got your number. Can you get the Sunday school prayer chain active?" He cleared his throat and swallowed back tears. "You can tell them whatever. Maybe someone will think of something to help. But until we know more, we need prayers most of all."

"OK," Sue whispered. Her gaze moved past Luke to another group coming in, and she forced a smile. "Good morning."

He mouthed thank you to her and headed out.

The twenty-minute drive home seemed much longer. Turning the engine off, he sat in the car, surrounded by silence. The driveway looked barren without Julie's car, even though it'd only been a month since their wedding and her moving in.

She almost always arrived home before him. Even if he got off early, he rarely came home immediately, running errands or stopping by his mom's to allow time for Julie to get there first and enjoy the alone time she craved.

He fought the threatening tears and pounded the steering wheel. He'd almost lost it at the police station. He wouldn't let it happen again. That would mean he'd lost hope. Lost his Julie. That was unacceptable.

He grabbed a sandwich bag from the kitchen on

his way to their bathroom. The trash should have been emptied the night before for pickup today, hopefully. His stomach relaxed when he pulled the can out of the cabinet and spotted the hair Julie had pulled from her brush that morning and a couple Q-tips were the only things in it. He slipped the hair in the bag. As he passed back through their bedroom, he grabbed the framed copy of their engagement picture from the wall and one of Julie in her work costume from the bedside table.

Frigid air whirled around him as he dashed back out to his truck. Funny how he hadn't noticed the cold earlier. He shut it out and started the engine. If only he could block out his racing thoughts.

Instead, he focused on what he could do, what else he could tell the officer. He wracked his brain as he drove to the station, hoping he hadn't forgotten anything.

He groaned. He had to call Fran. Julie's mom needed to know. He turned into the station parking lot and pulled into an empty spot. Slipping his phone out of his back pocket, he unlocked it. He scanned to Fran's name and his finger hovered over the call option. He closed his eyes and hit the off button. He'd wait. See what the cop said then call her.

He pushed through the glass door leading into the station. The hum of conversations and phones ringing greeted him. A laugh rang out from an unseen woman. His heart ached. It'd only been a few hours, and he missed Julie's laugh already.

Slowing his gait, he crept up to the clerk's desk. The young officer who'd gotten the brunt of his wrath his first trip to the police station a couple hours earlier met his gaze. "I, um, I'm here to see the officer I spoke

with this morning. I didn't get his name."

"Cooper."

"Officer Cooper. Can I see him? He asked me to get some things and meet him back here." He held up the bag of hair and the pictures.

The clerk picked up the phone and punched in some numbers. "He's here."

"I'm sorry," Luke said after he hung up the phone. He held up the picture of Julie in her costume. "This is my wife, Julie. She's missing. How would you feel if it was your wife?"

The clerk's face softened.

"Mr. Montgomery," said a deep voice from behind.

He swiveled to face Officer Cooper. "I brought some of Julie's hair. And these."

Officer Cooper took the items and handed them to the clerk. "Get the hair to the lab. Scan the pictures, take Mr. Montgomery out of this one, and print a dozen copies of each. Get the originals back to Mr. Montgomery when you get done."

"Luke."

Officer Cooper looked at him. "What?"

"My name's Luke. I hope this won't take long and I don't have to spend a lot of time here, but Mr. Montgomery is too formal. That was my father's name."

Officer Cooper's stern face mellowed for the first time. "Terrence." He stuck his hand out and Luke shook it. "Let's head back to the interview room." He motioned toward the hall they'd gone down earlier that morning.

~*~