



PRIVATE

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VALERIE WILDE

# PRIVATE D\*CK

A Steamy Contemporary Romance

VALERIE WILDE

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*Take a walk on the Wilde side!*

## Chapter One

---

GRACIE HOISTED the strap of her heavy bag further up her shoulder and glared down the dirty street.

She was standing outside a small take-out restaurant. The unappetizing smell of burnt fat wafted out of the door which was being held open with a brick. It was a greasy looking place with white plastic lawn furniture for those adventurous customers who chose to stay and eat at the restaurant. A little way along the street was a payday loan store. The sign above the door had been smashed a few months back and Gracie was unsurprised to see that it still hadn't been fixed.

In between the two businesses, there was a small, dark entranceway. A stranger, passing through the neighborhood, would assume that it was a blocked up alleyway or the side entrance to one of the neighboring stores. No-one would imagine that it was an actual place of business.

Just inside the entryway, there was a small rectangular metal sign. Maybe once, when it had first been screwed into the brickwork, the sign looked good. It certainly didn't anymore. Green and blue corrosion blossomed across the surface, completely obliterating the name of the agency.

In the two years that Gracie had been working here, no-one had ever bothered to clean that damn sign. It was the only outward indication that behind the front door was a private investigators agency eager for clients. The front door was painted black and, when Gracie pushed it open, there was still no sign that she was entering a business. The steep staircase loomed uninvitingly in front of her.

Gracie had forgotten what a nightmare these stairs were whenever she wore heels. Her last assignment had taken months. Coming back to the office made her see the agency through a fresh pair of eyes, and she did not like what she was seeing.

At the top of the stairs was, finally, a door with the name of the agency: Klarov Investigators.

How many times had she told Klarov that there should be more of a description on that door or a light in the entranceway, or even just cleaning the rust off that metal sign? It was a miracle they ever got any clients at all.

The small waiting room was empty, as was the reception desk. Ginger, the little old lady who'd been working there for decades, didn't work on Saturdays. The waiting room chairs were upholstered in thick material, in a garish shade of orange. They were probably really stylish in the 1970s.

The boss had his own office, his name painted on the frosted glass of the door just off the waiting area: Peter Klarov, P.I. It was lunchtime and light was coming through the boss' office door. None of the rooms had any windows, so if the light was on then Klarov was inside.

Damn it! Gracie grimaced, tiptoeing so that Klarov wouldn't hear her. She hadn't written up her last assignment yet and she



didn't need another lecture from Klarov about getting on top of her paperwork.

There was another door just off the reception, a small door that looked like it would open to reveal a supply closet. But no, that was Gracie's office, which she shared with another detective. From the look of the place, it seemed like the agency was one unpaid bill away from bankruptcy. They weren't, but Klarov was too set in his ways to get an office in a nicer part of town.

Crystal was slumped over her laptop, typing dully. Gracie clicked the office door closed behind her.

"G! You're back!" Crystal said, looking up and grinning widely.

"Yep, just got into -"

Crystal shot out of her seat and bounded across the office. She was bubbly and perky in a way that made her damn good at her job. No-one ever suspected the blonde of being a private investigator.

"Oh, my god, you look so healthy! I'm sooo jealous. You got paid to go on a cruise, Gracie. I wish I could get jobs like that!"

"Eh, I still had to work the whole time, Crystal."

"So?? A cruise!" Crystal argued, "So what if you had to follow a cheating husband around the whole time!"

Gracie shrugged. She hated working assignments when one spouse was looking for proof that the other was being unfaithful. They made her sick to her stomach.

Most of the time these couples needed to sit down and talk to each other; they needed to actually put effort into their

relationship. Instead, they'd hire a private detective and that never ended well. It could only ever go one of two ways. Either they'd find out, definitively, that they were being cheated on. Or there would be no proof and then the client would get angry, assuming the PI hadn't done a good enough job tracking the suspected spouse.

Whatever the result, it still meant that trust was dead in their relationship. Working for Klarov had given Gracie a dim view of relationships. It was the reason why she'd been single for the last two years.

"The sad thing was, the husband was clearly in love with his wife. She didn't need me there. The two of them need couples therapy!"

Crystal's smile dropped a little. She'd heard Gracie say all this before. Many times.

"But..." Crystal cocked her head to one side, "Then we'd all be out of a job."

"Yeah, yeah," Gracie sighed, "Listen, are you working tonight? Want to grab a drink and catch up properly?"

"Uh, sorry -"

**BANG!**

It was the sound of someone in the next room, banging his hand against the wall. It was also a sound that Gracie knew well. She rolled her eyes. This was another part of being back at the agency that she hadn't missed at all. Rather than actually get up from his desk and walk a few feet, Klarov would summon his employees by banging on his office wall.

Crystal giggled, watching her friend's reaction.

"The ogre calls..." Gracie muttered.

Crystal grinned wider. She had missed her friend but that wasn't the only reason that she was glad Gracie was back.

“He's been such a nightmare, ever since you left. I swear he's been in a bad mood for the past two months.”

There was another loud bang on the wall. Klarov was getting impatient. The few framed pictures that were still up on the wall rattled precariously.

“He's always in a bad mood!” Gracie said, putting her bag down on her desk and heading back out.

Klarov's grandfather had started the agency back in the day. Gracie didn't know much about what the business was like back then, except that it was Grandpa Klarov that had bought these offices. Her boss had once tried to convince her that, back when the agency started, it had been considered luxurious. Gracie did not believe him.

Eventually, the grandfather had left the business to his eldest son. The son had done well, the business had flourished, the name Klarov becoming synonymous with discretion and reliability.

Most of the clients they got nowadays were because of that reputation, even though the agency's glory days were long gone.

Gracie pushed open Klarov's door without knocking. She figured he was expecting her anyway.

Klarov was a tall man with a mess of unkempt hair that was, Gracie thought critically, exactly what a real-life ogre would look like. He lounged back in his chair, one arm stretched out to bang on the wall again.

“You read magazines, Gracie?”

Gracie pulled out the chair in front of Klarov's desk, the nice one that was reserved for clients, and sat down.

"Nice to see you too, Klarov."

"You know," Klarov smirked, raising a cocky eyebrow. It amazed Gracie that a man in a tiny, windowless office, could be so damned confident all the time. "You can just call me Pete."

"Klarov suits you better."

"Yep, there's that Gracie wit that we've all been missing," he opened one of the desk drawers, pulled out a bundle of papers and tossed them across the desk so that Gracie could see it was actually a magazine. "Have you ever read this?"

Gracie picked it up, flicking through. "Not this particular issue. I used to buy it when I was a kid."

"Well, this is going to be one of the last issues unless we can help them."

Grace flipped the magazine closed, looking down at the familiar bold name printed on the front cover: Attitude.

Did teenagers still buy magazines?!?

It was hardly a surprise that Attitude was in trouble. Actually, the only surprise to Gracie was that the magazine was still in print

"Do they need help setting up their website?"

Klarov gave her an unimpressed look and held out his hand for the magazine back. Gracie held it out, but it was still too far away and Gracie had to half stand to reach Klarov's hand.

"No. Someone keeps stealing their articles and leaking them online hours before Attitude goes to print. The owner thinks

it's a case of industrial espionage.”

“Riiight,” Gracie said skeptically, “You know it's far more likely they've been hacked by some troll sitting in his parent's basement somewhere.”

“That's what I told the owner a month ago and he got some IT experts in. They're not being hacked. It's someone from their office. Cheer up, Gracie. This is going to be easy. I've got a job lined up for you at Attitude, all you have to do is keep an eye on the staff and report back anything suspicious.”

“I hate industrial espionage cases.”

“Yeah? What kind of cases do you actually enjoy, Gracie?”

Gracie shook her head. There were plenty of cases that she enjoyed. Klarov had a habit of deliberately misunderstanding her words.

“Anyway, this one should be especially easy. The owner has a suspect already. The editor, Drew Chesney. Apparently, there's been some bad feeling between him and Clive for a while.”

“Clive's the client? The magazine owner?”

“Uh-huh, you're due to start as Chesney's PA on Monday,” Klarov opened another desk drawer and took out a folder. “Here's all the information you need on the company.”

Gracie eyed the folder, not reaching out for it.

“Do you trust this guy Clive?”

Klarov pushed the folder further across his desk. “I trust his money. Clive Huang was one of Dad's best clients. Jeez, Gracie, it'll be simple. Just shadow Chesney, get some proof that he's sabotaging the magazine. You'll probably be done by the end of the week. I'll even give you next weekend off...if you've wrapped it up by then.”

“Thanks,” she said sarcastically, and with that Gracie reached for the folder, accepting the assignment. She had a horrible premonition that this case was not going to be as simple as Klarov thought it was.

“Oh, and Gracie?” Klarov called as she stood to leave. “I expect your report on the Alexa Bishop case on my desk before you start at Attitude.”

There it is, Gracie thought, it was great to be back.

## Chapter Two

---

“NEW JOB ALREADY?” Crystal asked in surprise as Gracie came back into their shared office.

“Ugh, yeah,” Gracie said, slapping the new assignment folder down on her desk. She was half-tempted to storm back into Klarov’s office and demand a bit of time off before she started her next job. Except, the folder was right in front of her and Gracie was already feeling the stirrings of excitement that came with each new assignment.

This was why she’d become a PI in the first place, the thrill of the chase, of actually catching bad guys, instead of unfaithful spouses. This was a proper assignment, even if it was a simple case of industrial espionage. For the first time in months, she would actually have a job to really get stuck into, instead of just following a cheating spouse around and snapping incriminating photos.

“What kind of job is it?”

“Undercover at some company,” Gracie said, flipping the folder open and taking a quick look through.

Crystal laughed, “That sucks!”

“Huh?” Gracie shot her a surprised look.

“Sounds like waaaay too much work.”

Gracie shrugged, her attention caught on a plastic ID card that had been made up for her. Klarov had used one of the passport photos that Gracie had given him a few months back for the picture on the card.

Underneath her photo was the fake name that Klarov had given her: Greta Jones.

“Greta!” Gracie cursed. Turning the card over, she saw there was a tiny computer chip inside the plastic; this must be a key card to get into the Attitude Offices.

Crystal smirked. “See, this is why I prefer following cheating husbands around all day. I don’t have to remember what stupid alias Pete made up for me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she muttered, closing the folder. “PI’s had it a lot easier in the days before Google.”

Crystal gave her a blank look. Using a fake name was essential to undercover work nowadays, now that the internet gave everyone instant access to anyone else’s info. Anyone with an ounce of tech savvy could find out that Gracie worked for Klarov if they knew her real name. She wasn’t going to have a problem remembering her fake name: the only issue was how much she hated the name Greta.

Klarov always insisted on creating fake names that started with the same letter as a person’s real name. He thought it was easier to remember.

Last time Gracie went on an undercover assignment, Larov had made up the paperwork and called her Gertrude. She supposed Greta was an improvement over Gertrude.

“I’m going home to read this,” Gracie said, gathering up her bag.



Crystal waved her off cheerfully, “Night, Greta!”

“Yep, same to you!” Gracie called out. She didn’t bother letting Klarov know she was leaving.

Gracie had already been back to her apartment once since getting off the cruise this morning. But it had been a rushed visit. Just long enough to drop off her luggage. As she arrived home she remembered why she’d been so eager to leave earlier.

The air in Gracie’s apartments was stale. The windows had been shut for months and the curtains drawn the whole time she’d been away. It wasn’t the only reason that her apartment felt unwelcoming.

She’d never really decorated the place. There were no knick-knacks on the shelves and no photos on the wall, although she’d been living there for nearly two years. It was sterile, not really anyone’s idea of a home.

And to cap it all off, there was no food in the fridge

Just down the block, there was a small bar that she knew served food every day, at any hour. Going to Happy Mike’s was much more appealing than staying here and airing out the apartment.

When she arrived at Happy Mike’s, the place was deserted. Gracie took a seat at the bar and opened the folder that Klarov had given her. Reading it through intently, she focused on memorizing every detail of her assignment. As she worked, she sipped a beer, nursing it slowly.

As it got later in the afternoon, the bar began to fill up. A large group of hipsters came in, almost all of them heavily tattooed and with the sides of their heads shaved. They chatted loudly, breaking Gracie’s concentration for a few minutes as she

watched them. A waiter pushed all of the tables at the front of the bar together for the large group. They sat down, settling down to speak more quietly in a steady thrum of conversation that was less distracting for Gracie.

Eventually, happy that she knew pretty much everything she would need to start work at Attitude magazine on Monday morning, she set the folder aside and ordered a meal.

Despite all the waiters being busy with the large party of new arrivals, her order was taken smoothly and arrived minutes later. Unfortunately, there was no cutlery.

Gracie looked up and down the bar, but the bartender had gone to help take orders from the hipsters. She stared down at her mac and cheese, longingly.

“Excuse me,” she said, turning in her seat as a server walked behind her but he walked right past without stopping. A few seconds later a younger, female server, rushed by.

“Hey, can I get -” Gracie began in a rush.

“Sorry, I’ll be right with you,” she said, not looking at Gracie.

Gracie looked around in frustration. Now all the servers had disappeared!

“Hey,” a man sitting a few chairs down the bar nodded at her, “Do you need a knife and fork?”

“I’d be fine with just a fork,” Gracie said, turning her back on the man as she thought she heard the kitchen door swing open. She had been mistaken, there was still no sign of a server.

“Well,” the man said wryly, “Let’s aim for more than fine. How about a fork, knife, and even a spoon?”

Grace turned back sharply, her eyes narrowing. Was that some kind of shitty innuendo?

The man grimaced and leaned over the bar. “I mean, uh, the bartender keeps clean cutlery back here.”

His arm hooked under the bar and groped around for a few seconds before he sat back. In his hand was a pint glass and about four sets of cutlery, each set wrapped up neatly in a paper napkin

“Neat trick,” Gracie said as the man offered her the pint glass with a flourish. She took a single bundle of cutlery out. “Thanks.”

“No problem. I’m guessing you haven’t been here on a Sunday before.”

Gracie was already attacking her mac and cheese. She had to pause, swallow and then look at the man carefully. She hadn’t come here to make conversation. Her instincts screamed at the idea of giving away any personal information about herself, even something as harmless as this.

The guy smiled, his large blue eyes could, in a certain light, Gracie supposed, be described as attractive.

“Uh, no.” Gracie put another loaded forkful of food in her mouth before he could ask another question.

“Those guys over there,” he jerked his thumb towards the group of hipsters. “They’ve been coming in here every Sunday for the last month. There’s an axe throwing place a block over and they like to come here afterward.”

“A what throwing place?”

“Axe,” he said with a grin. It was, Gracie noted dispassionately, a rather cute grin. The kind of boyish grin that other, less world-weary women, might call adorable. But Gracie had seen enough about how relationships fell apart: she knew that adorable smiles were no indication of character.

She leaned back in her seat with a confused frown. “So what? They’re farmers?”

The man burst out laughing. “That would make more sense. No, it’s sort of like going out to play darts with your friends, but they use axes.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“They’d probably be very pleased to hear you say that. It’s all very tame.”

Gracie put her fork down, taking a break from scarfing down her food.

“I’m Andrew, Andy, by the way.”

Gracie gave him an appraising look. Spending a few minutes chatting to a good looking guy was not, she decided, the worst thing in the world. She stuck her hand out for Andy to shake.

“G.”

“Just G?” Andy asked, moving along a seat so he was next to her before taking her hand. It was a firm handshake. Reliably strong hands.

“Just G,” Gracie confirmed, using Crystal’s nickname for her.

“Well, Just G, it seems you’ve been missing out on the cultural phenomenon that is axe throwing. Allow me to explain it to you.”

“Go ahead,” Gracie said, not quite smiling as she picked up her fork and started eating again. This was much better than sitting in her stuffy, boring apartment and ordering take-out for dinner. Andy was witty and entertaining, easy to listen to as she ate. It was, she mused, the perfect way to unwind. Being here was a world away from her last assignment; a fun Sunday afternoon before she had to start her next job.

“Wait, you’ve been talking for ten minutes about how terrible axe throwing is, but you’ve never even tried it!” Grace chuckled, pushing her empty plate away from her.

“A person doesn’t have to try something to know it’s silly.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong,” Grace said, resting her chin on her hand. Andy wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. He didn’t even have the tell-tale band of pale skin that the sleazy and the recently divorced always had. She grinned warmly, “Some things, a person just has to try for themselves.”

“Hmm,” Andy’s eyes seemed to sparkle as his gaze dropped to her lips, lingering there. “I guess that’s sometimes true.”

He put his elbow on the bar, resting his chin on his hand, mirroring her position. Gracie knew that if she saw a couple sitting at a bar in this same position, she would assume the two people were flirting with each other. Was that what she and Andy were doing right now?

“Hey guys,” the bartender said. Gracie quickly sat up straight. She’d been so focused on Andy that she hadn’t even noticed the bartender approaching them. She usually prided herself on her situational awareness, but Andy was pretty distracting. “So...my shift is about to end...do you mind settling up your tab now?”

“Sure. No problem,” Andy said quickly, getting his wallet out of his pocket.

The bartender rang up their bills and Andy paid first. Professional instinct kicked in and, as Andy handed over his credit card, Grace glanced at it, reading it upside down. The embossed name on the card read Andrew Chesney.

Grace’s stomach lurched uncomfortably. It wasn’t an uncommon name, but there wasn’t a doubt in Gracie’s mind.

This was the same man.

God, she'd come so close to ruining everything! It was only pure chance that she'd introduced herself as G rather than her real name. The folder of information on Attitude magazine was on the bar behind her. While Chesney paid, Gracie tucked the folder safely away in her large handbag. Luckily, there was nothing on the outside to indicate what the folder contained.

"I'd better be leaving too," Gracie said, getting her wallet out to pay. She had enough cash that she didn't have to get her own credit card, with her real name, out and risk Chesney seeing it.

"Oh," Andy looked at her with obvious disappointment. He crumbled up his receipt, shoving it in his pocket. "Yeah, me too. Hopefully, I'll see you here next Sunday?"

Grace plastered a thin smile on her face. Oh, she'd be seeing him a lot sooner than that! Her stomach gave another uncomfortable lurch. Of course, the one time that she let her guard down and let herself relax and chat with a handsome guy, this had to happen!

"Maybe," she lied. God, she was never going to come to Happy Mike's ever again.

"Cool, it was nice meeting you, Just G!" he flashed her one of his disarming smiles. Gracie watched him walk away, mentally scolding herself for not following her instincts. She'd known not to trust a smile that cute but she'd flirted with him anyway!

Chesney took his hand out of his pocket as he left the bar and, as he did so, his wallet came out of the pocket too. It tumbled down and landed on the floor. Chesney didn't notice. He was still walking away.

While the bartender was still counting the bills Grace had just handed him, she slipped over and picked up Chesney's wallet. No-one noticed her. Returning to her seat at the bar, she opened up the wallet and gave it a quick peruse.

Besides a few bank cards and about fifty bucks in cash, Chesney had a bunch of business cards in there. There was the same kind of photo ID key card that Klarov had made for her. Chesney was grinning that same adorable smile in this photo. Gracie scowled down at it.

## Chapter Three

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GRACIE TOOK OUT HER PHONE, deciding that she'd let him know that he'd dropped his wallet. After all, the man's bank cards were in there!

Andrew's cell phone number was printed on his business cards and he picked up almost immediately.

"Hey, it's, uh, G from the bar. You're probably still just outside. You dropped your wallet," Gracie said in a rush.

"Oh, hello. You tracked me down pretty fast, huh?"

Gracie's eyes narrowed and she felt a shiver of disquiet at his phrasing. Of course he couldn't know that she was a PI. There was no reason for Chesney to be suspicious, but the odd wording caught her off-guard.

"You bet," Gracie said, forcing her voice to sound cheerful.

"I'll be right there," he said before hanging up. Gracie went back to her seat at the bar and double checked her folder on Attitude magazine was safely hidden in her handbag. It was, but it didn't help her feeling of being wrong-footed. Chesney came back in, grinning widely at her. Gracie nodded back in greeting.



“Thanks for calling me. You saved me a long evening of dealing with my bank.”

“Oh, it’s what anyone would have done,” she demurred.

“Trust me, it’s really not!”

“So, I should tell you...full disclosure, I got your phone number from your business card and -”

Andy sat back down into the chair next to her, his knee bumping gently against hers and not moving away.

“Yeah, I figured.”

“I am about to start working for you. I just got hired as a Personal assistant at Attitude. ”

“Oh,” his smile dimmed, no longer reaching his eyes. He straightened in his chair, his knee no longer touching hers. “Greta Smith! Right! Not just G after all.”

She silently cursed Klarov, “Yep, Greta. That’s me.”

“It’s a nice name,” he said, easily picking up on her dislike of the name.

“I wouldn’t have picked it for myself.”

He snorted. “I know what that’s like. My boss insists on calling me Drew, instead of Andy. It drives me crazy. Now half the office calls me Drew and I can’t get used to it. I’ll hear someone call ‘Drew, Drew!’ and I’ll just walk past, totally oblivious.”

Gracie smiled weakly.

“I guess this means we’ll be seeing more of each other after all.”

“After all?”

“Yeah...” There was something like disappointment in his eyes. It wasn't not like anything would have happened between the two. Gracie had no intention of ever telling him her real name and they wouldn't see each other again after this short assignment. “Actually, now that we're talking about full disclosure. You're going to be working as my PA.”

“Yeah, I know. I saw your name on your business cards, that's when I realized.”

“Of course. You're probably wondering why I wasn't at your job interview.” There was a coldness in his voice now that wasn't there before and Gracie wasn't sure what to make of it.

“It's not uncommon for a PA to get hired without meeting their new boss, especially in bigger companies,” Gracie said carefully.

“Yeah? I'm not sure how big you think Attitude is, but it's not my way of doing business. If I'd known that my boss was hiring me a PA I would have wanted a say in who he hired.”

Was this an apology for not meeting her before? Or was he hinting that he wouldn't have given her the job? Either way, Gracie was rapidly coming to the conclusion that there was more to Andrew Chesney than met the eye.

“My boss decided that I need help getting organized. I only heard that he'd hired someone this morning. Usually, he's not that...eager to hire new staff. I thought he was joking when he first called me.”

“Well...” Gracie frowned at the insinuation that he considered her undercover job a joke. “Let's hope I live up to Mr. Huang's expectations. Excuse me, I should be getting going. I can't stay out too late, I have to make a good impression on my new boss in the morning.”

Chesney gave her a small half-smile.

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”



GRACIE GOT UP EARLY THE NEXT DAY. HER PARTING COMMENT to Chesney had been sarcastic, but it was true that she liked to be well prepared before a new job. Part of her preparation was working to get into the right mental place. Greta was a new PA: excited and nervous about starting work in a new office where she was probably envisioning working for a long time. She should be happy to meet her new colleagues and eager to make a good first impression on everyone.

So, when her phone buzzed with a message from Klarov, she grimaced in annoyance.

I’ll give you a ride to your new job.

Gracie was nearly ready to leave. If only she’d been a few minutes faster then she could’ve just ignored him. Instead, she tried to put Klarov off:

I’m pretty sure I can find my own way

Klarov sent back a flurry of replies:

First day of school jitters?

Isn’t it nice to have a friend on your first day??

Gracie could feel her blood pressure rising as she read his messages. Why did he have to be so damned condescending the whole time?

I’ve already bought you a coffee. Three sugars double milk

Gracie’s mood soured further. She only ever drank black coffee. Maybe she’d never explicitly told Klarov her coffee

order, but they'd been working together for long enough for him to know it. They didn't even keep any sugar in the office, because neither Klarov or Crystal used it either.

Her phone buzzed again:

Also, new info from Huang.

Gracie snorted. Trust Klarov to waste her time. Why couldn't he have just said that to begin with?

Fine, I'll be out in five minutes.

Ten minutes later Gracie stepped out of her apartment building and saw Klarov's car. It was a dark blue sedan that was so nondescript it blended into virtual invisibility wherever he went.

Klarov himself was busy on his phone. He didn't look up as Gracie approached, or even when she opened the car door and slid into the passenger seat.

"That one's for you," Klarov said, tipping his head toward the styrofoam cup in the holder between their seats. Not even a 'hello' or a 'good morning'.

"You were serious about the coffee?" Gracie asked, surprised. Not that she'd be drinking it.

Klarov grunted, still frowning down at his phone. She took the lid off the coffee and saw it was actually black like she preferred. Maybe it was the thoughtfulness of the gesture, despite his earlier annoying teasing, that made Gracie open up. The two of them were, after all, on the same side.

"I met him last night. Chesney. I ran into him at the bar."

That caught Klarov's attention; he looked up from his phone, his gaze calm and non-judgemental, "You blew your cover?"

“No. It’s fine.”

Klarov nodded once and put his phone away, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. Gracie appreciated that he didn’t ask for details. That he just believed her when she said it was fine. Klarov started the car, and began the drive to the Attitude offices.

“So?” Gracie asked impatiently. Klarov’s fingers were still tapping an uneven rhythm on the steering wheel. It wasn’t like he was even aiming for a tune.

“Chesney was attacked late last night. He’s fine, couple of bruises, nothing broken, but he had his laptop stolen.”

Gracie quickly swallowed her mouthful of coffee. “What was he doing out late carrying a laptop?”

“You tell me. He had it with him when you met him in the bar, right?”

“No,” Gracie said with certainty. He hadn’t had a bag, and he definitely hadn’t had anything as bulky as a laptop with him. “No, he must have picked it up and then gone out again.”

It shouldn’t be a disappointment to find out that Chesney is as dirty as suspected. There was a sort of bitter resignation that settled around Gracie at the knowledge.

“Ok,” Klarov said, not noticing Gracie’s change in mood. “But my concern is that whoever is behind all this is escalating.”

“No, the point is that Huang was right to suspect Chesney. He is involved somehow.”

“Maybe. But that’s secondary right now. I agreed to send you on a job where you spent a week pushing some paper around. But these guys are getting violent.”

Gracie turned to look at Klarov's impassive face. It sounded like he was worried about her, which was ridiculous. She'd been working for him for two years and been in far more dangerous situations than this.

"So?" Gracie asked, her chin raising defiantly.

"Oh, don't give me that look," Klarov said, not looking at her. "If you want to contract out and go work on your own, then that's your choice. But as long as you work for Klarov Investigators then your safety is my responsibility."

"Klarov," Gracie said softly, he looked over at her sharply, his eyes unreadable. "We don't know that the attack has anything to do with this case. In fact, it might mean that it's an outside job and the leaks have nothing to do with Chesney at all."

"Or," Klarov said, "That Chesney is trying to throw suspicion elsewhere. Perhaps he wasn't attacked at all. It might just be a ruse. It's too early to know anything for sure, except that this is more dangerous than I originally thought."

It was Gracie's job as a PI to be suspicious, but Klarov was downright paranoid. Gracie's eyes narrowed. These past years of working for Klarov had taught her a lot about the man sitting next to her and she could read him clearly.

"You're too worried about this. There's something else, isn't there? Something you're not telling me."

Klarov's lips tightened briefly and Gracie knew she was right. Damn him! So much for feeling like they were on the same side. She felt like an idiot for letting her guard down around him. Why had she forgotten what a jerk he was?

He pulled the car over, parking a couple of blocks away from the Attitude offices.

“There’s nothing concrete. It was just a hunch, and then I heard about Chesney. This is more dangerous than I realized. Maybe I should have just taken the job myself.”

Gracie seethed. Surely he wasn’t saying that he was a more capable PI than she was? Klarov was a glorified paper pusher. He rarely worked cases, instead focusing more on the admin side of the agency.

“I want you to take a weapon, just in case.”

“I’m not going to do that. You want me to put a weapon in my purse as I go to work as a PA? That’s ridiculous.”

Klarov leaned towards her, reaching out. Gracie resisted the urge to shrink back into the passenger seat, instead standing her ground firmly. Klarov clicked the glove compartment open, backing away quickly and letting the glove compartment door swing down so that it hit Gracie on the knee.

Inside the large compartment was an assortment of weapons.

“Trust me on this. You’ll need something. Pick one.”

Gracie shook her head, looking at the weapons on display. There was a taser, a can of pepper spray and a gun.

“Jesus, Klarov. I’m not taking your gun! Are you crazy? I could lose my license for carrying around someone else’s gun.”

“Then take something else.”

Gracie sighed, trying to decide what to do. She’d rather not take any weapon, but Klarov and his annoyingly secretive hunch made her uncomfortable. Maybe she should take one of the weapons.

## Chapter Four

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“WHAT IS ALL THIS?” Gracie muttered, half turning to the woman next to her in the crowded lobby.

“Are you new here? You picked a bad day to start!” the middle-aged woman chuckled, “Don’t worry, this doesn’t happen often and once they get set up it’s quite fast.”

“Set up?” Gracie asked but the woman wasn’t listening to her. She was pushing her way forward, forging a path of disgruntled office workers. Gracie followed in her wake until the woman had pushed herself all the way to the front of the crowd.

Gracie saw, with a sinking heart, what was causing the hold-up. It was a security check-point, five uniformed guards were setting up a metal detector. The closest one had a bored expression as he waved at Gracie to come forward.

“Phone and keys in the tub,” he grunted at Gracie, zeroing in on her before she had a chance to walk away.

The woman beside her smiled brightly and gently shoved Gracie forward, sticking close behind her. The two of them were so close that when the alarm went off the security guard wasn’t sure which one of them had set it off. Although, of



course, Gracie knew exactly what was causing the problem - it was in her handbag.

After she set off the alarm for a second time, and the guard used the electronic wand to try and work out what was going on, she was waved to the side.

“Ma’am, would you open your handbag for me?” a plump female guard asked, as other office workers made their way through the checkpoint. Gracie hid her grimace. Damn Klarov and his insistence that she take a weapon. Now she was going to get caught with a taser!

Plus she had a few other gadgets in her bag that were made of metal.

“No problem,” Gracie said breezily.

But, of course, Klarov’s taser was sitting right at the top of her bag, impossible to miss.

“Is this a taser? Ma’am, I’m afraid you’re not allowed to have this in the building.”

“Oh! I didn’t know that!” Gracie said, sounding surprised.

The guard gave her a bored look, “Yeah, well, you can leave it down here and collect it at the end of the day.”

“Really?” Gracie asked, genuinely surprised this time.

“Uh-huh, I’ll give you a receipt for it, and you can collect it from the help desk later,” the woman said, not looking at Gracie as she got out a pad and started writing up Gracie’s receipt.

Through the checkpoint, with her receipt clutched in her hand, Gracie went through the lobby to the bank of elevators. The older woman who’d pushed her through the crowd was waiting for her there.

“Hey, I saw they took your...toy. That sucks. They took mine last year too when they first started doing this.”

“I just wish I’d known there was going to be security like this,” Gracie said, noticing the way the woman leaned toward her, eager to chat.

“See,” the woman opened up her handbag, lifting it slightly so that Gracie could see inside. “That’s why this is the better choice.”

In the main compartment of her purse, tucked snugly next to her wallet, was a small plastic canister of pepper spray.

“It gets through the metal detector,” the woman said slyly, winking at Gracie. “When they first started doing this I was worried I wouldn’t be able to have anything to defend myself with and, you know, the parking lot isn’t lit at night. It’s dangerous, and a woman should always feel safe!”

“They do this every day?” Gracie asked. That was the type of detail that should have been written in bold text right on the opening page of the assignment folder. Clearly, even Klarov hadn’t known that the building had this kind of security, or he wouldn’t have insisted she bring the taser in the first place.

“No, it’s supposed to be a random spot check. Usually, they do this once a month and everyone is twenty minutes late to work.”

“Usually?” Gracie asked quickly, catching the wording.

“Well,” she cocked her head as she considered Gracie’s question, just as the doors of the elevator in front of them opened and they both got in. A few others had got through the metal detector and got in with them. “They did their usual check last week. It is kind of odd to have another one so soon.”

Gracie doubted it was a coincidence that on her first-day undercover there was an extra security check. She was not a believer in coincidences.

“Let’s hope they don’t have it again tomorrow,” Gracie said as the elevator got to the third floor and both women got out. There was a large set of double doors just down the corridor and nothing else on this floor. The bright logo of Attitude magazine was painted across the doors.

“You’re headed to Attitude too?” the woman asked, frowning slightly.

“Yeah, it’s my first day actually. I’m the new PA.”

“Oh. Oh! How nice,” she stuck her hand out for Gracie to shake, “I’m Laura Thibault, I’m on Features and Letters.”

“Greta Jones.”

“Do you have your ID card to get in yet?”

Gracie fished the card that Klarov had given her out of her pocket.

“Great, you have to swipe it over here and then...” The heavy doors clicked, and one swung open a few inches. Laura pushed the door the rest of the way open. “There’s a buzzer next to the door if you ever lose your keycard. Betty here will come and help you. Have a good first day!”

“Thanks,” Gracie said, as Laura smiled goodbye. The receptionist, Betty, was a young woman with an undercut shaved into the side of her long dark hair and a serious expression on her face. She had multiple tattoos on both of her arms, all of them simple black lines that didn’t seem to make any discernible shapes.

“So, yeah, you’re Drew’s new PA, right? Greta?” Betty asked, standing to lead Gracie into the open-plan office. Most of the space was taken up with a bank of desks. Laura was settling down to work at one of the desks, she didn’t look up as Gracie walked past her.

“That’s ri -”

“He hasn’t had one before,” Betty said, coming to stop by a small desk just in front of a frosted glass door. “That’s Drew’s office. This is your desk, we had to move it from storage.”

She cast Gracie an accusing look. “Thank you,” Gracie said slowly. It was important to get on with everyone because information could come from any source, but Betty gave her an unimpressed look.

“It was really heavy...anyway, Drew phoned earlier and said he’s gonna be late in today. He got mugged last night.”

“Wow, that’s awful. Is he ok?”

“I guess so, he’s still coming in later, so it couldn’t’ve been that bad. Ok, let me know if there’s anything else you need,” Betty said, already turned away. It wasn’t entirely clear to Gracie what Betty would do if she told her there was anything she needed.

Gracie settled down to her new desk. The company had provided her with a laptop, but until Chesney arrived there wasn’t anything for her to do. She found herself wishing she’d brought in the coffee that Klarov had given her. She’d only taken a few sips of it on the drive over.

Instead, she got out her phone and angrily texted Klarov:

Your stupid taser got confiscated by security!

He texted back immediately:

Seriously? You put it in your handbag?? You owe me a new taser.

Gracie made a low noise of annoyance. One text from Klarov was enough to rile her up. Her phone beeped with a second text from him.

Those aren't cheap you know

Gracie snorted

“Hey, new girl, keep it down!” someone yelled. Gracie looked up quickly and saw a hipster man wearing a bowtie and cloth cap, strolling toward her desk.

“Didn't mean to disturb you,” Gracie said, trying to hold back the sarcasm.

“Yeah, well you did.”

Gracie sat back in her seat. Her first morning was not going well at all.



FIVE MINUTES BEFORE NOON, BETTY SIDLED OVER TO Gracie's desk.

“How's it going?”

Gracie shrugged. “Kinda boring, but I'll probably miss it when Andrew gets here and I actually have to do some work.”

Betty smirked. “I heard Gussie was snippy with you.”

“Gussie?” Gracie asked, suspecting she already knew who Betty meant.

Betty nodded her head toward the hipster man from earlier, who was sitting at his desk, engrossed in his work.

“Yeah, I think I was breathing too loudly.”

Betty giggled. “His full name is August. He yelled at me this morning too.” She came around Gracie’s desk and perched on the edge before continuing in a lowered voice, “All the journalists think they’re better than us. Gussie is extra-pissy today. He just had his latest article spiked.”

“Spiked?”

Betty’s eyes lit up with all the joy of a gossip who’s found a new person to tell the latest rumor.

“Ooh, don’t you know about this?” Betty said, before excitedly telling Gracie about the recent leaks of unpublished articles from the magazine.

“Huh,” Gracie said when she’d finished, “I didn’t realize magazines were such a cut-throat industry.”

“I know right? It seems to me that the whole thing could be avoided if they just started a website and published their articles immediately, instead of hanging on to them for the stupid print deadline.”

“Why don’t they have a website?” Gracie asked, coaxing her for more insights

Betty shrugged. “Honestly, I can’t work it out and I’m not paid enough to care. What I do know is that circulation was down and now it’s waaaay down since these leaks started. So, I don’t want to tell you your job or speak out of turn, but don’t get too comfortable here.”

“That’s...tough to hear on my first day on the job.”

Betty shrugged again. “Whatever, I’ve been here a year and it’s not easy for me to hear either. This is what happens when old people think they understand what teenagers want.”

“Huh?”

“The magazine is owned by this old biddy. She probably doesn’t even use the internet, let alone understand online marketing. Anyway, I came over to let you know that there’s a lunchroom upstairs if you want to go for lunch now.”

“Thanks, I’ve just got to finish up here though,” Gracie said, waving at her laptop.

“You found something to do even though Drew isn’t here yet?” Betty asked, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Well,” Gracie said, copying her smile. What she really wanted was to wait until the office emptied out for lunch, “I’ve got some freelance stuff that I do, thought I’d get some of that done.”

Betty laughed, believing her, “Yeah, everyone’s got a side-hustle these days. There’s a reason I always look busy when all I ever actually do is answer the phone and occasionally photocopy something.”

Gracie laughed, feeling her chest lighten. Betty left and, over the next few minutes the office emptied out as everyone went to lunch. This was the opportunity that Gracie had been looking for. She picked up her handbag and dug around for a few seconds until she found the small leather pouch that held the tiny microphones.

With one final check to make sure that she was alone in the office and hidden from any prying eyes, she opened the door of Chesney’s office and slipped inside, leaving it ajar. Now she just needed to find a place to leave one of her mics.

Chesney’s office was L-shaped. The office door opened up into a main room where there was a desk and a few chairs, to the left there was a short dead-end corridor lined with filing

cabinets. Gracie took a few steps into the main office and bent down. Underneath the seat of one of these chairs would be a perfect place for one of her sticky-backed mics. These modern microphones were so small that most people wouldn't know what it was even if they were holding it in their hands, Gracie thought with satisfaction.

Just as she got a mic out, she heard a voice from right behind her.

“Where the hell were you last night?”

That was Chesney's voice. Of all the terrible timing! Gracie stood up with a burst of adrenaline. He was right outside the office door, already pushing it open. Gracie bolted into the side corridor, diving between two filing cabinets. She looked back, peeking her head out just in time to catch a glimpse of Chesney's strong profile as he came into the office and went over to his desk.

He was on the phone and there was a large band-aid on the top of his forehead, right at the hair-line. He would, Gracie thought in a rush of adrenaline, be an attractive man if he wasn't a suspect.

“I'm trying to help you,” Chesney continued angrily, now out of Gracie's view. “Is that so difficult to believe?”

There was a pause before Chesney spoke again. “Yeah, I think Huang is on to me.”

Gracie's eyes widened, that sounded like pretty damning proof that her case was all wrapped up.

“I don't know.”

Chesney made an angry noise. “No, you listen to me. I'll... Damn it!”



Gracie guessed the other person had hung up on him. Well, that had been a very interesting conversation. The question was, how the hell was she going to get out of here?

## Chapter Five

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GRACIE STEPPED out of the side office, watching Chesney's face as he saw her and realized that she had heard him on the phone. Instead of the guilt she'd expected to see on his face, there was something else. It was suspicion.

"I'm really sorry," Gracie began, trying to look penitent. Time to come up with an excuse for sneaking into his office!

"I came in here to ask if you wanted anything ordered for lunch. I didn't mean to intrude."

Gracie knew it was a pretty flimsy excuse, but at least it was strong enough that he couldn't outright call her a liar.

"You thought I was in my office...even though your desk is just outside the door."

Gracie blushed. To Chesney or anyone else watching it would have looked like she was embarrassed about doing something silly.

"Well, it's my first day. I've been meeting everyone and. I thought maybe you'd arrived while I was away from my desk."

Chesney made a disgruntled noise that Gracie internally struggled not to label as 'cute.' She absolutely refused to think

of someone she was investigating that way. Especially after just overhearing him say that he believed his boss was on to him.

Chesney sat down behind his desk, the light catching at his brown hair so that in places it looked gold. That too, Gracie thought fiercely, was not cute.

This man was probably sabotaging the magazine and nothing he could do would make her forget that. The band-aid at the top of his forehead was a stark reminder that he'd been out late last night, no doubt involved in this nefarious scheme.

“Would you join me for a few minutes, Greta? I was hoping we could talk.”

“Uh, sure.”

Gracie sat down in one of the uncomfortable chairs in front of his desk. This was the chair that she'd wanted to put a mic underneath. The irony of being this close to her goal and still failing to bug Chesney's office was not lost on her.

“So...” he ran a hand through his hair, “What a coincidence that we ran into each other the night before you started working here! Ha!”

It was very obvious to Gracie that Chesney no longer believed their first meeting was an accident.

“Well, it is my local bar.”

“Oh? Really? Because I haven't seen you there before.”

“I've been away. I just got back from a cruise.”

“A cruise? Who did you go with?”

Gracie smirked. Now that was an odd question, not where did she go on the cruise, not how long was the cruise.

“Family.”

“So you got off a cruise and walked into this job?”

“It wasn’t exactly that easy.”

“So, when did Huang hire you?”

“It was all pretty fast. I got back last week and had an interview with him straight away. Is there a problem with me working here? Because Mr. Huang was really impressed with my resume.”

Chesney hesitated. “Listen, Greta, I don’t really have anything for you to do. I’ve been working here for years and I’ve never needed a PA before.”

That sounded like it could be true, but Gracie was pretty certain that he was actually just suspicious of her and wanted to keep her at arm’s distance. Of course, the fact that he was suspicious at all just went to show that there was something going on here. No truly innocent person would worry there was anything suspicious about a newly hired PA.

“Oh, well, maybe once you get used to having me...I can help out in all sorts of ways.”

Did that sound like an innuendo?

“I’m pretty useful. I can do all sorts of things to make your work more efficient.”

Chesney raised an eyebrow. Gracie groaned internally. If it hadn’t sounded like an innuendo to begin with, then it definitely did that time.

“Like, uh, picking up dry cleaning, getting your lunch, getting people on the phone for you, scheduling meetings.”

There, Gracie thought with pride. None of those things sounded remotely naughty. Except, now she thought about it: had any of what she'd said actually sounded like an innuendo. There was just something about talking to Chesney that made her feel off-balance, like she wasn't quite in control of the situation.

Chesney sighed, "Ok, let's see how this works out. I do actually have some photocopying that needs to be done."

Gracie grinned happily. "Awesome. Um, how's your head? Betty said you were mugged last night?"

He scowled and then half-reached a hand toward the band-aid. "It's nothing you need to concern yourself with."

Yep, Gracie thought, listening to his cold tone: definitely not cute.



JUST BEFORE FIVE, HER PHONE BUZZED WITH A MESSAGE FROM Klarov:

need a ride home?

Ugh, she would need a ride home. Though only because her annoying boss had insisted on driving her this morning. Gracie mentally glossed over that he'd only done it because he was worried about her.

Fine, I'm just wrapping up here. Chesney left early and locked his office.

Klarov texted right back:

I'll meet you a block over, where I parked this morning. If you're good I'll pick up a sugary treat.

Gracie sneered, but it lacked her usual spite when dealing with her boss.

Before she could leave for the day, she had to collect Klarov's confiscated taser from the help desk downstairs.

There was one older guy in a security uniform with a bored expression on his face reading a newspaper behind the help desk. He seemed thrilled when Gracie approached him, eager to have the chance to talk to someone.

"Oh yeah, those guys have no respect for people's property," he told Gracie as she handed him the receipt she'd been given earlier. "I can't count the number of times someone has come to me, expecting me to have something they took in the morning, but then they never gave to me. It's always a headache, dealing with these outside contractors. Word to the wise," he paused, sliding the taser across the desk. "Best not to bring it at all in the future."

"Sure."

"Because this isn't the end. Oh no, definitely not."

Gracie put her hand on the taser, but she couldn't take it because the guard was still holding onto it too.

"Gonna be security checks every morning from now on. I've been working here for five years, and I've never let anyone in that didn't belong here. This is a safe building. But now they tell me I haven't been working hard enough. Not been getting the job done."

Gracie pulled the taser out of his grip.

"They're going to have the metal detector out every morning?"

"Yep," he said, popping the 'p' like it had personally offended him.

“Huh, thanks. Have a good evening,” Gracie said, mentally adding the new information to her list of very interesting but inconclusive facts.

Gracie walked over a block, catching sight of Klarov without him noticing her. He was standing on the sidewalk, leaning against the car. He had his sunglasses on and his face was tilted up into the sky, basking in the late afternoon sun. His arms were casually stretched out and he looked totally relaxed and cool. Of course he was relaxed! Gracie frowned, marching toward him. Klarov hasn't just spent all day undercover, having to deal with an increasingly distrustful suspect.

From one hand, Klarov dangled a take out milkshake carton. Slowly, entirely wrapped up in his own world, he lifted the straw to his lips and sucked. Gracie coughed loudly, not wanting to spend another second thinking about what Klarov's lips were doing.

“Hey there! Little Miss. Loses-the-Taser I gave her.”

“You shouldn't try and make up nicknames. You're terrible at it.”

Klarov shrugged and knocked his sunglasses down his nose a little ways so he could peer at her.

“Anyway,” Gracie continued, “I got it back.”

“You did!” Klarov grinned sharply. “Then you deserve this after all.”

He turned and leaned into the car to get something. When he turned back around he had a second take-out milkshake in his hand, which he handed to her.

“Hey, this is strawberry,” Gracie said, after taking a sip. There was nothing wrong with acknowledging that Klarov could, very occasionally, be a nice person. “Thanks, Klarov.”

“Duh, you ready to go?”

Yeah, he'd remembered her favorite flavor, but he still found a way to annoy her. That was just so typical. She got into the car, sipping her milkshake as she moved.

“You know,” Klarov said as he started the car and pulled onto the street, “If you call me by my last name, then it's only fair that you call Crystal by her last name too. Treat everyone in the agency equally, yeah?”

Gracie smirked. Crystal's last name was Plessinki.

“Yeah...but I like Crystal.”

“Aww, c'mon, Gracie!”

She snorted, looking over at his ridiculous puppy dog eyes.

“Fine. Peter.”

“Pete.”

“Don't push it.”

They drove in silence for a few minutes, with Klarov smiling broadly. Gracie took the taser out of her purse and went to put it back in Klarov's glove compartment.

“Hey, don't do that. Hang onto it until the case wraps up.”

“I'm not going to be able to take it into the office,” Gracie said and then went on to explain about the sudden changes in security in the office building.

“Ok, that's weird. I'll talk to Huang about it, see if he knows anything. Still, hold on to the taser. Better to be safe.”

Gracie shrugged and put it back in her handbag.

“Sure, but I'm just going to be leaving it at home. You need to have an ID card to get into the Attitude Offices, which means they probably have an electronic log of who arrives and when.



They'd know if I snuck in after hours. Perhaps I should have kept hold of Chesney's ID card after all."

The car swerved, pulling up in front of Gracie's apartment building with a squeal of the tires.

"What do you mean?" Klarov asked softly, with deceptive calmness.

Gracie clamped her mouth shut. She hadn't exactly been keeping it a secret, but she wasn't relishing explaining to her boss why she'd done what she had. "When I first bumped into Chesney in a bar, he dropped his wallet. That's how I knew who he was. His Attitude ID card was in there."

"And you didn't take it?" Klarov's voice was cold, verging on chilly.

"Well, no. I couldn't just take one thing out and I had to return it..."

Klarov's eyes were wide. She didn't think she'd ever said anything that had shocked him like this before.

"Why? Why would you do that?"

"Because it was the right thing to do!"

"Right?! You probably could have solved the whole case that first evening if you'd kept his wallet."

Gracie didn't answer, instead taking one last massive sip of her milkshake, draining it until the straw made a rude noise. She gently put the empty container in the cupholder between the two front seats and turned to leave, her hand on the door handle. This was typical Klarov: he could act like he cared and that he was a decent guy and then the next second he'd do something absolutely infuriating.

Returning Chesney's wallet had been the right thing to do and she wasn't going to let Klarov make her feel guilty about it.

"Oh, there was one more thing," Gracie said, not letting her annoyance distract her from the important stuff. "You said the owner was called Huang right, a friend of your Dad's?"

"Right."

"Huang is a woman?"

"No, he's an older guy."

"The receptionist mentioned that the owner was a woman."

"Huh, interesting. You think it's worth looking into?"

"I don't think it was just a slip of the tongue."

"Ok, I don't know anything about Huang. He phoned me up, told me he used to know Dad and said he wanted to hire us."

Gracie nodded, opening the car door. There was definitely something fishy there, but if Huang was the one paying the bills then it didn't really matter.

"Wait! Gracie, just wait a second. Is it...do you like him? Do you like Chesney? Because, I'll be honest, I'm struggling to think of another reason why you would give him back his wallet. That's a rookie move."

Klarov's wide eyes were beseeching and Gracie had the strangest urge to comfort him. His hair was a mess of loose dark curls and she reached out and patted his cheek.

"Thanks for the milkshake, Peter. Message me tomorrow, ok?"

Gracie walked away, knowing that she hadn't given Klarov a good answer.

## Chapter Six

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ON WEDNESDAY MORNING, Gracie stomped down the stairs of her apartment building, thinking furiously. Klarov's last words to her were still stuck in her head, his accusation that she'd made a mistake in the case because she liked Chesney was preposterous. Klarov was wrong. Of course he was wrong!

She hadn't given Chesney's wallet back because she liked him. Or because she was attracted to him. It had simply been the right thing to do. That was just an alien concept for Klarov.

And maybe Chesney had a cute smile, and eyes that seemed to see straight through her...and a way of speaking that made everything seem like an inside joke that just the two of them were in on.

Nothing was going to happen between her and Chesney. He was a suspect and she wasn't about to jeopardize the case because of some guy and his cute smile.

Just as she got into the car, her phone rang. Gracie didn't recognize the number.

"Hello?"

"Hi! Is this, uh, I'm sorry, Peter...Peter Klarov didn't tell me your name." The speaker was a woman, her voice sounded

young and full of confidence.

“Who is this?”

“It’s Claire Huang!”

Gracie relaxed, recognizing the last name of the client. “How can I help you, Claire?”

“Oh, you’re already helping! I just wanted to speak to you in person. I’m so grateful for the work you’re doing at Attitude I wanted to personally thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Gracie said softly, although she wasn’t sure that Claire heard her as she was already speaking again.

“Peter came over last night and it was just the first I’d heard of all of this. Isn’t it exciting? A genuine PI. It’s like something out of a movie. And then he told me that the person working undercover was a woman and I thought that was so cool!”

“Yeah, it’s really cool,” Gracie said dryly. “Actually, I’m happy you called. I was wondering if you could clear something up for me. Who is the actual owner of Attitude Magazine?”

“Well,” Claire’s voice quieted a little as she demurred. “It’s a family business. Uncle cares a lot about it. Which was why I was so pleased when I found out that he was taking this seriously.”

Ugh, rich people, Gracie thought, grimacing in the privacy of her car. They can never answer a straight-forward question about where their money comes from.

“You see,” Claire continued, “Uncle is always busy, but I know he has a special place in his heart for Attitude because it was one of his and Dad’s first joint ventures. Actually one of the only.”

Gracie swallowed her sigh and wondered if Klarov had got a better answer out of her. Who was the real owner of the magazine?

“Anyway, I’ll let you get back to your super-secret undercover work,” Claire said, her voice cracking with laughter as she spoke. Gracie’s grimace remained fixed in place. “Keep up the good work!!”

She hung up before Gracie could get another word in.



THIS WAS GRACIE’S THIRD DAY WORKING AT ATTITUDE AND, just like the previous two mornings, she had to go through the same security point before she could get into the building. As she went into the office she paused to exchange pleasantries with Betty and then waved at some of the other staff that she’d gotten to know over the last couple of days.

Most of them nodded back at her. One of them, Gussie, scowled instead. He was still in a snit about his most recent article getting leaked and trying to take out his frustration on the newest member of staff. Gracie waved a bit more forcefully at him until he looked away.

There wasn’t anyone in the office who seemed actually happy. There was a tension in the air, a gloominess. Everyone knew that, no matter how hard they worked, it could be their story that got spiked next time.

Gracie, who usually prided herself on simply following the evidence and not getting emotionally involved in any case, found that she really wanted to clear Chesney’s name. She didn’t want to believe that he was the one responsible for this unhappiness.

But she had a terrible suspicion that he was the one to blame. There wasn't really another explanation for what she'd overheard him saying on the phone on her first day. If only she knew who he'd been talking to when he'd admitted that Huang was on to him!

Yesterday, her second day in the office, had not been a good day for the investigation. Chesney had warmed up to the idea of having a PA and had found work for her to do. She'd picked up his lunch from a cafe a few blocks away, she'd fetched his dry cleaning, she'd got him coffee from a cafe that was a few blocks away from the office.

It hadn't escaped Gracie's notice that all of the jobs he'd given her had been away from the office. As if he was starting to suspect her and wanted to keep her at a distance. Gracie sat down at her desk, frowning at her thoughts.

It was a few hours before Chesney finally called for her.

“Greta!”

Gracie hurried into Chesney's office where he was already sitting behind his new laptop. She wished that Klarov hadn't given her a fake first name when he'd set up this job. It made sense that she use a different last name, but it sucked to hear Chesney use a wrong name when talking to her. “Just G, remember?”

Chesney smiled guardedly. Gracie tried to smile back; she would love to know what it was that made Chesney suspicious of her. Of course he was right. He should be suspicious of her. But it was those good instincts that made him all the more attractive to her.

“Do you have some more dry cleaning you need picked up?”

“Not yet.”

There was a deep buzzing noise as his phone started to vibrate. It was in its usual place, on the desk next to his laptop. It was, Gracie thought disparagingly, an awkward spot. Far too out in the open, which meant that Chesney would notice immediately if it went missing.

“Oh, just a second, sorry, can you come back in a minute, once I’ve dealt with this?” Chesney said, distracted as he put in the passcode to his phone. Gracie watched his long fingers as they moved quickly across the screen, memorizing the pattern.

“Actually,” Gracie said, coming up with a new plan on the spur of the moment. “I was coming to ask if you wanted me to pick up some lunch. I’m going to head out in a minute.”

“No, no. I’ve got that lunch meeting with the suppliers.”

“Right!” Gracie said, a little too loudly, almost a yell. “The people from the paper company. They phoned to confirm it this morning.”

Chesney looked up from his phone, giving her that half-smile of his. It wasn’t a mocking smile, but it seemed to say ‘we both know that you’ve just done something funny and that’s ok.’

Gracie shuffled awkwardly. Too often she left Chesney’s office regretting that she’d ever taken this case.

“Ok, well, have a good meeting.”

Chesney’s face fell. “Thanks.”

Gracie didn’t spend time analyzing Chesney’s odd reaction because, as soon as she was back at her desk she sent off a text to a number that she hadn’t used in months:

You got an iPhone XS? No visible damage but completely dead.

It only took a few minutes to hear back and, as soon as she read the message, she picked up her handbag and left the office.

The solution to the whole case was hidden on Chesney's phone. All she had to do was go through his call history. It was just a not-so-simple matter of getting hold of his phone, and Gracie had an idea.

She drove across town, headed in the direction of the Agency office, although she didn't intend on visiting Klarov today. A few blocks from headquarters she pulled over and parked in front of a rundown store.

It was the sort of place that most people would walk past without a second glance, confused that such a shabby looking place could stay in business. A neon sign that read 'PHONES PHONES PHONES' was unlit in the window. Gracie knew that the neon didn't work anymore and that it hadn't for years.

"G! How are you? It's been a while!"

The owner of the store, a plump man in his forties with slicked-back hair and a T-shirt with a picture of a howling wolf on it, greeted her warmly. Sonny was behind the long glass counter, a cocky grin permanently set on his face.

"Hi, Sonny."

"Hi, Sonny?!? That's all the greetings I get after not seeing you in ages."

"I had some business out of town."

Sonny snorted and put a phone on the counter between them. It was the exact same model that Chesney used. It looked identical.



Gracie smiled, pleased that her plan was coming together. “It’s completely dead, right? It can’t charge at all?”

She picked it up, examining it more closely. There wasn’t a single scratch on it.

“Sure, sure. Just like you asked.”

“How much?”

“\$50.”

“\$50? Sonny, it’s a useless lump of metal, what are you going to do with it?”

Sonny shrugged, “You think you’re the only person who buys these? I’ve got other customers. Lotsa interest.”

“Yeah,” Gracie said slowly, not believing him for an instant.

Years ago, Gracie had helped Sonny out when he’d been accused of handling stolen goods. She’d been able to track down the paperwork and clear his name. Not that she believed he was entirely innocent. Not all of the phones in his store were totally legal. But that shipment hadn’t been stolen.

Where was the loyalty?

She leaned on the glass counter, spinning the lifeless iPhone around without saying a word.

“Times are tough, Gracie. It’s not like you’re paying anyway. You can write it off as an expense. The client always pays, right?”

“You don’t know my boss,” Gracie muttered. Klarov could be pretty unreasonable when it came to justifying expenses. She did not need to listen to another of his lectures about what exactly constituted a frivolous expense but Klarov wouldn’t complain about paying fifty bucks if it solved the case. She

just had to make sure that this worked. “Fine. Send the bill to the Agency, would you?”

Back at the Attitude office, Gracie waited with mounting excitement for the next time that Chesney called for her. She tapped her foot impatiently under her desk. Usually, she was great at waiting for a suspect. She could track an errant spouse for hours, days even, and never lose her cool.

There were aspects of stake-outs that she disagreed with; the tawdry insights into how often relationships fell apart through lies and betrayals. But she was still brilliant at getting the job done.

Gracie had mastered the art of being inconspicuous, she could blend so totally into the background that even her most cautious targets were dumbfounded when they found out they’d been followed.

This case was different. It put her on edge. She couldn’t find her usual sense of inner calmness that allowed her to simply wait for the right moment. And she knew why. There was an obvious reason: investigating Chesney was making her doubt herself, distracting her from her usual cold pragmatism.

The dead phone was heavy in her pocket.

“Greta!” Chesney yelled. This was it. Time to find out the truth.

Chesney’s phone was on the desk, just where it had been before. Gracie glanced at it, confirming it was still there, and then looked away.

“Could you hand these out? I need to get signatures from all the Feature writers. And Henry’s too.”

Chesney held out a small stack of paper for her. Carefully, cautious but trying to look as natural as she could, Gracie

leaned over, resting a hand on the desk as she took the papers, making sure that she tilted the papers so they briefly blocked Chesney's view of his desktop. Her other hand knocked his phone, sending it skittering to the floor.

"Oh!" Gracie breathed out as she let go of the papers too, sending them flying up into the air.

She dove down, the dead phone already out of her pocket. Above her, the papers began to descend in a flurry.

This, Gracie thought was almost too easy. Once the two phones were swapped she'd have the whole case wrapped up in a few minutes.



ANDREW CHESNEY

From the second he'd met her, he'd known there was something different about Greta.

He'd been unwinding over a couple of beers at his local bar and this gorgeous woman had sat down next to him. It was Greta, captivating and totally unaware of how every guy in the room was sneaking glances at her.

Andrew had struck up a conversation and been surprised at how easy she was to talk to. It had been fun. She laughed at his jokes and asked questions about his stories. It was a few hours totally outside the usual stress of his life and he'd treasured every second of it.

But then, by coincidence, this woman, who was exactly his type, turned out to be his new PA. Andrew did not believe in coincidences.

Attitude was failing. The numbers were down. Everyone in the office knew the score and no amount of hard work or amazing writing or eye-catching design was going to change the fact that teenagers didn't buy paper magazines anymore.

They were simply locked in a dying industry and no-one was making any attempt to change.

Andrew's hand drew into a fist, thinking about all the years that he'd been working here, all the people whose jobs relied on keeping this magazine running. He had a plan to bring Attitude into the modern era, no matter what Huang thought. It was sneaky and underhanded. Some people would probably be hurt when they found out, but he really believed that he was doing the right thing.

Soon he was going to confront Huang with what he'd done. But first he needed more evidence.

Andrew sighed heavily. The plan was taking too long and having Greta as his PA wasn't helping. She was incredibly distracting. He wished that he'd invited her along to today's business lunch. Having her there might have made up for how mind-numbingly dull it had been.

In front of him was the stack of forms that Betty had printed off for him. They all needed to be signed before the end of the day.

"Greta!" he called out. This was another job that could be handed off to her. Andrew had always rebelled against the idea that he needed a PA. He'd thought that it would get annoying to have someone constantly monitoring him. Greta wasn't like that at all, she was discreet and professional...and incredibly tempting.

If only there wasn't that constant thought in the back of his mind. That constant nagging doubt that whispered at him. Why would Huang hire a PA for him now, if not to spy on him?

Greta came in, her dark hair swaying as she moved.

“Could you hand these out? I need to get signatures from all the Feature writers. And Henry's too.”

She reached to take the papers from him but seemed to stumble as she did. The papers flew up in the air as Greta tumbled down to the floor, knocking into his desk as she fell. His phone slid away too, caught in the accident.

Andrew, already on edge after months of sneaking around, followed after his phone, slipping out of his chair and to his knees with a burst of energy.

**SMACK!**

His head banged into Greta's and she yelped in pain

“Shit, I'm sorry,” he said quickly, kneeling on the floor by the side of his desk.

Greta already had his phone in her hand and he took it from her. She gave him a rather sad smile, no doubt trying to pretend that her head wasn't hurting. Andrew cursed himself. He'd been jumpy and assuming the worst of people for weeks now and the cost of it were the small bruises they were both going to get on their foreheads.

This close he could see the flecks of green in her brown eyes. Andrew clutched on to his phone, suppressing the wild urge to reach out to her, to touch her, to kiss her. It was completely inappropriate but having Greta in front of him like this was making him forget all the reasons why this was a bad idea. He was just as captivated as he'd been from the first second he'd

seen her. More captivated even, because he knew now what it was like to have Greta in his life.

“It’s fine,” she said, not moving away.

Her eyes darted down to his lips, the tip of her tongue peeking out to wet her bottom lip.

His heart soared. It wasn’t just him feeling the pull between them, feeling this tension between them that seemed to be building higher and higher.

Greta leaned forward and Andrew had no idea what she was about to do but his gut clenched in anticipation.

## Chapter Seven

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CHESNEY WAS LOOKING at her with such naked hunger and she could feel an answering stirring inside herself. In that second she was so drawn to him that it seemed like the most obvious, the most natural thing, if she simply leaned forward and kissed him.

But, as she moved, she felt the weight of Chesney's phone in her pocket. She'd just successfully swapped his phone for the dead one; the only reason the two of them were kneeling on the floor was because she'd arranged this trick on him.

The man didn't even know her real name. She shrunk back, all her mounting excitement dying in an instant.

Kissing Chesney now would be crossing a moral line that Gracie wasn't willing to ever cross. She grimaced, disgusted at herself.

"Sorry," she said, grabbing a few of the scattered papers and standing up quickly. "I'm such a klutz."

Chesney picked up the last few sheets of paper and stood up slowly, an unreadable expression on his face.

"That's fine," he handed her the papers, forms that she needed to go and get people to sign. "Accidents happen."

His words stabbed at her like a dagger. Gracie nodded curtly and then practically fled his office. Her heart was racing and her lips tingled as if they actually had been kissed.

She tried to think of Klarov. Her boss would tell her not to get too emotionally invested in any suspect. He'd be annoyed at her for even sympathizing with Chesney, let alone nearly kissing him. She needed some of Klarov's resolve right now, because even though she'd achieved what she'd set out to do, and stolen Chesney's phone, she wasn't elated. Her skin prickled and she felt dirty.

It was guilt. She felt guilty for taking Chesney's phone at the same time as nearly kissing him.

As she walked around the office, getting the signatures that Chesney needed, she tried to reason away the uncomfortable feeling: she was just doing her job. She was a PI, this was just a normal aspect of undercover work. The Kiss-That-Wasn't was just an accident. It wouldn't happen again.

Gracie returned to her desk to find Chesney waiting for her. He had the dead phone in his hand, frowning at it.

"Hey, Greta. I can't get my phone to turn on, do you mind taking it to the Apple store to see if they can fix it?"

"No problem," Gracie said. Most people, in Gracie's experience, would make some kind of sarcastic or passive-aggressive comment at this stage. She'd knocked Chesney's phone to the floor and then, from his perspective, it had stopped working. Yet he wasn't blaming her.

An excuse to be out of the office for a few hours was exactly what she was hoping for. She could go through his phone, hopefully, work out if he was innocent or not, and then put this whole case behind her.



“Great, I’ve got a meeting at six. Could you stop by the restaurant and drop off the phone once it’s fixed?”

“Sure. What restaurant are you going to?”

“Le Fendoir.”

“Ooh, very classy.”

Chesney winked at her, “I’m a classy guy, can’t you tell?”

“I would never have guessed,” she said primly, plucking the dead phone from his hand. Her fingers brushed against his. It was a casual, meaningless touch, but she was vividly aware of exactly where they were touching, the temperature of his skin, the pressure of his flesh.

“I’m sure they’ll get it working in no time,” Gracie lied, clutching the dead phone tightly.



DESPITE THE KISS-THAT-WASN’T, GRACIE CONSIDERED herself a careful woman. She was not the type to ruin a job just because of one careless mistake.

Gracie drove a few blocks and pulled over next to a small park. This was far enough away from the office that no-one from the magazine would see what she was up to.

Chesney’s phone opened easily as she put in his passcode. Now, all she had to do was go through his call history and find the person he’d been talking to when he’d confessed that Huang was ‘onto him’.

It was a number, with no name set into the contact info. Gracie put the number into her own phone and then called it, the thrill of the chase making her eager to unravel this mystery.

The phone rang a few times before a woman picked up.

“Trident Solutions, how can I help you?”

Gracie frowned. Chesney had been speaking to someone from a different company? A company that had an annoyingly vague name...

“Yeah, hi. I was wondering if I could make an appointment?”

“Is this a support issue?” the woman asked in a bored tone.

“No. Actually, I’m thinking about starting a new...venture.”

“I’ll put you through to Darryl. Hold, please.”

Tinny classical music came through the phone before Gracie could say anything. A man crossed the street in front of Gracie’s car, heading for the park. He had a yellow lab on a leash, the dog straining to get to the park. She narrowed her eyes at him, waiting for him to look around but the dogwalker didn’t pay her any attention.

“Hey, this is Darryl! So you’re thinking about setting up a new website? That’s awesome! Having an internet presence is essential for business nowadays. What sort of site are you thinking about building?”

Gracie tapped her fingers against the steering wheel. Chesney was setting up a website behind Huang’s back? He was trying to take the magazine online, despite the express wishes of the company’s owner?

What else was Chesney lying about? Did this mean that he really was the person responsible for spiking the articles?

God, she thought with relief, what a mercy that she hadn’t given in to her instincts and kissed him!

“Hello? Are you still there?”

Gracie coughed. She needed to confirm that Chesney was setting up a website for Attitude.

“Yep, still here. Hi, Darryl. I’m actually looking around at a couple of firms. Setting up a new site is going to be a really big job, could you give me some insight into your company? What sort of sites do you typically create?”

“Well, in the last year our two biggest clients have been Harrigey Department Store and Expo Artiste.”

Gracie made an appreciative noise. Yeah, if Trident could work on that kind of scale, then they definitely had the ability to set up a website for Attitude.

“Interesting. What about more recently? What projects are you working on at the moment?”

“Umm,” Darryl said, sounding unsure of himself. “We can’t really discuss that. You know, client confidentiality and all that.”

“Sure, sure. I’m wondering if you could handle a newspaper style site, with daily updates, hosting videos, that kind of thing.”

Darryl didn’t hesitate. “Absolutely we can do that.”

It was, Gracie thought, the easy answer of someone who was already working on a similar project.

“Great. Thanks, I’ll have to get back to you in a few days.”

“Ok. We can be really competitive on pricing.”

“You’ve been a great help,” Gracie said, her voice sounding bitter. “Bye, Darryl.”



LE FENDOIR WAS, IN GRACIE'S EXPERIENCE, THE TYPE OF fancy French restaurant that cheating middle-aged men took their mistresses to.

In her two years working for the Klarov she'd found herself sitting outside it at least five times. Each time with her camera at the ready, preparing to snap up the proof of the man's infidelity. On every stakeout, she'd wait in her car, drinking lukewarm coffee and maybe, if she was being organized, a homemade sandwich.

She'd never actually gone inside the restaurant. It had never been necessary. Now, as she pushed open the heavy wooden door, she felt a shiver of apprehension. She was leaving her usual safe territory and getting too involved with the case. The inside of Le Fendoir was dimly lit, dark wood on the floor and walls accented with gilt.

To Gracie, the darkness was dreary and rather gloomy but she supposed others might find the atmosphere romantic.

The maitre d' was a plump young man with knowing eyes, watching her steadily as she walked over to him. Behind him, the main dining room opened up. There were diners at about half the tables, and the low mutter of conversation filled the air, competing with the gentle tones of classical piano music. All the occupied tables had candles on them, their flickering glow highlighting the faces of the diners.

"Hey, I'm here to drop off a phone," Gracie said.

The maitre d' opened his mouth to answer, but heard Chesney's voice calling out instead.

"Greta!"

There was the man himself, sitting alone at a table just tucked to the left of the doorway. He gave a wide, almost dopey, smile

and waved at her to come over and join him.

“Greta. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Gracie slid into the chair opposite him, taking in the half empty plate in front of Chesney and the mostly empty bottle of red. When he’d said he had a meeting, she’d assumed he meant a business meeting.

That’s what she got for assuming.

She pushed Chesney’s phone across the table, eyeing the wine with distaste. Had Chesney come here on a date?

There was a candle on the table between them. It was not romantic, Gracie thought angrily, it was simply an accident waiting to happen. Didn’t anyone care how easily that could start a fire?

Gracie’s lips pursed. Here she was agonizing over the ethics of kissing him and he was entirely oblivious. What an utter fool she was!

“Thanks. You want a glass?” Chesney asked, seeing that her attention was caught by the bottle. Gracie shook her head. She didn’t want to share in the dregs of his date.

“Shame,” Chesney said, refilling his already full glass. “I don’t know much about wine but Huang ordered this so it’s probably ridiculously expensive.”

“Your meeting was with Huang?”

“Uh-huh, he didn’t stay long. You want to join me?”

A feeling of relief flooded through her, even though she knew she shouldn’t care.

She really shouldn’t. She shouldn’t get involved with a guy she was investigating, a guy who didn’t even know her real

name and would have every reason to be angry when he found out she'd been lying to him all this time.

"I already ate," she said, relaxing into her chair. The candlelight, despite being a fire hazard, was actually rather cozy.

"Hmm, can I tempt you with some dessert then?" His eyebrows wiggled enthusiastically. Gracie giggled, feeling her resolve crumble. What harm would it do to stay a few minutes? "They do the most amazing chocolate mousse."

"You come here often enough to know the menu?"

Chesney grinned wide, all of his boyish charm directed just at her. "I like to be wined and dined while Huang yells at me."

"You don't get on with Mr. Huang?"

Chesney shrugged, the carefree expression slipping away from his face. "Oh, he's the usual micromanaging boss."

A waiter came over to take Chesney's plate and he ordered a dessert and two spoons. "Just in case I can tempt you. I've been meaning to ask you, where were you working before Huang hired you?"

Gracie smiled coyly. "On a cruise ship actually. It sounded like it was going to be a big adventure when I applied, but...after a while, I couldn't hack it anymore."

"Hospitality, huh? Too many irate tourists upset about their sunburn?"

More like too much time spent waiting around, hoping to snap a photo of a cheating spouse.

"It was time for a change."

“So you decided to see what it was like to be one of the passengers before you left.”

Gracie’s smile froze. She’d forgotten that she’d originally told him that she’d just returned from a cruise with her family. Instead of answering verbally, she shrugged with one shoulder.

“I’m sure your friends and family were pleased you decided to come home, right?”

The waiter arrived, putting an elegant glass full of chocolatey goodness in the middle of the table. Gracie smirked as she picked up a spoon. Was this Chesney’s way of asking if she was single?

“Ha! I knew I’d tempt you to try some,” Chesney said.

Gracie bit back a moan as she tasted the delicate mousse. It was light, airy and decadent. She licked her lips, tracing the last taste of flavor. Chesney watched her, his eyes wide. He did not have any dessert himself, seeming content for Gracie to eat it all by herself.

“My Mom is glad I’m back in town,” Gracie said, snapping Chesney’s attention from her lips to her eyes.

“Of course she is. Does she live nearby?”

“Not really,” Gracie began, intending to give Chesney a few vague truths about her Mom. Except he kept on asking questions. Some part of her knew that he was deliberately steering the conversation away from business and the intrigues at Attitude office...but at the same time, he seemed so genuinely interested in her answers. He listened attentively, making the occasional joke and then asking her another question about herself.

By the time she’d finished the chocolate mouse, Gracie had told him all about her Mom, including how her parents had

first met.

Finally, she put the spoon down. The mousse was gone and it was time to go. Chesney had finished the wine while she was eating. He stumbled slightly as he stood up, even though the wine didn't seem to be affecting him otherwise.

"Don't we have to pay?" Gracie asked. He shook his head.

"Nope, already taken care of."

"Huh, convenient."

"Yep," Chesney said, putting a hand on the back of his chair, "That's what every guy wants to hear. That he's convenient."

Gracie snorted. "You are definitely inconvenient."

He grinned cheekily, looking rather proud. The maitre d' gave them a nod and smile as the two of them left. It had gotten dark while they'd been eating. The evening air was warm with just enough of a cool breeze that it didn't feel too sticky.

"Greta," Chesney said softly, "You would tell me if..."

"If what?"

He frowned and shook his head, the moment breaking.

"I should get home," he said sadly, getting out his phone. She knew he was about to call an uber but she'd been having so much fun talking to him that she didn't want the evening to end just yet. Her car was in the restaurant parking lot, just a few feet away. It would be the easiest thing in the world to give him a ride home, but did she trust herself to do what was best for the investigation?



## Chapter Eight

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“YOU DON’T HAVE to call an Uber. I’ll drive you home.”

Chesney looked up in surprise. “Yeah? You’d do that?”

“Don’t look so surprised! I’m an extremely helpful person.”

He smirked, pocketing his phone. “And modest too.”

Once in the car, Chesney opened his window all the way. The wind poured in, tousling his hair as Gracie drove. He turned on the radio, playing with the stations until he found a song he liked. The sound of a heavy beat and a woman singing flooded the car.

“I haven’t heard this in years.”

Gracie shrugged, sending him a bemused glance. “I don’t know it.”

“What?! This was massive,” he wiggled around in his seat, looking goofy. Gracie’s smile widened as she realized he was trying to dance. It was painfully cute. “Laugh at me now, but back in the day, I used to know all the lyrics to this. Turn left at the next lights.”

“All the lyrics? That’s quite a boast, c’mon then, let’s hear it.”

Chesney stilled, his smile turning nostalgic as he tried to dredge up the lyrics from some long-forgotten corner of his memory.

“Bad singing voice?” Gracie teased.

“Yep, but I’ve never let that stop me. Jeez, I can’t believe I’ve forgotten this,” Chesney opened his mouth and started what Gracie would only loosely define as singing.

It was probably the bottle of wine, making him more relaxed, but Gracie soaked up the happy confidence in him. A man who was comfortable enough in his own skin to admit his shortcomings and try to sing, even when he knew he couldn’t.

He stopped only when the song ended and he needed to give her more directions:

“And then, take the next right.”

“This is a nice neighborhood. Very expensive,” Gracie noted, her PI instincts rearing up. How could an editor afford a place on Eastleigh Drive?

“You know, you ask a lot of questions. You’re subtle about it, you don’t push but you can pump someone for information without them even noticing.” Chesney’s voice was light and amused, maybe he was only joking around but it made Gracie wonder if she should be on her guard; no matter how cute Chesney’s smile was as he half-closed his eyes, enjoying the simple feeling of the wind on his face.

“Are you offering me a job as a journalist?”

“Ha, Attitude doesn’t need any more journalists!”

“No? What does it need?”

Chesney shrugged, his whole body moving, radiating disappointment. One of his knees bumped against the glove

compartment, making Gracie clutch the steering wheel.

“My teenage self would have been ecstatic to learn that he grew up to become the editor of *Attitude*. I used to pour over every issue, practically memorizing the articles. It was for kids, but it spoke to us like we were adults. And there’s still a market for that. Teenagers still want the same thing, to be treated with respect, not spoken down to and also to have things explained clearly.”

“Well, then it sounds like *Attitude* will be around for a long time to come.”

Chesney shook his head, sighing wistfully.

“It’s that yellow house up ahead...”

In the dark, the house didn’t look yellow, just a pale color, but Gracie understood. Most of the houses on Eastleigh were practically mansions, with long driveways and some even had wrought-iron gateways. Chesney’s house was different though, and it stuck out like a sore thumb in a neighborhood where every other house looked like it belonged in a glossy magazine.

Chesney’s house looked like it had been transported from some quaint mountain top village, with red tiles on the roof and a flowering plant growing up the side of it. The yard was neatly mowed and there was an archway that must lead to the backyard, with purple flowers hanging elegantly down.

Gracie smiled at the incongruity of the place. It was a side to Chesney’s personality that she would never have predicted. And it was her job to predict people.

“Are you coming in?”

Gracie turned, and Chesney was right there. A bolt of pure yearning went through her. It would be the easiest thing in the

world to just forget her scruples and reach over and kiss him.

But what would happen afterward?

He'd call her by the wrong name, her fake name.

"No," she said softly, not moving away. "Not tonight."

His eyes were intense as he drank her in and Gracie knew that they both felt this pull between them, this tension, and that she couldn't act on.

"Andy," she whispered. The sound of her voice snapped both of them out of it and the moment ended, the bubble of their passion suddenly bursting. He opened the car door with a grimace. "Night, Greta. See you tomorrow!"

"Night!" she called after him as Chesney walked up the path to his front door. He raised a hand to wave an acknowledgment, but didn't turn back around. Gracie slumped down in her seat. What were the odds that the one guy she actually started to like would end up being a suspect in a case?

Biting her lip, she watched as Chesney unlocked his front door. His shoulders were wide and his shirt fluttered in the evening's gentle breeze.

There was, Gracie thought with sudden awareness, something dreadfully wrong with this scene. A professional instinct kicked in, her senses heightening. The flowers in the archway waved delicately in the wind, the sweet scent of them reaching Gracie in her car.

Chesney closed his front door behind him, but Gracie was sitting stock still, trying to work out what her subconscious had picked up on.

There! Through the archway, a shadow moved. It wasn't the random movement back and forth of some plant caught in the

breeze. It was far too big. Too big to be a neighborhood pet. No, that was the steady movement of a person, trying to move through the shadows. There was someone in Chesney's backyard, someone who obviously didn't want to be seen.

Acting without thought or pause, Gracie lurched over, grabbing open the glove compartment and getting out Klarov's taser.

There wasn't time to try and be quiet, to try and take the intruder unawares, he'd already had too much of a head start. Gracie sprinted from the car, through to the backyard, the taser in front of her and ready to be used.

The shadow heard her coming, turning to face her, ready for an attack. It was too dark back here to make out the figure clearly, but they were wearing a balaclava to cover their face.

Gracie sneered, "Put your hands up! Where I can see them!"

"Make me!" the intruder growled, his voice dampened to a harsh whisper that made it difficult to make out his words. He took a threatening step towards Gracie. She stood her ground, feeling confident. But before the intruder could get any closer, the back door of the house swung open and Chesney came rushing out, heading straight for the intruder.

Chesney met him with a swing of his fist, the impact making the intruder stumble backward just managing to keep on his feet. He retaliated with a punch to Chesney's chin, but Gracie saw a glint of something else as he moved. Something sharp and metal that glittered in the dim light, held tight in the intruder's hand.

Chesney was holding his own in the fight, but Gracie wasn't going to let him get stabbed! As the two men focused on each

other, Gracie circled around, staying out of the intruder's sightline, trying to find a clear shot to use the taser on him.

"Greta! Run!" Chesney yelled, as the intruder stepped back, brandishing his knife at Chesney. But Chesney's yell seemed to have confused the guy. He half-looked around, unwilling to take his eyes off Chesney, but unable to see where Gracie was.

In the split second of confusion, the intruder rushed at Chesney, taking him by surprise and pushing him to the ground. Gracie screamed, not able to see where the knife was. Had he just stabbed it into Chesney's stomach? Chesney let out a low pained noise, as the intruder ran past him, out of the back yard.

"Shit, shit, shit," Gracie panted, fear running through her. Those times when she'd held herself back from kissing him, when she'd let worry stop her, ran through her head. Now he was hurt and she didn't know how badly.

She bent over Chesney, her hands darting over him as she searched for a wound. "Are you ok? Did he get you?"

"I'm fine, just a bruised ego -"

Gracie stood up quickly. Adrenaline made her shake slightly. She'd been terrified, thinking that Chesney had been hurt and she wasn't going to just let someone get away with this. The intruder was going to pay.

With her taser still clutched in her hand, she ran in the direction the man had gone. The street was deserted as Gracie got back to her car, scanning the area. He could not have gotten far, but there was nothing moving in either direction. No pedestrians, no cars, and certainly no running men wearing balaclavas.

Was that someone a few dozen yards to her left? She paused, trying to work out if it was a person or just a tree branch.

Why the hell weren't there more streetlights?

She took off, jogging a few steps until she could see the tree more clearly. It wasn't the intruder. He'd escaped her. She hissed, angry at her failure. She turned back, striding back to Chesney's house.

Chesney was waiting for her at the front door.

"I lost him," she said, as the two of them walked into the house. He led her into an open living room that had been worked over. Books had been thrown off bookshelves, papers scattered across the floor and surfaces, leaving only the leather couch free of mess. "Wow."

"Yeah, it doesn't look like he actually took anything, just messed the place up a bit."

It was, Gracie recalled, the second time that Chesney had been burgled in less than a week.

"Are you ok?" Gracie asked, still panting and worried about him.

"Me?" Chesney choked a bitter laugh, "Why did you run after him?! I was worried about you. What would you have done if you'd caught up with him?"

"I can take care of myself," Gracie said sharply. The anger and fear and relief combined so that it was difficult to think clearly. "I had my taser."

"You just..." Chesney took a step closer so that she had to tilt her head up to keep looking at him. "You just ran out...putting yourself in needless danger!"

Gracie blinked, his concern hitting some part of her that had long been put away and forgotten.

Moving slowly, Chesney raised a hand and cradled her cheek. The pad of his thumb stroked against the bottom of her lip.

His soulful eyes were so close. Gracie could feel her resolve breaking.

The excitement of the fight and the chase, the adrenaline still coursing in her veins, she could still feel her own panic as she'd seen Chesney fall and now he was right in front of her, looking at her with something like wonder. It was all too tempting. Her eyes shut as the last thread of her will power gave way. Chesney's lips were hot against her, sparking a flame inside her that she could not damp down.

Gracie moaned, giving up all resistance to her desires and wrapping her arms around Chesney's neck, pressing into the kiss and stoking the fire that was already burning inside her.

She pulled back, gasping and desperate for more of him, all her previous doubts evaporating as she felt the heat of him. Gracie's hands twined into his hair, gripping onto him and pulling him back to her, directing his mouth to her sensitive neck. She sighed in pleasure, leaning back as his wicked mouth kissed and licked her until she didn't have a coherent thought in her head. She was being driven wild and she pushed his head further down, wanting to feel the heat of his tongue on every inch of her skin.

He groaned, his hands caressing every part of her that he could reach over the barrier of her clothes. It was too much and nowhere near enough. Gracie pulled at her own clothing, wanting to feel him, wanting his talented mouth.



Gracie undid her jeans, and Chesney pulled back, his eyes wide as he watched her. The fight in the garden was over, but this evening could have taken a very different turn if Chesney had been stabbed. She'd be in some hospital waiting room, hoping that he was going to pull through. Her fingernails dug into his scalp, holding him close, not wanting to think about how close she'd come to losing him only a few minutes ago.

She pushed him down and he willingly fell to his knees in front of her. Reverently, he pulled down her jeans, pushing them down her legs and leaving on her panties.

“Look at you,” Chesney whispered, stroking the front of her panties. She was already wet, impossible not to be after the way that they'd kissed. Behind her was the leather couch and Gracie sat back onto it, spreading her legs. “Oh, baby, you're perfect.”

He leaned up kissing her mouth again and then trailing kisses down until his tongue dug into the hollow of her throat, planting small kisses there.

“Andy...I...” Gracie struggled, her words getting lost as his thumb brushed against one of her hard nipples through her lacy bra.

“What do you want? Hmm?” His voice was annoyingly calm and Gracie hated it. She wanted him to be just as breathless and inarticulate as she was.

“I want,” Gracie said, pushing him back as she licked her lips, “I want your mouth on my pussy, I want you to lick me until I scream.”

“Oh, baby, I can do that,” a Chesney said smugly and then he was pulling at her panties, stretching the material to the side in his desperation to get to her. Gracie sat up, pushing her panties

down a little way until Chesney could get them out of the way completely and then his mouth was on her. Drinking in her wetness as his talented tongue licked at her.

Gracie let out a shriek at the sudden intensity, the heat of him and power of just his tongue.

There could be no more pretending that she wasn't going mad with desire. She gasped, her thighs tightening, holding his head in place as he worshipped at her core.

Underneath her, the leather couch creaked rhythmically. It sounded obscene. Anyone within earshot would know exactly what they were doing. But there was nobody in earshot, and Gracie was too close to the edge to care anyway.

“Andy!” She yelled out, again and again, her body clamping down as her mind melted in orgasm. Her thighs clamped down around his head, holding him completely still.

Finally, Gracie unscrewed her eyes and let him move away.

Chesney was still fully dressed, his shirt mostly undone but still clinging to his shoulders. The couch was just wide enough for both of them as he lay down next to her. Gracie clung on to him, her muscles still shaking as he held onto her.

Chesney's hand was stroking along her spine as she shivered. But Gracie's mind could never be still for long.

“Why would someone want to rob you?”

His hand paused and then continued stroking again without answering her.

“And you were mugged last week.”

He huffed out a laugh, his breath fanning through her hair, tickling at her scalp. “You never stop, do you?”

“You’re not that surprised that there was someone here. You haven’t phoned the police.”

“It’s a busted lock, what could they do?”

Gracie pulled back to look at him with narrowing eyes.

“You’ll need a police report for home insurance.”

“I need a locksmith.”

Gracie ducked her head back down, resting her cheek on Chesney’s chest and mulling over what had just happened; Chesney’s lack of reaction to the break-in, how her body couldn’t be trusted when it came to him. It was like she had some instinct to trust him, even though the evidence pointed to him being up to no good.

Chesney took one of her hands and raised it up to his face to kiss the inside of her wrist, right on her pulse point.

“Your heart is racing,” he said. She didn’t need to sit up to know that he was smirking in a self-satisfied way. Gracie snorted and sat up, reaching for her panties. It was time to get dressed.

Chesney watched her silently until she had done up her pants.

“Greta.”

“Yeah?” she looked around, not sure where her other shoe had gotten to. Had she dropped the taser on the floor? That didn’t seem like something she’d do, but there it was on the floor!

“Do you work for Huang?”

Gracie’s attention snapped back to Chesney although her only visible reaction was a slight frown.

“Uh, obviously, he owns the company and he was the one that hired me.”

“Yeah,” Chesney stretched out on the sofa, sitting up on his elbows. “No. Did he hire you to spy on me?”

“Spy on you?”

A smile tugged at Gracie’s lips, he was making it sound like some kind of Cold War espionage.

“What? Why would you think that?”

“Just...He hired you at a really odd time...” Chesney tried to smile and failed. Gracie had spent so much time worrying about the morality of kissing a guy who didn’t know her name, but she saw now that he’d been suspicious of her right from the beginning.

Confusion was etched across his face and Gracie wanted nothing more than to reach over and smooth out the frown on his face. But, despite what had happened between them, she still had a job to do. The inner, professional voice was telling her to deny everything, to drop this case and forget about Chesney. To forget that anything had happened here tonight. It was just an adrenaline fueled hook-up.

But Gracie didn’t want to do that. She couldn’t walk away from him now. Looking down at herself, she wasn’t even sure why she’d put her clothes back on. She’d been content lying on the couch with him, and she missed the intimacy of his touch.

She perched on the couch, resting her hand on his chest, right above his heart.

“So you think there’s something that Huang would want to ‘spy’ on?”

“Yes,” he said tensely. Gracie reached out, cupping his cheek as she wiped a patch of her wetness from his chin. “If you tell

me the truth about why you were hired then...I'll tell you why Huang might want to know what I've been up to."

## Chapter Nine

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GRACIE'S HAND went back to resting on Chesney's chest, she could feel his steady heartbeat as he lay on the couch, looking up at her. She'd never felt drawn to anyone involved in her investigations before. Being a PI was her life, and there hadn't been room for anything else, for anyone else, in years.

But being with Chesney like this felt wrong, like she was here under false pretenses. She felt pulled in two directions, her loyalty to Klarov and the job, and her own sense of morality. She was lying to Chesney about so much. It was just wrong to share the passion they just had and yet he didn't even know her real name.

It was time to tell him the truth.

"Andy," she said slowly, her fingers stroking along the indent between his pectoral muscles.

A look of horror passed across his face and he grabbed her hand, stopping her from caressing him. His fingers gripped onto her tightly, holding her back.

"You really were hired to spy on me?"

It was the base truth, but Gracie grimaced to have it stated so dramatically. She didn't think of what she did as spying. She chased bad guys, it was her job to stop bad things from

happening, or at least expose them so they don't happen again. It had seemed to Gracie that Chesney already knew the truth anyway, that he just wanted her to be honest with him. That it was the untruth between them that hurt him.

But now she wasn't so sure that was the case.

“You said that you already suspected me of working for Huang. Ok? So, yes, I am working for him. I'm a private detective.”

Chesney sat up quickly and Gracie had to move or risk being knocked off the couch. There were papers scattered on the floor from the break-in, and Chesney put his foot down on one, the paper crinkling as he trod down. He didn't notice though, his brow furrowed by what Gracie had just told him.

“I can't believe this. I mean, I suspected it but I never thought he'd go this far. Or that it would be you. Private detectives are supposed to be dirty old men in greasy trench coats! Not... not...you!”

Gracie stood up, glaring down at him. She could understand him being initially upset and she was prepared to deal with that, but she wasn't going to listen to some sexist bullshit about how women couldn't be PIs. She'd heard enough of that when she was starting out and she didn't need to hear it again. Not from him.

After all, both the PIs that Klarov employed were women. She could feel that old anger working itself up, but then Chesney asked his next question, stopping her in her tracks.

“Is Greta even your real name?”

She shook her head and Chesney made an odd, pained noise, like a dog with a thorn in his paw.

“What's your name?”

“Gracie.”

“It suits you,” he said, his voice bitter.

He moved away from her. It felt to Gracie like he was trying to get away from her as if she was something dirty that should be avoided. This guy had just had his mouth on her pussy, he’d just tasted the most intimate part of her, but now he wanted to be away from her rather than risk touching her. That feeling of dirtiness got worse and it felt an awful lot like shame.

Gracie rubbed her hands together, holding her head up proudly. She didn’t have anything to be ashamed of and she wouldn’t let him make her feel that way. All she’d been doing was simply her job, she’d known what she’d been doing and she hadn’t done anything wrong!

Why was he looking at her with that bitter expression? Trying to make her feel guilty? She was being honest with him now! A burst of anger made her sit up a little straighter, looking back at him in defiance.

“So…” Chesney began, “Huang hired you?”

“Hired my agency.”

“There’s more of you?!?” Chesney asked, somehow looking even more upset. Gracie narrowed her eyes at him. Did he even still see her as a woman, a woman that liked him, or did he look at her and merely see Huang’s spy?

“No,” she said sharply, “There’s only one of me.”

“I need some coffee,” Chesney said, standing up and starting for the kitchen. He had to pick his way carefully across the messy floor. “Are you going to tell me why he hired you?”

Gracie hesitated. It was one thing to tell Chesney the truth about herself, but it was a very different thing to tell him the



details of the case. Telling him the whole truth would do more than just blow her cover...it would blow the whole case.

Slowly she followed after him. Surprisingly, it didn't even feel like a big decision. She'd already told him this much, why stop now?

She wanted to be honest with him. Even though he was reacting badly, it felt good to finally come clean. Whatever was going on between the two of them was fragile and tenuous. Could it even be called a relationship?

She wanted to call it a relationship. And the one big thing that years of working as PI had taught her was that relationships were destroyed by secrets. Secrets were a rot that worked their way stealthily into the hearts of relationships, destroying love and making the most devoted couple doubt each other.

Even though they had a rocky start, and this attraction might not lead where she hoped it would, Gracie didn't want to have secrets between them anymore.

Chesney was in the kitchen, aggressively spooning coffee grounds into the machine. He didn't look up at her as she came in and cocked her hip so that she could lean against the edge of the kitchen counter.

"I'm trying to find out who's spiking the articles."

Chesney's hand shook, spilling the grounds across the counter. "Dammit!"

"Look," Gracie said, putting her hand on her hip and jutting out her chin defiantly. "I'm telling you because I wanted to be honest. Because I like you."

Chesney swallowed, his face unreadable as he paused what he was doing.

“I...I liked you too. I admit it’s a shock to find out you really are a...spy. But if you can’t tell me the truth then I think you should leave.”

Gracie reared back, “I am telling you the truth!”

“Greta...Gracie, Huang didn’t hire you because a few articles got leaked.”

There was a tight feeling in Gracie’s chest. She was being honest with him! And, yes, maybe he had reason to doubt her word, but it wasn’t fair because she was being honest with him now!

He frowned slightly at seeing how strongly she reacted.

“Why do you think he hired me?” she asked faintly. Her lips clenched together, stopping an angrier retort escaping.

“Hired your agency,” Chesney corrected sarcastically, but oddly there was an undercurrent of warmth to his tone.

“Hired my agency,” she nodded, feeling the tension ease slightly.

“You know, this was one of the other reasons why I thought you were a spy. You’re always asking questions. Always digging for information.”

“And you don’t like being interrogated?”

“No...” Chesney shook his head with a rueful smile. The first smile since she’d told him the truth. “I like that you’re curious about the world around you.”

He got a cup out of the cupboard, silently offering a cup to her to ask if she wanted a coffee. She shook her head. Pausing to roll up his sleeves, he poured himself a cup. He still hadn’t done up the buttons at the front of the shirt. The material was only really covering his back and upper arms at this point.

Gracie waited for him to finish drinking before revealing her next surprise.

“I know you’re putting together a website to get Attitude online.”

Chesney’s eyes widened. “How did you even...? Jesus, you’re really good at this. How did you - No, actually don’t tell me. You really, really should have been an investigative journalist.” He shook his head in reluctant admiration. “I’ve got to hand it to you, I have no idea how you could have found that out.”

“It’s your turn,” Gracie said, taking a step toward him. This time he did not back away from her.

“Huh?”

“Our deal, I told you the truth, now it’s your turn. You were going to tell me why Hunag might want you investigated.”

He scoffed, watching her in amusement, “I don’t need to tell you. You already know. I assumed Huang had an inkling about me setting up the website behind his back and hired you to get proof.”

“No,” Gracie shook her head decisively. “He hired me to look into the spiked articles.”

Chesney’s mouth twitched slightly, she could see that he didn’t believe her.

“Gracie, my house has just been broken into, nothing’s been stolen but they went through all my papers. My laptop got stolen last week. This isn’t happening because of a few articles. This is a lot bigger than that.”

“I’m telling you, I was hired to see if you were the one leaking the articles. That’s it. I doubt that anyone even knows about

the website!”

Chesney put his coffee down on the counter and raised his hand to cup Gracie’s cheek. His fingers were hot from cradling his coffee cup.

“It’s difficult to trust you when you’ve been lying to me since the beginning. How...” his thumb stroked her bottom lip and his troubled eyes seemed to look straight through her. “How do you expect me to react?”

Gracie leaned her head into his hand, her lips brushing his palm. “I expect you to believe me.”

Chesney’s hand dropped away. “I want to, Gracie, I really want to.”

With a sinking heart, she realized that there was nothing else she could do here. No matter what she said, she was not going to be able to convince him. Despite their earlier intimacy, she didn’t feel welcome any longer.

“I should go,” she said softly. He didn’t make a noise of protest or try to stop her. She leaned up to press a goodbye kiss to his cheek and counted it a victory when he didn’t turn away.

She could never regret a job that she loved so much. She would not feel guilty for not being honest with him from the beginning. All she could do as she left Chesney’s house was wish that the two of them had met under different circumstances.

There were a bunch of missed calls on her phone. All of them from Klarov. He must be desperate to get hold of her, but she didn’t call him back. The radio came on as she started the car, it was still tuned to Chesney’s radio station, now playing some happy sounding song with upbeat lyrics.

Gracie shut the radio off and headed home in silence.



KLAROV'S CAR WAS PARKED OUTSIDE HER APARTMENT building and the man himself was walking through the parking lot. He must have just come from knocking on her front door.

“What the hell? Where have you been?” Klarov said, looking her up and down with a professional eye, checking for injuries as soon as she got out of the car. Gracie's clothes were still crumpled from putting them on so quickly after her encounter with Chesney and she smoothed a hand down her pants, hoping that Klarov hadn't noticed anything amiss.

“Busy.”

“Busy?!? You're in the middle of a case, Gracie. You don't get to be busy with anything until this is wrapped up!”

She shook her head, stepping past him. All she wanted was to go to bed and pretend that all of that conversation with Chesney had been a dream. An unreal nightmare that she could just wake up from. Klarov drew a deep breath, pivoting on his heel to follow after her.

“What are you doing here, Klarov?” Gracie asked, forestalling the rest of his tirade.

“I wanted to let you know what I found out about Huang, and I couldn't reach you!” Klarov's feet stomped heavily behind her.

“Jesus, I was worried about you. I was imagining all kinds of shit and you were...you were, what exactly?”

“I was with Chesney.”

“WHAT!?!?”

Gracie stopped outside her front door, not wanting to let Klarov inside. She didn't need to be yelled at in her own

home. Not right now.

“Keep it down, the neighbors will complain.”

Klarov scowled and lowered his voice to a hiss, “What the hell were you doing with Chesney that means your shirt is inside out?”

Gracie looked down quickly. Klarov was right. She wanted to tell him to back off, that it was none of his damn business why her shirt was inside out. But that wasn't entirely true. Ultimately he was responsible to the client, he needed to know that she'd blown the case.

“I told him.”

Klarov simply looked confused by her confession.

“I told him my real name,” Gracie clarified, “And about the case.”

“Why?! Why would you do that?”

“Because it was the right thing to do, Klarov. He's...he's not who we should be watching. He's not the one leaking.”

“He's using you,” Klarov said with certainty, there was pity in his eyes and the sight of it made something in Gracie snap.

“Someone broke into his house, he's the victim here. There's more going on here than just the leaked stories, this is bigger than that.”

Klarov just shook his head, looking at her like she was so wrong that he didn't even know how to explain her mistakes to her.

“He's really done a number on you, got you believing him. So what? He charmed you, romanced you and convinced you to break your cover? Unbelievable.”

This was why she'd always hated Klarov, with just a few words he could strike at the heart of her insecurities. Gracie always trusted her instincts, she never doubted them or second-guessed them. Usually that worked out fine. Usually.

But right from the first time she'd seen Chesney, her attraction to him had been getting in the way. Had she misjudged him because of that attraction? Had his pain earlier been an act?

"No!" Gracie yelled, no longer worried about disturbing her neighbors. "No, that's not it! You're so fixed on Chesney that you can't see there's more going on here."

She stopped, not wanting to get emotional in front of Klarov. Instead, she turned away to dig her keys out of her handbag.

"What did you want to tell me about Huang?"

Klarov snorted. "Oh, are you still working the case? You've tanked it!"

"Of course I'm still working on it! There's something going on here, that's what I'm trying to tell you. I need to get to the bottom of it."

"Why?" Klarov asked, his pity turning back to anger.

"Why?!? Because that's what we do!"

"No, we earn money. I care about the agency getting paid for finishing a job, not getting to the bottom of mysteries!"

"Listen, if we clear this up then we'll get paid. Whoever owns Attitude will pay up."

That caught Klarov's attention and he looked around, making sure that no one was in earshot. Perhaps he could see that the case was bigger than Chesney after all. "There is something funky going on with that. The real owner, on paper, is the

daughter of the guy that founded it. But ownership is held in trust by her uncle until she turns 25.”

“How old is she now?”

“Twenty-two.”

Gracie fiddled with the keys in her hand, not unlocking the door. “I spoke to her over the phone a few days ago. She’s the real owner?”

Klarov nodded slowly. “You really told Chesney about the case?”

Gracie sighed heavily. She couldn’t regret what she’d done, she just wished that she could feel better about it.

“Yeah.”

Klarov looked away, out over the parking lot. “I’m not going to see a cent from Huang, am I?” His tone was more resigned now, he’d worked off his anger as he yelled at her. “I suppose you were due a bad case.”

“Thanks,” she said dryly. It was clear that he still thought Chesney was just using her. But Gracie knew he was wrong. Chesney wasn’t like that. But she had to decide how she was going to handle the case now that Chesney knew about her.



## Chapter Ten

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“JUST GO HOME, Klarov. It’s been a long night and I need to get some sleep,” Gracie said, wiping a hand across her face. Her skin was slightly sweaty from earlier and she needed to have a hot shower and try to forget the look on Chesney’s face when she’d told him the truth.

Klarov nodded, his eyebrows furrowing as he looked at her in concern. “Sure. Listen, try not to beat yourself up about this.”

“Uh-huh,” Gracie said, turning her back on him to unlock her front door. She didn’t want her boss to see the expression on her face. Klarov’s attempt to make her feel better wasn’t going to cheer her up.

“It seems like a big deal now, but in a few days you’ll put this behind you and it’ll be like it never happened.”

Gracie opened her front door and slipped inside, turning back to Klarov, she kept the door open only ajar so they could finish their conversation.

“You think?” Gracie asked, surprised that Klarov would make any assumptions about Chesney’s personality. He was usually a cautious judge of character.

“Absolutely!” Klarov said with an easy grin. “I’ve got another case that you can get stuck into. By this time next week, you

won't even remember the name Andrew Chesney!"

Gracie's face fell. She didn't want to forget Chesney! She'd been so sure that he already knew that she was working undercover, it simply hadn't occurred to her that he'd take the news so badly that it would destroy the trust between them. Despite the flare of electricity that seemed to exist between them, despite the tension that burned in Gracie's gut whenever she thought of him, it hadn't been enough.

"Right. Thanks, Klarov. Night," Gracie said bitterly, shutting the door and almost missing the pitying look on Klarov's face.

She showered and got ready for bed trying to make herself comfortable. But her mind kept on going back to Chesney and the evening they'd shared.

"How do you expect me to react?"

She could still see the way his soulful eyes had seemed to look straight through her as he'd asked her that. And then her mind wandered back to even earlier that evening - when she'd been lying on his sofa, his mouth worshipping at her. How had things gone so wrong, so fast?

Gracie wasn't going to let things end here. She wasn't going to turn her back on Chesney like Klarov seemed to expect her to.

She turned off her bedside light, settling down into her bed. As always, she was by herself, but for once the bed felt too big like there was something, someone, missing and Gracie felt alone.



NO-ONE PAID GRACIE MUCH ATTENTION AS SHE WALKED through the magazine office. Certainly no more than they

normally did. Betty nodded to her, the young receptionist already too busy talking on the phone to speak to Gracie.

None of the journalists and magazine staff looked up from their desks as Gracie walked past them, making her way to her desk.

Their lack of interest in her was evidence that Chesney hadn't told anyone that she was a PI, working here undercover. The thought warmed her. Why hadn't he told anyone?

She smiled to herself, ducking her head as she sat down.

"All smiles for the boss, huh?" a man's voice called out sarcastically. Standing in front of her desk was one of the journalists, August. He'd taken a dislike to her the moment she'd started working here and right now he was scowling down at her.

Gracie's smile vanished. "What does that mean?"

"Oh," August scoffed, "Like we don't all know."

"I don't know."

"What I mean is," August said, leaning down to put his hands on Gracie's desk. "Being the boss's hook-up makes it easy to get hired."

Gracie blinked, taking a second to consider August's rude behavior. It was an astonishing thing for him to say. Sure, it was rude, but Gracie expected nothing else from August. No, what surprised her, what made her smile slowly in realization, was that she knew that she'd never given any sign of her attraction to Chesney in this office.

August snorted, unhappy that his barb hadn't got the angry reaction that he'd been hoping for. Without another word, he stalked away.

August had just made himself Gracie's next person of interest in her investigation.

Chesney opened his office door and peered out at her. She gave him a weak smile that he didn't reciprocate.

"Greta," he said, pronouncing her name with heavy sarcasm. "I did not expect to see you here this morning!"

Gracie peered around the office quickly and then jumped up, hurrying into Chesney's office before he could say anything else to blow her cover in front of everyone.

Chesney went to sit behind his desk and Gracie followed after him, leaning back against his desk right next to him. They were so close that she could have reached out and touched him, but she didn't, and neither did he.

"Getting comfortable?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Trying to. Did you ever say anything about us to August?"

Chesney gave her a profoundly confused look. Had he been expecting her to continue their conversation from last night?

"Us?" Chesney looked down at his hands, before shaking his head. "Us? No, I prefer to keep things professional."

Neither of them had kept things professional last night, but Gracie only nodded gently.

"Yeah, but things slip out, a little comment maybe..."

"No," Chesney shook his head more firmly this time, "That guy hates me. Huang made me hire him, even after his interview was a trainwreck. I'm not about to have a cozy chat about my personal life with Gussie."

Gracie nodded to herself. That confirmed what she'd already thought. For August to believe that Chesney and she had

hooked up, he must have seen them together outside of the office. There was only one person who knew that Gracie had been at Chesney's house last night.

"Listen," Gracie said with forced cheerfulness. "I've been thinking about what you said. That the spiked articles aren't important."

"Oh, yeah..." Chesney said, his voice guarded. Gracie wished that she could reach out to him. As she looked at his lips she remembered the feel of that mouth. It hurt that he seemed so distant now. But she had a plan: they would work out what was going on around here and solving the case together would prove to Chesney that they were good together.

Quickly she told him what Klarov had told her last night: that Clive Huang was not the real owner of Attitude magazine, that he was only holding it in trust until the real owner was old enough to inherit it. As she spoke, Gracie hopped up onto Chesney's empty desk, perching carefully.

"I've never heard anything about that," Chesney said when she'd finished. "Are you sure that's true? I know Huang has a niece and she does take a vague interest in what we do here... but I always assumed that she was simply a fan. I'd be in here every single day if I was going to inherit this place."

"Apparently it was her father that started the magazine."

Chesney leaned back, still frowning but clearly his thoughts had moved on to other things. "Do you think I could get her to OK the website?"

Gracie smirked. Chesney's top priority was keeping Attitude afloat as long as possible and that was far more interesting to him than all these other intrigues.

“I think it’s worth telling her that her uncle is stopping you from putting the magazine online.”

“And,” Chesney said bitterly, “That he hired a Private Detective agency to spy on the magazine’s editor.”

Gracie shrugged.

Chesney continued, his voice getting softer as he started to plan what he was going to say to this woman. A chance at a different owner meant someone who might listen to his ideas to keep Attitude relevant and financially viable. “Maybe, I could find out her address. She must be a subscriber.”

“I’ll go with you. We can go tonight and talk to her.”

Chesney sighed heavily, her words snapping him out of whatever plans he was making. “Gracie...”

“Andy, I was hired to investigate you and I took the case because I thought you were doing something wrong and I wanted to help. I understand that you don’t trust me right now but...see things from my point of view. The more I learned about you the more I saw you were one of the good guys.”

Chesney smiled, his eyes softening as he listened to her. He reached out and put his hand on her knee. It looked like an almost subconscious gesture, as if he simply couldn’t bear to be this close to her and not reach out.

“It’s weird,” he said gently, “I keep on having to correct myself every time I go to say your name.”

“Weird doesn’t mean bad,” she said, copying his gentle tone as she put her hand over his, and then sliding her hand along his arm, she bent forward until their faces were level. She could feel his hot breath against her cheek.

She leaned just a little further and then he was leaning toward her too, answering her wordless question. Their lips brushed together, it was barely a kiss but it was enough to let her know that he still wanted her, that he still felt this same need that she did, boiling inside her.

She felt lightheaded with the rush of it, the thrill of just that tantalizing touch. They kissed again, deeper this time, neither holding back the passion that they both felt.

Chesney's hand was suddenly on her waist, pulling at her, urging her forward and she was about to tumble onto his lap. Damn the consequences. Both of them were so wrapped up in this kiss that nothing else mattered

There was a noise in the background. A steady, insistent noise that Gracie was only distantly aware of as she realized that it had been going on for some time. She'd been too busy to notice it.

Someone was knocking on Chesney's office door.

Gracie shot up quickly, jumping away from him quickly. The door wasn't locked. They could be discovered if the person on the other side decided to simply walk in. As she leapt away from Chesney, she saw what their kiss had done to him, the hardness in his pants that was just for her.

"Go away!" Chesney yelled

The person took that as a sign that it was alright to come in and opened up the door. Laura, the journalist who worked Features and Letters took a few brisk paces into the office.

"What did I just tell you?" Chesney asked wearily.

Laura didn't answer him, as her eyes narrowed as she looked between the two of them suspiciously. "Sorry...guys...But I

forgot to give this form to Greta yesterday and she wasn't at her desk and I know you need it asap..."

Chesney grunted in annoyance, and Laura put the paper she was clutching on his desk before fleeing and shutting the door firmly behind her.

But the moment was gone. The two of them looked at each other from opposite sides of Chesney's desk, both of them wondering how many of the staff had heard Laura banging on his door. So much for Chesney keeping his private life separate from the office. The staff were going to be gossiping about this for the rest of the day.

Chesney pushed a hand through his hair, "Fuck, ok. After you left last night, I started thinking and...and if what you told me is true -"

Gracie bristled, glaring at him.

"I mean...You're telling me that Huang hired a PI because some articles were spiked?!? It's just a few leaks, it's not that big of a deal. I didn't even know that Huang cared that much about it. I don't think that he cares that much about it. And the more I thought about it, the more I think he just wants someone to keep an eye on me. I mean, I'm the one that he told you to investigate, right?"

Gracie nodded. "I wasn't even told the name of anyone else that works here."

"So...if Huang only wanted you to investigate me, and you're not going to be doing that anymore...right?"

He looked across at her, his expression unsure. Gracie hesitated, watching his eyes widen as he waited for her answer.



“I don’t think you’re the one spiking the articles,” she confirmed for him.

“Good!” he said in relief. “Because while I like having you here, you don’t have to stick around pretending to be my PA. Let’s go out on a date, an actual date, where we know each other’s names and we talk to each other honestly.”

Gracie chuckled. That sounded good. The right way to get to know someone, instead of all this sneaking and lying. She didn’t need to come into the office to look into what Huang was up to.

“Alright, I’m going to hold you to that.”

Chesney grinned, and when he smiled like that a small dimple formed on his cheeks. Gracie hadn’t noticed it before and she found herself utterly charmed by it.

She wished that she could just let the case go. But she still wanted to know why she’d been hired; why had Huang wanted someone to keep an eye on Chesney? And was Chesney really 100% innocent of leaking the magazine articles?

She believed so, her instincts told her that he was, but there was no conclusive proof that Chesney was innocent.

“I’ll see what else I can dig up around the office, now that you’re not my prime target, and then check in with my boss. My real boss. I guess this is the end of my career as a PA.”

There was another knock on the door, although this time the knocking was much quieter, as if the person on the other side of the door didn’t actually want to be heard.

“I should get to work, but I’ll message you about tonight, once I get that address.”

Gracie nodded, wanting to say something else but there was another knock on the door, louder and slightly more confident. Without waiting for an answer the door opened and two journalists strode inside. Both of them speaking at once:

“Chesney, you need to look over my article.”

“I was wondering if you had a chance to think about that deadline extension...”

Gracie caught Chesney’s eye and then slipped out of his office, closing the door softly behind her and cutting off the sound of the journalist’s complaints. Although she had told Chesney that she’d dig around the office, there wasn’t really anything else that she felt she could usefully do here. She packed up her bag and left.



KLAROV SWUNG HIS FEET UP ONTO HIS DESK AND SCOWLED AT her. The soles of his shoes were filthy. Gracie moved her chair away from them.

“Where have you been all morning? I was going to give you a nice, easy ‘follow and photo’ job, but I had to give it Crystal instead.”

“I went into the Attitude office.”

Klarov let out a disappointed sigh, “Jeez, just give up on the whole thing.”

“There’s something weird going on there, I want to know what it is.”

“Maybe, but you’re talking about investigating the guy that was paying our bills.”

“Was?”

“I couldn’t keep charging Huang. I told him this morning that he’d have to look for another agency.”

“How did he take the news?”

Klarov took his feet off the desk and leaned forward. “It was... odd. He seemed almost happy that the case had fallen apart. Which, yeah, maybe you are right about all this. I’m not saying I approve of you investigating anything when you’re not going to get paid for it...but I think you’re right to be suspicious of him.”

“Yeah? So you wouldn’t mind if I went and spoke to him myself then?”

Klarov snorted. “Like I could stop you. I’ll give you his address, just you know...be careful. This guy lives in one of the mansions on Eastleigh.”

Gracie frowned, two thoughts coming to her in quick succession. What were the odds that both Chesney and Huang live on Eastleigh Drive? Why would such a rich guy hire Klarov’s firm?

Gracie knew that everyone on staff was good at their jobs. But the office was run down, it had its heyday when Klarov’s father had run the business. This was not a detective agency that someone with that kind of money would hire. Unless they wanted the case to fail.



AN HOUR LATER GRACIE WAS DRIVING ALONG EASTLEIGH Drive. Huang lived a lot further north than Chesney, where the

houses were even bigger. Klarov had been right, these houses could definitely be called mansions!

The wrought-iron gate was open and Gracie pulled into Huang's driveway, driving straight up to his large house. A surveillance camera whirred as Gracie approached the front door and rang the bell. She smiled tightly up at the camera, annoyed as she stood on the stone steps for a few long seconds.

She rang the doorbell again, and waited a little longer until she gave up any hope of someone coming to answer the front door.

Weird that the gate should be open, but no-one around to answer the doorbell.

Gracie walked along the front of the building, and then peered around the side. There was nothing to stop someone from walking around to the back of the house. With a shrug and a regretful look at that surveillance camera, she started around to the back.

At the back of the house, there was a wide-open patio, overlooking a sweeping lawn. The back door had been left open and Gracie heard a very familiar voice, raised in anger.

“Why? Why didn't that matter?”

It was Chesney! Chesney was at Huang's house. Chesney had left the office, after asking her to leave, and come to confront Huang by himself.

Gracie scowled as she decided what to do next.

## Chapter Eleven

---

GRACIE DIDN'T HESITATE LONG. She rushed in through the patio doors and into the middle of an argument.

Chesney had his back to her and he didn't turn around as she came in. His attention was too focused on the man that he was yelling at.

“Why didn't it matter that you were ruining your friend's work?”

To Gracie's astonishment, the man in front of Chesney wasn't Huang. It was August! The hipster journalist from the office who was always so rude to her.

“Why didn't you care about that?” Chesney demanded again.

August looked past Chesney, glaring hatefully at Gracie as she stepped further into the house. The room was a richly furnished office, all green leather and the untouched bookshelves. Chesney, sensing that August was looking at someone behind him, turned sharply.

“Gracie!” he said in surprise, Gracie's eyes watched him carefully, trying to read his expression but all she could see was warmth and confusion. He was glad to see her. Something unlocked in her chest, that fear that she'd been carrying

around, that Chesney was only using her, broke and disappeared. “What are you doing here?”

As she watched, his smile changed, it was more than just a vague pleasant surprise to see her. It was something sharper. He was truly delighted to see her. To Gracie, it felt like an overreaction, but she pushed that thought back to mull over later.

“I wanted to talk to Mr. Huang...”

August snorted, glancing to the side. Sitting in an old fashioned green leather armchair that was angled away from all them, was an older man. This must be Clive Huang. He was staring into the unlit fireplace of the study. His chin was resting on his hand, his lips downturned, a broken expression on his face.

He didn't even move as Gracie said his name, nor look around to see who had just entered his house. Gracie gave him a slow look, before deciding that she would deal with him later. Instead, she turned back to the journalist who had been spiteful to her from the second she started working undercover at the office.

“What are you doing here, Gussie?”

He sneered at her, not saying anything as Gracie's mind whirred, putting together what could have happened.

Had Chesney finally found his leaker and come to report them to Huang? Gracie assumed that it was August who had been leaking the articles, why else would he be here?

But no, because that didn't explain Huang's defeated body language. Gracie frowned, annoyed that she couldn't work out for herself what had caused this strange confrontation.

“What's going on, Andy?”

He grinned at her. “What you told me about the owners of the magazine got me thinking. I never understood why Huang refused to set up a website for Attitude. It’s so obviously necessary for the future of a magazine that’s marketed to teenagers. So why would he act against the best interests of the company? For ages I thought he was just determined to do things his own way.”

Huang sighed turning away completely without saying a word as Chesney continued:

“And then after you left, I caught Gussie sitting at Laura’s desk, copying the latest article she’s been working on.”

“Gussie...” Gracie said quietly. She should have known there was more behind his surly attitude whenever he spoke to her. August crossed his arms in front of his chest, looking over at the old man again.

“When I confronted him, he told me that he was only following Mr. Huang’s orders.”

“Orders!” Huang scoffed, finally breaking his silence.

“Don’t let him fire me!” August wailed suddenly. He must have sensed that, now Huang was participating in the conversation, this was his chance to ask for mercy.

“Why?” Chesney said quickly, his voice rising in anger, “Why would you want to work somewhere that you care so little about!”

There was a small sound behind Gracie as someone else stepped through the patio door.

Gracie looked the newcomer up and down. She was a young woman wearing bubble gum pink lipstick and circular sunglasses that were so mirrored that Gracie couldn’t see her

eyes at all. The young woman strode past them all, heading over to Huang.

He looked up at her, his lips twitched like he was trying to smile but it seemed to Gracie that he looked closer to vomiting than actually looking happy to see her.

“What the hell? The gate was open! You’re the one who’s always going on about keeping it shut. Then I saw this chick,” the woman tilted her chin in Gracie’s direction, “Sneaking around the back of the house, like some kind of burglar...do I need to call the cops?”

She reached into the pocket of her denim shorts as Huang shook his head. “No, no, don’t do that.”

“And,” she drawled, taking her phone out of her pocket, “There’s some random car parked next to the pool house. What the hell is going on here? Who’s car is that?”

The whole time she spoke, she looked directly to Huang, dismissing everyone else in the room like they were all servants. Gracie recognized her voice, and from the casual way she spoke to Huang, she was sure that this was his niece: the one who would inherit Attitude magazine in three years time.

“Uh, that’s my car,” Chesney said, stepping forward. That also neatly answered the question of why Gracie hadn’t seen another car when she pulled up to the house.

Huang shook his head, looking even more broken.

“Diane,” he said gently, holding his hand out to her.

“What’s wrong with you?” she said, frowning down at him. She pulled up her sunglasses, looking at him suspiciously even as she reached out to take his hand.



“There’s...there’s something...”

“Uncle Clive?” she said, her voice faltering as she started to understand that Huang was in a strange mood.

“I’ve made such a mess of things,” Huang muttered to himself.

“No, you haven’t!” the younger Huang said quickly. “Just tell me what all this is about.”

“I...” Huang shook his head. “I did something...very foolish. I was...not always a good brother to your father.”

“Of course you were! That’s why he made you his executor.”

Huang shook his head, his whole body swaying. He let go of his niece’s hand and turned back to face the fireplace so that Gracie had to walk around the edge of the room to continue watching him.

“A few months ago a man approached me. He had proof of something I did twenty-five years ago, before you were even born. I...Don’t ask me what it was. But I know that if Ben were alive then he’d have never forgiven me. I didn’t want you to be angry too.”

“Uncle Clive...what was it? What did you do?”

He shook his head again, shivering and gathering his arms around himself. “This man wanted me to sell the magazine.”

“Huh? Attitude!?” Diane asked. Chesney and Gracie exchanged a look, their gazes catching for a second. Diane just looked confused, as if she simply couldn’t understand why anyone would want to own the magazine. It was not an expression, Gracie decided, that boded well for Chesney’s future.

“Yes, but I couldn’t just sell it. I have to answer to the shareholders! I can’t just...But he said if I didn’t sell it to him

for cheap within six months then he'd tell you...about how I used to steal from your father.”

“Oh,” Diane said, her voice low so that Gracie wasn't sure how she was taking the news. “Oh, Uncle.”

Huang's head fell down to his chest, unable to look at his niece any longer.

“You could have just told me the truth,” she snapped.

It didn't seem like Huang had heard Diane speak at all. Gracie stepped forward, determined to get to the bottom of the case once and for all.

“So you were deliberately tanking the magazine, trying to devalue it so that you could sell it to your blackmailer.”

Huang flinched and Gracie knew that she was right.

“But that doesn't explain why you would hire a private detective. The leaks were on your orders, you didn't need them investigated.”

Huang threw an anguished look at his niece, but it was Diane herself that answered. “Oh, my god! I know why. I kept on asking what you were doing about the leaks! So you went out and found the shittiest agency you could, hoping they'd make a mess and not find anything.”

Gracie clenched her jaw. She'd wrapped up this whole case in record time, despite being lied to at almost every turn. She was pretty damn proud of how everything was coming together now. Although, she acknowledged in the privacy of her own head, the agency offices were shabby. Klarov really should look into moving.

“Ugh, Uncle Clive... I don't understand why, like, you could have just me the truth. Dad loved that magazine. You know he

did. I wouldn't have cared about...I'm going to call my lawyer right the fuck now. I just can't believe this."

Diane paused, waiting for her uncle to respond. But, now that he'd confessed, he looked more broken than ever. He hunched over further.

"Aren't you going to say anything else? Is that it?"

If she was hoping for an apology, then Diane was doomed for disappointment. She let out an annoyed huff, her phone already pressed to her ear as she flounced out of the patio door. She barely looked at any of them as she left, and the arrogance of her set Gracie's teeth on edge, even though she felt sympathy for the young woman. After all, her uncle had been trying to sell off her inheritance.

Nevertheless, she was a rich woman who had her lawyer's phone number listed in her contacts. Attitude would not be sold off to this blackmailer now that Diane knew what was happening.

"Wait!" August said suddenly. Diane paused to look back at him, looking him up and down once before turning away and continuing out the door. Gracie could hear her voice, coming from outside as she started speaking on the phone.

"But...but..." Gussie spluttered, staring at the doorway like he expected Diane to come back in and help him. Finally, he turned his attention to Mr. Huang. "But I was only doing what you asked me to do!"

Huang sighed loudly, "I'm not responsible for what you did."

"He's going to fire me!" August said desperately, "Aren't you even going to pay me for what I did for you?"

Huang sat back in his chair, the large leather wings of the armchair hid his face as he spoke in a harsh whisper. "Just go

away. Can't you see I don't care? All of you, get the hell out of my house."

August's mouth fell open, as if he couldn't believe that he'd been betrayed like this by his employer. Gracie wondered if he had any empathy at all for what he'd done to his colleagues, for how he'd betrayed their trust.

August stormed out of the room, out the patio door.

"Mr. Huang," Chesney said quietly. But Huang had no time for him either. It seemed like he was simply too exhausted by his confession, he had no strength left for anything else.

"Just go, would you?"

Gracie nodded. There was nothing else that Huang would tell them right now. She'd worked on cases before, helping people who had been blackmailed and she recognized the mental strain that it had on its victims. Huang had been lying and scheming and constantly worrying for months and now his worst fears had been realized: his niece knew the truth.

Of course, he didn't have the energy to speak to anyone else right now.

Gracie put her hand on Chesney's elbow and guided him outside. In the distance she could still hear Diane talking on the phone, describing what her uncle had just told her. There was no sign of Gussie and Gracie was glad that she wouldn't have to deal with him again. She had no interest in seeing his sneering face again.

Chesney shut the patio door behind them. Stepping into the bright sunlight felt like a fresh start, like they'd put all the lies and half-truths of the case behind them and now it was just the two of them.

“God, I can’t believe that,” Chesney said, turning to her. “I knew the way Huang dealt with the magazine was odd, but I never thought he was actively working against us.”

Gracie smiled, her hand was still on his elbow and now she curled it around his arm. It was sweet, the way that Chesney loved the magazine so much. After all that they’d just learned, his foremost concern was always going to be the survival of the magazine.

“Yeah, it sounds like Diane Huang might be your new boss sooner than expected.”

“Hmm...maybe. Although, after everything Huang did, I don’t know if she’ll want us.”

Gracie hummed, leading him along the side of the house, back to where she’d parked. “I thought that too...but it sounded to me like she sees it as part of her Dad’s legacy. I think she’ll do everything she can to keep Attitude going.”

“Yeah?” Chesney stopped and wrapped his arm around Gracie’s waist. “What are you doing here, Gracie? You don’t seem at all surprised that Gussie was the leaker.”

“I already knew that Gussie was the leaker,” Gracie said with a smirk. This close she could see as Chesney’s eyes widened.

“What? How? I thought you were only looking into me as the leaker.”

“You sound jealous,” she teased, putting a hand on Chesney’s chest. She could feel the steady beat of his heart through the thin shirt he was wearing. “He made a comment this morning, implying that he’d seen us together. And the only way he could have known that I was at your house last night was if he was the intruder.”

“Huh, very clever,” Chesney said with a pleased smile.

Gracie reached up, her fingers brushing against Chesney's lips as she traced a finger along his lips, following the contours of his smile. She'd been so worried that everything between them was over, that Chesney would never forgive her for how they'd met or that she'd originally given him a false name. Now he was smiling at her detective skills and it felt like she was soaring.

She leaned up and pressed a kiss to those smiling lips. At the touch of him, she could feel something inside her melt, all those worries seemed behind them. Their kiss lingered, neither of them wanting it to end.

Gracie pulled back, watching him with wonder as he slowly opened his eyes.

"There's something I want to know though," she said.

"Really? I thought you'd already worked everything out."

"Why were you so happy to see me earlier? When I came into the house."

Chesney's smile widened. "You don't know? Well, I didn't know you were outside. You could have stayed out there and listened to the whole conversation. If I was still a suspect then you would have done that, just to make sure that I didn't say something that I didn't want you to know. The fact that you didn't need to listen in, well, that shows that you do trust me."

"Oh," Gracie said. Of course she trusted him! Sure, they had been a time when she'd thought he was the leaker, but now, when she looked at him, all she felt was giddy happiness.

"Listen, Gracie," Chesney took her hand from his chest, cradling it in his. "I have to go and find Diane Huang. I can't go back to the office and tell everyone that Attitude might be sold off. But...do you want to meet up later? I owe you a date,

let me take you out to dinner tonight. We can celebrate the case being over.”

Gracie nodded, grinning widely and throwing her arms around him, hugging him close. The gesture surprised even Gracie. She was used to being alone and self-contained, there was just something about Chesney that called to her, that made her feel it was ok to be open and vulnerable.

Chesney let out a surprised laugh but hugged her back just as tightly. He kissed the temple of her head.

“I’m going to take that as a yes to tonight,” he said, letting her go slowly. Gracie nodded, embarrassed at how obvious she’d been.

“Yeah, yes. Now go and make sure Attitude is going to be ok.”

Chesney grinned, pressed one last quick kiss onto Gracie’s lips and then hurried back around the house in the direction that Diane had gone.

Gracie watched until he’d rounded the corner of the house, her mind empty as she just enjoyed the simple feeling of joy that she felt whenever she was with him.

But now that Chesney was gone, she started to make plans.

## Chapter Twelve

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KLAROV TOOK his feet off his desk, sitting up in his chair as Gracie came into his office.

“Let me guess, you want some time off? Some slimeball broke your heart and you need a couple of days to get over him?”

“That’s a terrible guess. It’s no wonder you work behind a desk. You don’t have the instincts to be a real PI.”

Klarov huffed back a chuckle, “I’ve got enough instincts. I’ve never fallen for anyone while I was undercover.”

“Fallen for?” Gracie scoffed. Klarov didn’t reply, simply raising a knowing eyebrow at her.

Gracie scowled back at him, taking a seat in front of his desk. She had absolutely no interest in discussing her love life with her boss, nor did she want to admit that perhaps he was right to say that she had fallen for Chesney.

Despite the plans that they’d made after the confrontation with Huang, Gracie had yet to see him. He’d had to cancel their plans to meet up later that evening and although they had messaged a few times since it had not been enough for Gracie.

Now, two days since the confrontation, they were finally getting together to celebrate the end of the case. Gracie was



going to drive over to Chesney's house as soon as she finished at the office.

She was nervous to see him, it was the sort of nervousness that verged on giddy excitement. She had missed him. During the case, she'd seen him all day, every day. His sudden absence had felt odd, uncomfortable even. But the time apart had also given her time to reflect.

Klarov was right, she had fallen for him. She'd fallen hard, and now she needed to take things a little slower and find out if there really was a spark between them or if it was all just the excitement of the case and working undercover, spending all her time watching a hunky guy.

"I've got another case for you. Sorry, no time off for you!"

"I wasn't going to ask for time off," Gracie said, protesting quietly, her attention already on the paper file that was right in front of Klarov. His hand rested on top of it and he started drumming his fingers, a distracted expression on his face.

"No?" Klarov lifted the file and shoved into one of his desk drawers. "Maybe you should. Did you ever sort things out with Chesney?"

Gracie didn't roll her eyes at him, but it was only a matter of extreme restraint. "Klarov..."

"Did I ever tell you about my ex?" Klarov said, his voice loud and slightly sarcastic. The two of them never discussed their personal lives with each other and they both knew Klarov had never told her this story before. Gracie shook her head anyway. "She was...well, she was the one, Gracie. The One. Except, you know how it goes. There's always another case, and we don't exactly work 9-5."

Klarov sighed heavily, turning his chair to the side so that Gracie could only see his face in profile.

“Things didn’t work out?”

“They did not,” Klarov said, his voice turning wry but Gracie could hear the sadness that it belied. “You never know when you’re going to meet someone, someone that makes you feel joy from the second you wake up in the morning. I do have another case for you...but it can wait.”

Gracie cocked her head, considering. Klarov was usually a demanding boss, he wanted the best from his employees and he didn’t care if that meant pushing. Except, he wasn’t pushing her now, maybe underneath it all, Klarov was a bit of a romantic after all.

She dragged a hand through her hair, not sure how to deal with a Klarov that seemed to have actual feelings. She was too used to him being an ass. She had plans for tonight and a break from work would be nice.

“I’ll be in tomorrow morning,” she said, getting out of her chair. “Night.”

There was no response from Klarov, so she hesitated in the open doorway, before looking back at him. Klarov’s mouth was downturned and his eyes unseeing: he was wrapped up in the memory of an ex that Gracie hadn’t even known existed.

She felt a fondness for him, despite how irritating he was, he was still a friend. “Night, Peter.”

Calling him by his first name snapped Klarov out of his thoughts and he grinned up at her.

“Night, Gracie.”



GRACIE PULLED UP IN FRONT OF CHESNEY'S HOUSE, PARKING the car and taking a few seconds to calm down. Eagerness thrummed through her, and just a touch of fear.

What if Chesney didn't feel the same way that she did? In all the ways that counted in life, Gracie was confident and self-assured, yet Chesney had somehow wormed his way through all her defenses.

Something moved in her periphery vision and she looked around sharply; her self-preservation instincts had always been strong. There was Chesney, coming out of his house toward her. He must have heard her parking.

The late afternoon sunlight caught in his hair and as he smiled at her she couldn't help but smile back, amazed she could ever be afraid of this meeting. This gorgeous man was staring at her like he'd never seen anything more wonderful than the sight of Gracie, slumped in her car, slightly grubby after a day of paperwork.

Gracie got out of the car, not rushing, but savoring the feeling of anticipation. It was like she had been walking a tightrope and now, willingly, she was going to step off the rope and fall into the unknown. It was exhilarating and it should be terrifying but as long as Chesney smiled at her like that, then Gracie wouldn't be afraid.

"C'mere, you!" Chesney muttered, but Gracie had already thrown herself into his waiting arms. He held her tight, her body pressing into him so that she could feel the muscle and solidness of him through their clothes. Nothing had ever felt so right to Gracie, her body lighting up with the memory of him.

He rested his head on top of hers. If anyone else had done that she might have felt trapped and enclosed, held back somehow, but with Chesney, she felt safe.

“I’ve missed you,” she admitted in a hushed whisper.

“I missed you, too,” he said, just as quietly into her hair. He pulled back, slowly letting her go. The smile on his face was wide and happier than she’d ever seen him before. The look suited him and Gracie found herself hoping that she saw that expression again and again. “And I miss my PA bringing me coffee.”

Gracie laughed. “However will you cope?”

Chesney watched her lips as she teased him, and took her hand, “I suppose I’ll struggle through somehow.”

And then, as though neither of them could wait a second longer, they were kissing. Neither of them could have said who moved first, who reached for whom. But their lips met in a burst of passion and need and something else, something deeper that neither of them were ready to say out loud. Like this though, their bodies could communicate on a primal level. It was just a kiss, a press of hot mouths and battling tongues, but both of them knew how much it meant.



“CHAMPAGNE?” GRACIE SAID, PERCHED ON THE BARSTOOL OF the kitchen island as Chesney cooked. She’d glimpsed a bottle cooling in the fridge when Chesney got out the butter.

“I thought it was appropriate.”

“Yeah? Good news?”

Chesney stopped to turn to her, the spatula still in his hand, “Of course, you said you’d come over tonight. That was all the good news I needed.”

She looked down, not used to the easy way that he could compliment her. She wanted to get used to it, but she half-believed he was only teasing.

“So, um, what’s going on with the magazine and the Huangs now?” she asked before he could compliment her again or call her out on the blush that was slowly spreading across her cheeks.

He turned back to stir at the frying pan on the stove. “The big news is that Diane worked it out with her lawyers. She’s getting control of her inheritance now, instead of having to wait another few years. Which is great news for the magazine. She wants to use the website that I made and make a real push to up the readership. It’s a pretty exciting time, even though she’s...not the most patient boss.”

“That’s alright though?” Gracie asked. Chesney was dedicated to his work and to the success of the magazine which he’d loved for years.

“Oh, definitely. She has this whole social media campaign strategy that is just...well, let’s just say I’m not worried about Attitude’s future anymore.”

“That’s wonderful,” Gracie said sincerely. She had no particular love for Attitude magazine, but she could see Chesney’s passion. He was genuinely emotionally invested in it and she loved that he cared so much. It made her, indirectly, feel attached to Attitude too.

“What’s wonderful,” Chesney countered. “Is how quickly you worked out was happening.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I knew there was something going on with the magazine; the leaker, Clive’s weirdness about modernizing the magazine. But it never occurred to me to put any of it together. All of this was happening right under my nose and I never saw it. Seriously, you’d make an amazing investigative journalist. I’d hire you in a heartbeat if you want to change careers...”

Gracie snorted inelegantly. It was enough of a trial to write her reports for Klarov, she did not want to have to write actual magazine articles. A new thought entered Gracie’s head. Was Chesney still angry about her working undercover and lying to him?

Did he resent her job and the fact that she was a PI? After all, that was the source of all the lies between them. Her job was part of who Gracie was. She couldn’t be with him if he couldn’t accept that part of her.

Her insatiable curiosity, and her need to find answers drove her. Even now, although the case was over, Gracie still had the urge to track down all the loose ends. She still wanted to find out about who had been blackmailing Huang.

“What’s going to happen to Clive Huang now?” Gracie asked suddenly.

Chesney gave her a sour look. “Nothing. Diane doesn’t want to press charges on her own uncle. So he’s going to get away with trying to tank the company.”

“What about the blackmailer?”

“I knew you’d be curious! Diane is too...Have you spoken to your boss about your next case?”

Gracie blinked at the sudden change of topic before slowly putting the pieces together: the file on Klarov’s desk!

“Diane Huang has hired us to find out who the blackmailer is?”

Chesney grinned, looking very proud of himself.

“Did you...” Gracie narrowed her eyes at him, “Did you suggest that she hire our agency to look into it?”

He smirked at her, “Yeah? That’s good, isn’t it?”

Gracie nodded vigorously. It wasn’t just good: it was proof that he didn’t resent her job.

“Actually,” Chesney continued, “I’m pretty sure that she’s already hired your agency.”

That file on Klarov’s desk was definitely about the Huang case. Gracie smiled, knowing that she’d have the chance to investigate the whole mess, just like she wanted.

“We should open that champagne now,” Gracie said. Life was good after all, she had an entire evening with Chesney and in the morning she’d have a case that already piqued her interest.

Chesney got it out of the fridge and turned to get two glasses out of the cupboard. “I’m not sure it’s chilled enough.”

“I don’t want to wait any longer,” Gracie said, reaching over the counter to pull off the foil from the neck of the champagne bottle.

“No,” Chesney said, taking the bottle and starting to work the cork out. “Nor do I.”

The cork flew out of the bottle with a bang, startling a giggle out of Gracie.

Later, when the champagne was finished, Gracie dragged Chesney away from the cooking. She was too impatient to wait any longer. She wanted to be able to touch him, to put her

hands all over him and she needed his touch far more than she needed a hot meal.

Meeting Chesney while he was a suspect and she was undercover had been a rough beginning, fraught with lies. But the two of them would never have had a chance at all if she hadn't been working on his case. As the two of them made their way to Chesney's bedroom, needy hands pulling desperately to get each other naked as fast as possible, Gracie knew that they had moved past their difficult beginning.

They finally made it to Chesney's bed and Gracie pushed him down so that Chesney's back hit the mattress. Slowly she straddled his chest, her whole body alive with anticipation. She needed him inside her.

As she lowered herself onto him, taking him slowly into her body, she threw her head back and cried out with a moan of pure satisfaction. His heavy cock pushed into her and Gracie clamped her lips together, trying not to scream in pleasure. She was flying and it was all she could do not to yell that she loved the feel of his cock, that she loved the way his hands cupped her breasts, plucking at her nipples.

But most of all, she loved him. It was too soon for those words but, as Gracie lifted herself up and then thrust down again, filling herself with him, she knew that one day she would say those words to him.



**Thanks so much for reading Private Dick! I hope you enjoyed it half as much as I enjoyed writing it.**

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**XOXOX**

**- V**

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