

Laying It Out

Police chief Jackie Kline sat behind the battered desk in her office at the police station and glared at the man sitting across from her.

Grant Jerold was a lot older than he'd been the last time she'd seen him, but he was still a good looking man, she thought. Maturity suited him. But he'd always been appealing, even back in high school when he'd been running with that bastard Brian Clark and his crowd, racing cars up and down the deserted back roads. He'd had an edge to him that had interested more than a few girls, back in the day. Maybe even Jackie herself, if she was being honest.

But that had been a long, long time ago. A lifetime.

Jackie shook her head slightly to dispel the thought. When a girl became a mother at seventeen and had most of her family turn away from her because she'd decided to keep the baby, she learned quickly enough that admiring rough good looks weren't going to buy the diapers. Especially when the boy sporting those rough good looks was a selfish prick and totally oblivious to everything going on around him. She wondered if his powers of observation had improved now that he was in law enforcement. She sure as hell hoped so. They couldn't get any worse.

The irony that they were both cops was not lost on her. Hell, the fact that Grant Jerold was employed at all was a bit of a shock, let alone that he was apparently well-respected and successful. She would have sworn that he'd turn out to be just as much of a loser as Brian. And Jimmy.

It was even more of a shock when she'd found out that he'd left the NYPD, where he'd been well established, and moved back to the area at the beginning of the year. Now he was a Pennsylvania State trooper out of the East Stroudsburg barracks. She wished he would have stayed where he was.

Ever since she'd heard he was back, she'd known she'd run into him sooner or later. And here they were, courtesy of Margo Truelove, the town's mayor. The woman had been involved in a practical joke, just a stupid college prank, at the Dress Your Best clothing store on Main Street. Instead of calling the local cops who were literally a block away, the woman had called the state police. And they—Grant—had answered the call instead of contacting Jackie, as was protocol since the store was clearly in her jurisdiction.

Oh, yeah. Jackie was all kinds of pissed. There is no way it should have come to this. The lack of respect was breathtaking.

Pissed. But not surprised, considering what she knew of the parties involved. It was well past time to set both Trooper Jerold and Her Highness the Mayor straight about the way things ran around here. Or she could shoot them. She was still deciding which would be the best option.

“What are you doing here, Grant?” she asked, determined to get everything out on the table and then beat his ass. Yeah, he was bigger than she was, but she was probably smarter.

“What do you mean?” he asked, feigning confusion.

Jackie squeezed the stress ball one of her comedian squad members—probably Harry—had left on her desk.

“You know damn right well that the incident at Dress Your Best is in my jurisdiction. Hell, the damned store is a block away.”

“The mayor called our barracks, and I responded,” he replied without emotion.

“Don’t give me that.” Jackie’s hand clenched on the stress ball so tightly she wondered if it would pop. “You know you should have contacted me and passed on the call. Or at least brought me in on it. You knew you were coming onto my turf. If the other customers in the store hadn’t let us know what was happening, I wouldn’t have even realized there was a problem in my own damned town.”

Grant inclined his head in acknowledgment and for the first time she saw something on the blank slate of his face—regret. “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking and I screwed up. I didn’t mean to stir up trouble.”

“Bullshit,” Jackie spat at him as her temper got the better of her common sense. “That’s all you’ve ever done. All the way back to the days you were running with Brian and Jimmy. Well, Jimmy’s dead and who the hell knows where Brian or the rest of the guys are. You should have stayed in New York.”

His full mouth tightened, the first sign he wasn’t completely relaxed.

“Someday I might tell you why I came back,” he said. “But not today.” He hesitated. “How are you, Jackie?”

“Why the hell do you care?” she demanded, then, because she knew she was giving away too much, waved a hand. “I’m pissed, that’s how I am.”

“Yeah, I got that.” He hesitated again. “I heard that your parents and sister moved away and Bill’s in Harrisburg now.”

Jackie’s entire body turned cold. “You’ve been busy,” she snapped, letting the ice in her stomach coat the words.

“I liked Bill.”

“Yeah, well you could have fooled me. You never gave him the time of day. Especially after he got all up in your buddy Brian’s face.”

The Clarks had been—still were—a leading family of Hardy Falls. That’s what you got when your father owned land developers were willing to pay lots of money to acquire. It was the only reason Bethany Clark, Brian Clark’s niece, was Jackie’s newest part-time police officer. The town council had insisted.

Grant looked away. “Sometimes things are different than you think they are,” he said inscrutably.

Jackie snorted. “Look, Jerold, much as I love the reunion, I have to go do some actual police work.”

When he looked at her again, the mask was back and his smile was more a smirk.

“Unless things have changed in the last few years, it probably doesn’t keep you too busy in this town.”

She drew herself up behind her desk. “This might be a small town and a small department, but it is my town.” She deliberately folded her hands on her desk, channeling the cold until she knew it was all over her face. “The only thing that matters is that you *will* respect my jurisdiction from now on. I don’t care if the pope calls you, if it happens in my territory, you back off. Got it?”

Grant studied her a moment longer, then nodded. “Yeah.” He stood, looking down at her. “Sorry for causing trouble, Jackie.”

She bristled. “You will call me Chief Kline, Trooper Jerold.”

There was a faint smile this time as he nodded.

“Chief.”

Jackie watched him walk out of the office, then sank back in her chair. When she relaxed her hands, they were shaking.

Jesus.

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