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There are many advantages to working on a Saturday. Less traffic was one reason. If you loved your work, as Grace did, then it didn't feel quite as much like work, which was another reason. Third... well, it was late summer, almost autumn, so the leaves and fiery colors of fall were just starting to emerge, making the world look more vibrant and alive.

Grace took her thermos into her tractor, ready to tackle the morning's work. The forecast had been calling for rain all week, and she had some bushes and shrubs that needed moving, and it could get quite muddy where they were going, so she'd best get her ass in motion. The soil was still warm, and the day was still young.

Chicago felt distant, even though they had returned home just yesterday. Even with the penthouse feeling like an actual home for those days, it still was in a different world than her own life here. A holiday home. It had been nice though. A real break from it all, including work. She would always appreciate and love Nolan's ability to know her needs and take care of them so selflessly.

And now Grace was happy to get back to what she enjoyed.

The tractor rumbled to life, and Grace got to work. She drove around the large grass and flower bed, her eyes taking in what needed to be done. The grass was getting too tall, and she needed to start mowing soon. Even if it was late in the season, the small field of grass was eager to grow.

As Grace drove, she didn't fail to notice that her phone buzzed.

Grace sighed heavily, knowing who it was. Nate had an insistent habit of lingering in her thoughts and in her day-to-day that thoroughly annoyed her. She had realized that even though she was away with Nolan, Nate had presence. Not always so explicit as one might expect from a

man like him, but still. Sometimes, an involuntary comparison, sometimes a thought that lingered, other times it was even more physical. How often didn't she notice this or that with her wrist? From just looking to a mild visual mark.

And then there were the text messages... He wasn't even nagging at her or anything... yet, and yet Grace felt like she was constantly dodging something.

Grace's knuckles whitened. Control over her life was her virtue, it was her price even, and she'd be damned if this fucking asshole wasn't going to loom over her like this. She wasn't going to let him do that. Whatever had happened earlier this week, that was it. It stopped there. It had to. This was the edge, and she was choosing to walk away from it.

Grace stopped her tractor, but before going out to get to work, she looked toward her phone. The first glance was just that, a glance. Her double-take became a lingering look. She hesitated. It wasn't a gun that had just shot someone; it was just her own phone.

Her notification wasn't even from Nate, but his message from Thursday was still there, unread.

'You disappeared?'

Another sigh, though not as heavy and dramatic. Conclusive. Grace knew what she had to do. This was a journey to explore, not to grow... attached. Though that was a word Grace wasn't comfortable with. One thing was for sure, Nate wasn't supposed to impact her like this. Her and her relationship with Nolan. If Nate trickled into her time with the one she loved.

'We need to talk,' she wrote. No. That would give him the option of deciding when and where. Nope, this was Grace's time. *'After work. I'll stop by.'*

Grace tossed her phone aside and smiled for herself. It felt decisive. At least, it was supposed to. This was going to be the last time.

When Grace heaved herself out of the tractor, she no longer felt irritated. Nor was she as relieved as she thought she was. Picking up the shovel, she took a deep breath. Fresh air, good sun, and work ahead of her. She got started on the bush she wanted to move.

But her mind wandered.

Grace wasn't used to feeling conflicted. Usually, she had a plan, a schedule, and that's what she followed. Sure, plans changed, but they always did so within the framework of a purpose. This was different.

She thought back to when she had gotten home yesterday.

Her and Nolan had been a bit tipsy, but not drunk. And they had fucked again, Nolan taking her from behind. She remembered how he had dug his fingers into her ass, pulling her into him. He had felt so good inside her, and even as she stood there with her shovel in hand, she doubled down on her conclusion that Nolan was the man she hoped to start a family with, the man she wanted to marry. Some people saw an ambitious, try-hard, Grace saw the caring, devoted man he was. He was hers first, and his own second, and that kind of love wasn't easy to find.

She worked for another few hours, moving bushes and shrubs, pruning back the old growth, and planting new seeds. She was trying to concentrate, and she worked diligently, yes, but only per routine. Nothing was as focused as she'd like. And she knew why.

With the hedge moved, Grace was covered in soil, sweat, and grass. It was good. Her muscles were warm and loose, and she had worked up a good sweat. She climbed back into her tractor, ready to drive back up toward the shed, when she paused.

She reached for her phone.

No new messages.

She wasn't surprised, but she also didn't know what she was expecting. For some reason, that irritated her. In high school, one would ignore one's messages to play hard-to-get, but that mere notion made Grace snort.

The day went from bright and crisp to more yellow and overcast as Grace drove her tractor back to the shed, parking it neatly and properly. She put away all her tools and supplies, tidied up, rinsed off in her faucet, then took her truck back home.

Driving home, Grace felt determined.

But as determined as she felt, she felt herself throwing glances at her phone every now and then. She didn't like it, but she also couldn't help herself. And it only confirmed her decision.

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It wasn't long until she found herself walking down the hallway toward Nate's apartment. It was convenient that he lived next door to Nolan and her, in that regard. Almost too convenient. As Grace approached, she found herself wondering for a mere moment if she should knock. Nah. Nate had given her a key; she might as well use it, even if she might end up having to give it back after tonight.

She unlocked the door and walked inside, shutting it behind her. The apartment was dark, but she could hear the TV coming from the living room, so she headed in that direction. She found Nate lounging on the couch, watching some game show on TV, his feet propped up on the coffee table.

"Hey," she said, tossing the keys on the kitchen counter with more normalcy than she'd like, and it almost made her physically cringe. Nate was trickling into her life more than she'd like. Her time with Nolan, her time at work. "We need to talk."

Nate held up his hands as if on gunpoint. As if Tuesday hadn't happened. As if it didn't linger with her for days afterwards. As if he hadn't crossed a line she hadn't fully decided how to name yet.

"Uh-oh!" Nate chuckled, moving his gaze from the TV to her.

When he saw her face, he let his hands fall, his face drooped a bit, and Grace made to approach. She opted for the recliner, wanting a bit of separation between her and Nate. She settled down in it, resting her arms on the sides.

"Listen," she said, leaning forward slightly instead, steadying her voice. "We need to reset some things."

"Yeah," Nate said.

Grace blinked. His admittance or lack of follow-up threw her a bit off. Not much, but enough to annoy her.

"You don't get to just--," Grace started, stopping herself as she realized she was getting flustered. "You can't just do something like that to someone. I mean, tie me to a bed for hours? Then come back and... do what you did? We're just lucky the lack of lube didn't do any damage. And how do you think Nolan would react if he learned exactly how it went down? I never consented to any of that."

Nate nodded along, looking at her with a studying look. What the fuck did he have to study? He was clearly in the wrong.

"You're here," Nate said, a small, subtle gesture toward the room with his hands.

"Tuesday," Grace began.

"I went too far," Nate said.

Grace looked at him. She had come here with a clear plan, but now, she found herself faltering.

"Why did you?" she asked, her voice not so steady anymore.

"I wanted to push your boundaries," Nate said, shrugging, his hands spreading on the couch cushions.

Grace shifted in the recliner at the memory he was deliberately pulling up—the way he'd woken her up last weekend, already inside her, the shock melting into something else entirely. That had been different. That had been... something she could process.

"And before that," Nate continued, his voice lower now, "there have been plenty of times you liked it when I took away that control you're always holding so tight." He paused. "But I'll be the first to admit when I'm wrong. And I was."

Grace watched him. He was so self-assured, even when admitting fault.

"I took it too far," Nate said. He looked at her then, his dark eyes catching the blue light from the TV. "Maybe in another world I'd do one of those things. Not all three together. But I did." He let that hang there. A confession without apology.

Then he gestured vaguely with one hand, a sweep that encompassed the room, her, himself.

"Despite all that... well, you're here."

Grace shifted in the recliner, her annoyance flaring like a match in the darkness. She'd come here to set boundaries, to put this whole experiment back in its box. But before she could recalibrate her thoughts, Nate spoke, his voice cutting through the tense silence between them.

"What did you feel?" Nate asked, his voice even. There was no smirk on his face, no hint of judgment, only that unnerving calm. He wasn't challenging her or trying to demean her. He was just asking, genuinely interested in what went through her mind. That was somehow more irritating than if he'd been gloating.

"You're angry with me," he continued, his eyes holding hers. It was intense as ever, but in another way than before. "But I want to know what you felt. When I woke you up. When I came back."

Grace shifted in the recliner, the fabric scraping against her jeans. She hated how he could do this. Strip everything down to these raw, uncomfortable truths without even raising his voice. "I want to know what you felt when you couldn't get away," Nate said softly. "And why you came back, if you hated it so much."

"That's not the point," Grace shot back, trying to maintain the venom.

"Then what is?"

"You can't just decide something like that for me," she said. "Tuesday was way too far." She was repeating herself now.

"Yeah," Nate said.

The tables had turned, and now Grace found herself studying Nate. She'd come ready to lay down the law, to deliver a piece of her mind—only he'd met her with an ease that left her feeling exposed. There was no argument, no pushback—a confession without apology. He wasn't disagreeing with her, not really. He was letting her have her point, but something about the way he did it made her wonder if he was actually giving her anything at all.

Nate leaned back in the couch with a heavy sigh, picking up the remote to turn the TV off.

"Listen, Grace. We don't have to do anything tonight," Nate said, his voice softer now. "The date. We can just drop it."

Grace's eyes widened. Not in surprise of him pulling back, not the fact of it at least, no, but rather that he was the one who did it before she had the chance to do it. The moment caught her off-guard, and she blinked a few times.

She slumped back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest. "Yeah..." she muttered, feeling a bit silly suddenly. Like a school girl being denied... what had she even come here for? A fight? Grace hated that he could make her feel like this, but on the other hand, this was exactly why she was drawn to him.

Grace let out another annoyed sigh. Then she closed her eyes and collected herself.

"Good," she said. "That's what I wanted." But it was hollow. It didn't feel like it should have.

Nate stood with a heavy sigh, a far cry from her own. Just the struggle of being in your late forties and getting out of your seat after having been sitting still for too long. He calmly lumbered over to the windowsill, nipped some small moss from some of the plants Grace had helped him plant.

"I'm a bit behind on that pilot thing anyway," he said. "I still need a model." Then he looked over at her with a small, mischievous smirk, before returning to his little task, carefully using his finger and thumb to move moss from the soil to a small tray next to his plants. "Didn't get around to it yet."

Grace shifted in her chair again, looking toward the door, her hands that she didn't realize had clenched loosened slightly.

Nate had mentioned that photoshoot before, back when he was still trying to convince her to model for him. He'd played it off as a joke then, something casual she might do if she was feeling adventurous. Now it was back, sitting between them like a challenge. Nate was still suspended, trying to figure out how he'd land on his feet when he got back to his job—something about soaps he kept mentioning vaguely. He'd even gone to a meeting about it last Tuesday, when... Well, apparently, that had gone well enough for him to keep pushing the idea.

"You're shooting tonight?" Grace asked, picking up her phone.

"Yeah, I booked a studio just down the road, but like I said, I never got around to actually doing anything," Nate explained, picking up the tray of moss, walking over to the balcony to throw it off the edge toward the forest.

It was just a shoot. This wasn't the same thing. Leaving now would feel... abrupt.

Nate returned. Grace still held her phone, but quickly put it down on the armrest.

"What kind of setup have you got?" Grace asked.

"I'm keeping a tight budget, so nothing huge. A guy who owns a small studio owes me a favor. Just enough to get the idea across efficiently enough," Nate explained, returning the tray to its place in the windowsill, waving his free hand briefly as he talked.

Grace slowly stood from her chair, stretching out, feeling the work of the day aching.

"A simple set-up then," she said. "I'm just going to stop by Nolan real quick."

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Nolan looked up as Grace stepped in, reading something on his phone.

"Back already?" Nolan asked, but her urgency must have shown on her face because he stood up. "What's wrong?" he asked..

She smiled softly, coyly even. "Nothing's wrong. I just..." She trailed off, unsure how to say it. "I'm... helping out Nate with something."

Nolan stopped in his tracks, his head tilting slightly as he studied her. The phone slipped from his grasp, forgotten on the couch cushion. He didn't speak at first, but his eyes gave away everything—fear, curiosity, something else she couldn't quite name.

"With Nate?" he finally asked, his voice softer than she expected. He shifted from one foot to the other. "Now?"

Grace looked at him for a moment, then hurried over, kissed his cheek, and said, "Trust me." She took a step back. "I'll be back soon."

And then she was out the door.

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A few minutes later, she slumped down in the passenger seat in Nate's old Volkswagen, the suspension creaking and complaining. Grace looked down at herself, realizing she hadn't even had a shower or anything. Sweat and dried dirt lingered still.

"I'm not exactly... presentable."

"I like my girls dirty..." Nate said, offering her a glance and a smirk. "Nah, you're good. It won't matter."

Nate was right when he said it wasn't far. They rolled into a small parking lot in front of what looked like an old industrial building, with big garage doors and lots of brick and concrete. When they stepped out of the car, Nate pointed at a smaller door near the corner of the building.

"Just in there."

Grace followed Nate inside, feeling strangely nervous. She'd never been to anything like this before, and she felt a bit awkward. Also, the building was sort of... creepy-looking. Nate didn't seem to mind, though, guiding her through the smaller door, opening it for her and ushering her inside.

It was dimly lit and smelled of dampness and concrete. Nate flipped on a light switch, revealing a narrow hallway that led deeper into the building. They walked down the hall, and Grace was struck by how quiet it was. The only sounds were their footsteps and the soft humming of the overhead lights.

The hallway ended at another door, which Nate opened. As soon as they stepped inside, and Nate turned on the lights, Grace was greeted to a... modest studio. There was a simple backdrop, a couple of lights, and a camera mounted on a tripod. It was very... plain.

"This is it?" Grace asked.

"It's all we need," Nate said with a shrug, making his way over to the camera.

Grace looked at him as he moved to check for an SD card or something. "And... where's the photographer?" Grace asked. The setup looked to her rather... basic. And outside the backdrop, there was a bunch of empty cans of beer, lightbulbs from studio lights. In the corner, there was a row of unused tripods and more lights, giving the whole room a bit of a messy atmosphere. And clearly not a professional-grade setup.

"Like I said, we're on a budget," Nate said casually.

"Right," Grace muttered, moving to look around a bit more.

The set was just a backdrop with some lighting behind it, and there were a couple of folding chairs sitting in front of it. There wasn't much else in the room, and Grace wondered how this was supposed to go. She wasn't a model, or really dressed for the occasion either, but still, Nate had said he wanted to shoot something, so...

Grace took off her jacket and draped it over one of the folding chairs. She stood awkwardly for a moment, unsure what to do next. Nate was still messing with the camera, and the room was eerily quiet.

"So, uh, what exactly are you going to shoot?" Grace asked, feeling a little uncomfortable with the whole situation.

"You," Nate said, looking up at her and smirking.

"Yeah, but like, what's the theme or whatever? What are you trying to get across?" she asked.

"Alright, I want you to start by sitting on the chair and look off into the distance," Nate said, ignoring her question and gesturing toward the chair with the camera.

Grace hesitated. She looked around the room, taking in the bare walls and concrete floor, and then back at Nate. He was standing there with the camera in his hands, looking at her expectantly.

"Are you going to answer my question?" Grace asked, folding her arms across her chest.

"I just need to focus the camera. We'll take a few shots, get going, then take it from there," Nate said with enough confidence that Grace almost thought he knew what he was talking about. He smiled at her, briefly, then looked back at the camera. "It'll be fun. Hold that pose."

Grace sighed. She was here to help him out anyway. And it was just a photoshoot, nothing more. If you could even call it that...

"Fine," she said, and walked over to the folding chair. She sat down and looked off into the distance, just like Nate had asked. She tried to strike a pose that would be interesting and appealing to the camera, but it felt awkward. She didn't know what to do with her hands, so she just settled for resting them in her lap. A newfound respect for models bloomed within her.

Nate took a few photos of her just sitting there. Grace wasn't sure what to do while he went at it, and opted for sitting there, feeling a bit ridiculous.

Nate moved the camera around, taking pictures from different angles. Grace shifted uncomfortably in her seat, unsure what to do with herself. She was acutely aware of the way the fabric of her jeans rubbed against her skin, the way her shirt clung to her back. The way she hadn't showered or even dolled up properly before coming here.

"Alright, now stand up, turn around, and look over your shoulder," Nate said, his voice breaking through her thoughts.

Grace stood up, and turned around, looking over her shoulder at him. She felt self-conscious, but tried to push that feeling away. She wasn't a model, she had nothing to worry about. Still, when

she saw Nate taking pictures of her, she couldn't help but feel like he was judging her. Like he was seeing all of her flaws and imperfections, and was capturing them forever in those photos. It was a strange feeling, one that made her stomach churn and her palms sweaty. And he wasn't even looking at her. Not directly.

"That works. Hold that," Nate said.

"I'll try" Grace asked, feeling dumbfounded while Nate took his pictures. A feeling she never felt. That and so judged was something she wasn't used to. It was a bit intense. Maybe Nate must've felt it, and he was easing her mind. Or maybe he was genuine.

Nate went over to one of the lights, adjusting it a bit. "Alright... let me see something. If you could," Nate looked at the chair, not her. "Just stand behind the chair, with your hands on the back of it. But stand a bit back, as if you're leaning on the chair."

Grace moved into position and smiled for the camera. Nate moved behind the camera again.

"Good. Now, drop the smile. Just look at the lens like it's... dirt."

Grace raised an eyebrow and removed her smile. All while she adjusted, Nate took pictures. She felt like she was looking like a stuck-up, arrogant bimbo. God, was that how people looked at her? Grace was always so confident and assertive. Nate had even pointed out that she had that 'look' about her, where she knew she was just better. Was that truly her?

Either way, Grace felt herself try to shift a bit to give Nate a few different looks. He didn't say anything, neither correcting her nor anything else. Grace felt a bit bolder, shifting her weight over to one foot, earning a new barrage of photos being taken, her new pose being held for a few seconds before she changed again.

"Yeah, that works," Nate said, almost as if talking to himself. "Tilt your chin up a bit. Like you're looking down at the camera."

Grace did as she was told, but now had to force herself not to smile.

"Tilt to the side an inch," Nate said.

Grace spent the next minute shifting back and forth, sometimes with a wither stance, sometimes narrower, giving the camera the same look in a few different ways, keeping that serious, monotone, almost lazy gaze that Nate seemed to want. The camera clicked away as she moved, and she tried to focus on that sound instead of feeling too self-conscious. It was just Nate. It was just her helping him. And for now, it wasn't too bad.

"Move to the side of the chair," Nate said.

Grace did. She stood beside it, one hand on the chair, one on her waist, looking lazily at the camera like she had been doing thus far.

But as she did, Nate came up, put his hand on her cheek slightly, and sort of... positioned her just the way he wanted her. Then her hips, arching her a bit.

It wasn't gentle, it wasn't forceful. He simply guided her, and Grace let him. Then he stepped away without another word.

Grace stood there and looked at Nate a bit as he got in position. She had thought she was doing alright, but Nate felt the need to guide her. This meant that what she was doing was being noticed indeed, evaluated, measured, and would be corrected if needed. Even if he hadn't said a word.

"Hold that," Nate mumbled from behind the camera, as natural as ever.

Nate took a few more pictures. Meanwhile, while she had been shifting around more freely before, she was more focused on standing like she had been positioned, especially her hip and chin position. Nate clearly had something in mind for this shoot, and Grace wanted to do her best to help him get what he wanted.

It wasn't usually how she operated, under another man's merit, but then again, she wasn't a model either.

But Nate seemed satisfied with the pose, because he started to move around to get all different angles. Seeing him satisfied made her feel a little better. Their work, Nate's work rather, was working. Grace tried to imagine what it would look like. It certainly felt less ridiculous and more natural now than before.

Grace tried shifting her weight again, like before. Nate didn't correct her, which in turn felt almost gratifying in itself. She opted for a new hand placement, more lazy than before, and that was also not corrected. She was really getting the hang of this, she thought. She even tried to let herself smile a bit, but only on one side, so that it looked the same, almost arrogant tone they had been working with thus far.

Nate paused for a moment, looking up from the camera to look at her, just briefly, and then turned back to the camera.

"Yes, that," he said. "Work with that."

Grace smirked. She had something good going, and that was always satisfying to be aware of. She kept the smirk on her face, letting Nate shoot away. Her body felt good too. She hadn't stretched or anything since the day's work, but she was getting the hang of the poses. Her thighs were a bit sore from the squatting she had done today, and her stomach muscles ached a bit from lifting a bush earlier. But she didn't let it show on her face. Instead, she focused on the feeling of her body, how it was working, how it was moving. It was a strange kind of focus, one she wasn't used to, but she found herself enjoying it.

She had seen plenty of models pose for cameras before, but never considered how hard it actually was. She'd always just assumed it was easy, that you stood there and looked pretty. She had offers before, but this almost made her think she should've considered it more back then.

Grace adjusted again, her legs moving a bit more, trying to find a new position. Nate again took more photos. Now, after his first correction, it felt like they were working together.

"Alright, turn a bit to your side and look sideways at the camera," Nate said, his voice still even and calm.

Grace did as she was told, standing sideways, returning to her lazy gaze. Nate shot away, and as he did, she was slowly turning her body away from Nate, until she stood looking at the camera over her shoulder. She gave the camera a sultry look, her eyes half-lidded, her lips slightly parted. The camera clicked away as Nate took more pictures. Grace shifted her weight again, trying to get into a more comfortable position. A new barrage of pictures. She moved again, a new set of pictures was taken. Standing there with her back to the camera, looking over her shoulder, she held the pose for a beat or two longer than usual.

She smoothly transitioned into another pose, which also earned her a lot of attention. There was no hesitation between poses, between the subtle changes in how she stood and looked at the camera. It was more deliberate and assertive. Probably not far from how she felt in general. And it felt oddly empowering, and it actually was starting to feel fun. She felt a bit of a rush as she posed, the camera clicking away, and Nate taking pictures, boosting her ego.

"A few more. Hold it a bit longer," Nate said, as Grace moved to change positions again. She gladly held the pose a bit more. She hadn't dressed for any sort of gig like this, but her tight jeans and her loose shirt were working their magic still. Grace did wish she could get a bit of makeup on, though; the studio lights were really warm, and she could feel herself sweating a bit. She wondered if she would be way too shiny and greasy. But Nate didn't seem to mind.

"Like that. Only move your head," Nate said. The instructions were sharper, but Grace didn't mind. It was working, and that was what mattered. As Grace abided by his rule, more pictures were taken. That was why they were here. And it meant that she was doing something right. She was being effective despite it being her first time. Again, it was empowering.

Grace shifted her gaze from one shoulder to the other for one pose, held it for a moment or two, then shifted her weight, moved a hand. They worked like this for a few more shots, and Grace felt herself more and more engaged with the project.

She was now hitting the poses smoothly, Nate shooting, and they had their little rhythm established.

"So this is for that soap thing?" Grace asked, turning more toward the camera and subsequently toward Nate.

"We're getting there. We're testing tone," Nate said, refusing to elaborate, apparently. Grace mentally shrugged.

Her eyes scanned the studio – no soap bars, no bottles, nothing that screamed ‘*soap advertisement.*’ Just concrete walls and harsh lights.

Nate lowered the camera suddenly, breaking their rhythm. When he looked up at her, the intensity in his expression made her shift her weight. It was that look again – he knew exactly what he wanted and was searching for it in her.

Nate set the camera on a chair, made his way over to Grace. Grace was acutely aware that she was being studied. Nate's gaze was like a physical thing, running over her, making her skin prickle. He stopped right in front of her, close enough that she could smell the faint scent of his sweat, the hint of musk and cedar underneath.

He moved his hand down to the hem of her t-shirt and lightly tugged at it, as if inspecting how it creased. It was a simple black concert t-shirt Nolan had given her ages ago.

"Your clothes are too casual," Nate said, and let the fabric go. "You're supposed to look like a professional."

Grace blinked. "What, I'm not professional?" she asked, a slight edge to her voice.

"Not right now, no."

"I'm exactly as I advertised, Mr Ad-Man?" Grace said, putting her hands on her hips, trying not to smile.

Nate allowed a small chuckle. "Tie it up a bit," Nate said, stepping back.

Grace sighed and pulled her t-shirt up and tied the ends in a knot, making the loose fabric more form-fitting. Her belly and belly button were now visible as well, creating a more next-door look, she figured. It was something she often did during the summer when she was out working, but mostly as a practical measure. Sure, it looked good too, and Nolan had more than once feasted as a result; he had a thing for her tummy, it seemed... or her in general. But there was no doubt a sexy undertone to tying her shirt up.

Nate's gaze flicked over her body, then he nodded, seemingly satisfied, even offering a half-smile. The picture-taking commenced.

Grace felt a spark of defiance after Nate called her clothes "too casual." As if anything about her was ever casual. She straightened her shoulders, her chin lifting slightly as she looked at him across the room. The knot in her shirt felt suddenly intentional, not just practical. She worked her body hard - hauling plants, digging in the dirt, maintaining the grounds that others enjoyed. Every muscle had its purpose, every line of her body was earned. If Nate wanted professional, she'd give him professional. If he wanted something more than that... well, that remained to be seen.

She shifted her weight, the worn denim of her jeans suddenly feeling more like armor than work clothes. The concrete floor was cool under her boots as she moved into a new pose, one hip jutted forward slightly. She let her fingers trail along the back of the folding chair, nails tapping

lightly against the metal. When she looked at the camera again, her expression was calculated – a mixture of challenge and invitation. This wasn't just helping out anymore. This was a demonstration. Grace was reminding herself, and anyone who cared to look, exactly what she was capable of when she put her mind to something.

"Like that," Nate said, giving her an even more of a challenge and a confidence boost.

Grace let out a small "Damn right," under her breath, tugging up her shirt a bit on one side, down on the other, as if she was going to rip off or open. It was something she remembered a lot of singers did when they were modeling. Nate's enthusiasm was immediate, shooting along, waving his hand of her to continue.

Grace let her hands explore her midsection, sliding across the exposed skin where she'd tied her shirt. She pushed the fabric up slightly, revealing another inch of her belly, then let it fall back down. Nate's camera responded with a steady rhythm of clicks.

Her teeth found her lower lip, biting down gently as she looked over her shoulder at the camera lens. A slight smile played at the corners of her mouth as she shifted her hips, creating new lines and shadows for Nate to capture. Each adjustment brought another barrage of photos, the sound echoing through the otherwise quiet studio.

"Keep going. There it is," Nate mumbled. "I'm starting to think you're enjoying yourself here."

"I am," Grace admitted, running her hands up the outside of her thighs, hooking her thumbs in her jeans.

"Woah, careful now," Nate chuckled, but without really stopping her.

But Grace moved her hands to other places, feeling herself up more, her eyes locked on the camera, longer than she had before. Her fingers trailed along the hem of her t-shirt, pushing the fabric up slightly, revealing more skin. She tried several looks with her shirt, playing around and

adjusting how it sat. Her hands returned to her jeans, playing a bit with the hem, pretending to pull it at it.

"Not yet. Don't rush it," Nate said, looking up from the camera.

While she'd felt a bit self-conscious perhaps before, she simply adjusted. No jeans. Instead, she went back to her shirt, shifting around a bit, trying different angles. Standing a bit to the side. Leaning against the chair again, one foot on the chair. A sideways glance where she pulled her shirt up to under her bra, carefully not exposing anything more than just that, aware that she was being seen in everything she did. Holding eye contact, holding her holds longer.

And that seemed to be the way. Nate responded like she had come to expect. Shooting and clicking away with his camera. And this time, as she moved her hands to her waist, he didn't seem to stop her from exploring other areas. She moved them down toward her hips, then back up to her stomach, letting her fingers trace over the lines of her muscles. She pushed the fabric up again, revealing a sliver of skin above the waistband of her jeans, her thumbs hooking into the denim once more.

Grace held her pose for a moment, waiting for him to stop her. He didn't.

Then she slid her hands down her hips, cupping the curves over her jeans, her fingertips pressing into the denim. She could feel the warmth of her body through the fabric, the heat of her palms radiating outwards. Slowly, her hands traced up her sides, sliding along the contours of her body, following the subtle swell of her breasts, then up to her shoulders. Her fingertips danced along her collarbones, then back down again, coming to rest at the base of her neck.

She closed her eyes for a moment, focusing on how she moved and looked for the camera. Everything, since the start of the shoot until now, was being judged. Measured. Reframed or held.

'Too casual,' he had said.

Grace opened her eyes and let her hands travel back down her body. This time, she didn't stop at her hips. Instead, she let her fingers slide underneath the waistband of her jeans, pushing them down slightly. She could feel the softness of her skin underneath, the slight curve of her hipbones, the warmth of her own body. Her thumbs hooked into the waistband again, and when Nate didn't correct, she pulled them lower ever so slightly, teasingly revealing the waistband of her panties.

Grace pushed her jeans lower still, the denim stretching tight across her strong, shapely thighs. The waistband of her black lace panties peeked out, stark against her skin. But not too much. The elastic band and an inch, and that was it. She held Nate's gaze through the camera, her confidence growing with every click. The air in the studio felt charged, electric. Sweat beaded on her brow, but she didn't care. Let him see. Let him capture everything.

"Turn around," Nate commanded, his voice firm now. "Slowly."

Grace complied, her movements deliberate and sensual. Slow and seductive. She kept her eyes locked on the lens as she turned, the camera clicking away with each subtle shift of her body. The rough concrete floor felt cool against the soles of her boots as she pivoted. Her jeans slid lower still, hanging precariously on her hips.

"Stop," Nate said when she faced away from him completely. "Look over your shoulder."

Grace did, her hair falling across her face as she turned her head. She peered through the strands, a confident smirk playing at the corners of her mouth. Nate's camera captured the moment in a rapid succession of clicks. The sound was almost hypnotic, driving her to push the boundaries further.

Grace's hands moved to her hips, fingers hooking into the belt loops of her jeans. She tugged downward, the denim sliding another inch down her hips. The lace of her panties was fully visible now, the black fabric stark against her pale skin, and a bit of naked curve appeared.

That's when Grace noticed that the camera wasn't clicking away as it should have. Grace held for one more moment, looking past the camera at Nate. He lowered the camera slightly and actually looked at her. He was taking her in. What? Her pose? Her progression? Her quality of work? Grace once again felt exposed and evaluated. Center stage with the lights on her, but with barely any audience. But the weight of that gaze... that felt like something else.

Keeping eye contact, Grace shifted her stance a bit, but didn't move her jeans further. She tried to adjust her shirt slightly.

Nate set the camera down on the tripod and moved a lever to lock it.

"That's enough," he said. "We've got it."

"We're done?" Grace asked. That was it?

"You hungry?" Nate asked, looking at his watch. "We should get something to eat. We've been working at it for two hours already!"

"Really? Damn," Grace said, awkwardly pulling her clothes back in their places, smoothing her shirt, re-buttoning her jeans. "Time flies, eh?"

*

They didn't say much on the way over.

Grace noticed that first.

Not the silence itself --- that wasn't unusual --- but the way it sat between them now. It wasn't awkward. It wasn't comfortable either. It was just... there. Like something neither of them had decided to touch yet.

She adjusted her shirt again as she stepped out of the car, fingers brushing where the fabric was a bit bunched up from the knot she had tied earlier. It still sat like it had earlier, but now it just felt different.

Nate didn't say anything the few times she tried to smooth it out and fix it. Neither during their brief walk out to the car, nor in the car. But what he didn't say, he did. Grace caught it. The way his eyes flicked over it once before he turned toward the diner door. It wasn't that he hadn't seen her before, but like with the bruises from the cuffs, Nate's were marks lingering on her. And Nate was noticing it too.

Or maybe he just didn't like a slightly wrinkled t-shirt.

Inside, the place was quiet. It was late after all, and late enough so that the rush had passed, early enough so that it hadn't emptied out completely either. A few scattered conversations, the low hum of a fridge behind the counter somewhere.

They slid into a booth across from each other.

Grace pulled her jacket off and placed it on the seat next to her. It just felt... odd to cover up again so soon.

Nate leaned back slightly, one arm resting along the top of the booth, studying her for a moment before picking up the menu.

"You picked that up fast," Nate said. He sounded almost casual, stuck between a compliment and being neutral. "I mean, you're a confident young woman, and you're your own boss and all, I wasn't sure how you'd take to me calling the shots."

Grace glanced over at him over the edge of her own menu, one brow lifted slightly.

"Just did what worked" she said. Grace shrugged, the movement subtle but controlled. "Didn't seem that complicated once I got used to it. Guess I'm a fast learner."

Nate huffed a quiet breath, something that could've passed for a laugh, his eyes dropping briefly before coming back up.

"Most people freeze up. Or try too hard," Nate said.

Grace folded the menu without really reading it, setting it down in front of her. Her fingers lingered for a second, then traced idly along the edge of it, feeling a bit keyed up still.

"Yeah?" she asked, wanting him to elaborate. "And I didn't?"

Nate looked up from his menu and tilted his head as if considering her the way he had back in the studio. He had done so so many times before on the countless times they had been alone before, but Grace seemed more aware of it.

"You adjusted quickly. Most people don't," Nate said. "I honestly had no idea you had that in you. You surprised me. And we both know that takes a lot."

"Surprised?" Grace said, faking indignance, shoving him with her foot.

"Personal fault. Lesson learned," Nate chuckled, turning his attention to the menu.

Grace looked at him, letting a small pause linger. Not long, just enough.

She leaned back slightly, shifting in her seat. She crossed one leg over the other, causing the shirt to pull just a bit tighter to her midsection, and she caught herself smoothing again. But slower now.

"I guess I had a decent teacher," she said, letting a faint smirk slip through.

Nate met her gaze. "I guess you did," he said, another crooked smile. "But again, I'm not sure why I'm surprised, princess. We both know you're a bit of a tease and a show-off."

Grace shrugged and smiled. "What can I say, I get a rise out of it."

"And you didn't slow down."

"Nolan would've checked in every five seconds," Grace mused. "He's a bit more... careful with that kind of thing."

"You didn't need that tonight," Nate said, looking at her.

A moment or two rolled by.

"So," Grace began, tapping her fingers lightly against the table, eyes flickering back up at him. "Tell me more about this 'soap thing'," Grace asked. "I haven't really wrapped my head around your idea yet. You've been working on it for a while, haven't you?"

Nate smiled at her from across the table. Her interest wasn't lost on him. She felt part of this thing now, and was compelled to know more about it. It felt like something she was being let in on, and she was curious.

"I have. I hope Josh will see what I can do despite... me being me." Grace nodded knowingly. "I met a guy. He needed something new. I gave him a direction and he liked it," he said. "They were interested enough to learn more about my idea."

Grace leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. She tilted her head slightly, as she had done at the shoot.

"And why did we not shoot any soap?" Grace asked.

"Next time. Which will be soon enough. Why, eager to get back in front of the camera?" Nate asked.

Grace shrugged. She hadn't minded it half as much as she thought she would. Initially, it was something she viewed as helping Nate out, but she wouldn't exactly mind it if there was more. She felt like their little session had ended too soon, almost. They had done what Nate wanted to, but Grace felt like they had left something unfinished.

"We're just building you a small portfolio now. Then we can show that to my guy at the soap company, and then we move toward a proper shoot. I have a slogan, I have model, and an idea. But before then, we might have to find you a bathtub or at least a bottle to pose around with just to show what we have in mind."

"We," Grace mused. Nate nodded.

"We work well together," Nate said, matter-of-factly.

Grace felt herself blush ever so slightly. "And a proper shoot? Does that mean other people?" Nate moved a hand to rub his stubble.

"Like I said, we work well together. No reason to get more people involved, right?" Nate said. Grace's turn to nod. "But that's more you than me, princess. You're a natural. You knew what you were doing by the end. And you're good at it, you know. Not everyone can do that, especially after just one session."

Nate's eyes trailed along her body for a moment. Grace smiled at him, a bit of a smug, satisfied smile, as she felt a hint of a pride swelling within her.

The waitress came over, interrupting the moment. Grace didn't know whether to be grateful for or annoyed by the interruption. The conversation flowed easily between them, but there was something else under the surface. Something that was building with each word, each look. "I'll take the cheeseburger," Nate said.

"Oh, same," Grace said. "With extra pickles, please."

The waitress scribbled down their orders and disappeared again.

When Grace turned her attention back to Nate, he was looking at her again. She felt herself blushing again, but kept her composure.

"It didn't feel much like helping by the end," Grace said with a knowing smirk. "I certainly have a well-earned respect for models who do this professionally now."

"You were more than just helpful. I know your pretty face will earn a lot of attention. All executives want their product next to a beautiful woman. And with you, they'll hit the jackpot," Nate said.

Grace looked down at the table for a moment. She was used to flattery, but it was something else when Nate said it. The way he looked at her, the way he talked... it was intense. Like he saw something in her that no one else did. Or maybe he just had a way with words. Or perhaps it was how sparingly he spoke with praise. Either way, she liked it.

She took a sip of her water, trying to gather her thoughts.

"A while back," Nate began, weighing his thoughts in his mouth before forming them into words. "You talked about how you couldn't stand people being drunk. You had various reasons,

but one that stuck out to me at the time was what you said about people being so fake and acting like someone they're not."

Grace looked up at Nate. She remembered the conversation, at least partially, but she was genuinely surprised that Nate did too. And that he remembered such a detail.

"But what is your take on models? And now, after you've shown your aptitude for it? I mean, you're acting a character of sorts, someone you're not. I mean, you're the pretty girl they'll see, but you're also much more than a pretty face."

Grace paused for a moment, letting Nate's question sink in. She took another sip of water, then set the glass down carefully. Her fingers traced along the rim as she considered her answer.

"I don't think I ever looked at it like that," she finally said. "I always thought of modeling as just something superficial, like just posing for pictures or something. But you're right, it's not just that. There's a lot more to it. It's more than just looking pretty. It's about capturing an emotion or a feeling. It's about making people feel something when they look at you. And you can use that to convey a message, or sell something. Or both."

Nate nodded thoughtfully, leaning forward slightly as she spoke, his fork paused halfway to his mouth. Like he was truly taking in her words. And how could she not think that he was? When he remembered something that she thought minor a few... weeks ago? Months? Time had become somewhat unreliable when it came to her and Nate. He had that way of remembering things—small details she barely recalled saying herself. It both unsettled and impressed her, how he could pluck conversations from their past and present them back to her, polished, with new meaning attached.

Grace found herself shifting in her seat, adjusting the hem of her shirt again. The booth's vinyl squeaked under her movement.

"So what you're saying," Nate said, setting his fork down, "is that there's more to it than just looking pretty. It's about being a conduit. Something that carries a message."

"I guess so," Grace said, taking a sip of water. "There's... an honesty to it, ironically enough. You're not being fake, not really. You're embodying something real, even if it's not entirely yourself."

Nate let out a low chuckle, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Honesty through deception. That's a pretty thought, princess."

Grace felt her cheeks flush slightly, and she picked up her own fork, fidgeting with it. "Well, that's how it felt. By the end, anyway."

"By the end, huh?" Nate's gaze drifted down, lingering where her shirt was still tied in a knot before coming back up to her eyes. "You got comfortable in there, didn't you?"

"I got into it," Grace admitted with a shrug, trying to sound casual. The waitress arrived with their burgers, giving Grace a brief reprieve from his intense gaze.

As the smell of grilled meat filled the space between them, Grace found herself replaying moments from the studio—how her hands had moved across her body, the deliberate way she posed, how Nate's direction had guided her into something she hadn't known she possessed.

"You did more than just 'get into it'," Nate said after she'd taken her first bite. "You owned it. That last part especially."

Grace looked down at her burger, picking off a pickle slice. "What part?"

"What do you think, princess?" Nate's voice was low, almost intimate now that the waitress had moved away. "When you were facing away from me. When your jeans were just... hanging there."

Heat crept up Grace's neck again, and she took another bite of her burger to give herself a moment. She remembered exactly the moment he was talking about—the feel of denim sliding against her skin, the exposure, the thrill of pushing those boundaries under his watchful eye.

"I was just doing what you asked," she finally said, though both of them knew that wasn't the whole truth.

"Is that all it was?" Nate asked, leaning forward, his hands flat on the table. "Because I saw something else in those photos."

Grace felt a knot of anticipation form in her stomach. She looked at him. That intensity was back—that look that said he was seeing something she didn't know she was showing.

"You weren't just following directions," he said. "That wasn't just me telling you what to do anymore. You were enjoying yourself."

The knot tightened. He saw right through her—right through the confidence, the casualness, the bravado. He saw right to the heart of it: how much she'd wanted to impress him, how much she'd wanted to be seen, how much she'd liked the feeling of being watched. She thought back to her dream about being alone on stage. Was that related to this?

She swallowed hard. Instead of replying, she picked up her burger again and took another bite, chewing slowly. She'd savor it more normally if it didn't feel like a million butterflies had taken flight in her stomach.

"You know," Nate continued, "most people would've been too embarrassed to do that. Or they would've been too afraid to push it that far. But not you."

"I'm not most people," Grace said, meeting his gaze, trying to match his confidence.

Nate smiled, slow and wicked, his eyes glinting. "No, you're not, princess. You're something else entirely. Only an idiot would think otherwise."

"If you say so," Grace said, trying to be dismissive. "Besides, you were telling me what to do. That was kind of the point, right? I was just there to help you out."

"Oh, I do say so," Nate replied. "And yes. I directed you... up to a point."

Grace looked at him, her demeanor slipping for a mere moment. She opted for another bite of her burger, but there were only so many bites left. What he said was true. Nate no doubt had nothing against it, and he didn't stop her, but Grace had been fully capable of stopping. She knew she had to. And she could. At any time.

So, why didn't she?

Because it was more fun that way, a small voice whispered inside her, sounding suspiciously like that of a certain devil on her shoulder.

"It's not like you didn't stop me," Grace said. "Seemed to me like you were pretty into it, cowboy."

"Hard not to be..." Nate said.

Grace met his gaze then, and saw what he had in mind for her. A tight silence descended over the table, interrupted only by the sound of silverware and other patrons' conversations. He had a certain glint in his eyes again, a spark that she couldn't place, and she wasn't sure if she liked it or hated it.

Grace was the one to break eye contact, shifting her napkin. Not unsure of herself, just feeling a bit timid under the intensity.

"I guess you got your date after all," she said, her voice light in tone. There was more to her pointing that out than just her pointing it out for the sake of it. Grace offered a small smile, sitting back in her seat.

It was Nate's time to smirk.

"I didn't have to push that hard," he said.

Grace's eyes trailed up to Nate, taking him in. His rough demeanor. His occasional menacing presence, occasionally boisterous attitude, yet now he sat across from her, calm and collected. Grace watched him across the table, the way he moved as he looked at her, his gestures economical, deliberate. There was something in Nate that unsettled her, a current that ran beneath the surface of his casual demeanor. She had come here tonight thinking she was in control, that she was setting the terms. But sitting here now, with the taste of pickles still in her mouth, she wasn't so sure anymore.

Her fingers traced the ring of condensation on her water glass as she considered it. The photoshoot had started as just helping out, just a favor, and yet... somewhere along the way, it had shifted. Each pose, each adjustment Nate had made, had chipped away at something. Nate directing her to his liking, her adjusting further into something he liked.

Grace remembered the way Nate's eyes had followed her movements in the studio, how he could make something as simple as positioning her chin feel like claiming territory. He had this way of finding those raw nerves she kept protected, of peeling back layers she didn't even realize she had. Nolan loved the polished version of her, the one who had it all together. But Nate... Nate seemed fascinated by the cracks.

The thought should have made her angry, should have sent her running back to the safety of her relationship with Nolan. Instead, she felt a pull, deep in her stomach. An attraction to the very thing that scared her most about him—his ability to see through her, to call her "princess" not as an insult but as recognition of something she couldn't deny existed.

Where did it end? That was the question circling her mind as Nate took another bite of his burger. Where was this thing between them heading? And why, God help her, did part of her want to find out?

She smiled at him, deciding to tease him further. "So what now... You planning on getting lucky too?" Grace said, sinking her leg down and leaning forward in an overly sensual way. "Is this where you... cash in?" she asked.

Nate chuckled, leaned back in his seat, and took her in. "That was part of it," he said, a crooked smile.

"And, uh..." Grace began, the words hanging in the air between them. She'd meant it as a tease, a little poke to get a reaction—to watch him squirm, to see that spark in his eyes flare up. That was her specialty, wasn't it? Knowing exactly how to make men warm under the collar, how to twist them around her little finger. But Nate... Nate just watched her, that small, knowing smile playing at his lips as if he could see right through the performance. He wasn't squirming. He wasn't flustered. He was just... there, letting silence stretch, letting her realize she'd just called her own bluff.

"Let's go," he said, as simple as can be.

Grace's eyes locked with his, and this time she didn't look away. In the space between them, across the sticky table of the diner. She could see it clearly now—he wasn't playing games. The realization hit her slowly, then all at once, a warm sensation spreading down her spine like the first sip of whiskey, smooth and surprisingly comfortable. It felt like someone had poured warm syrup through her veins, slow and thick, making everything go soft around the edges.

*

Nolan looked up as Grace hurried into their apartment. He was just reading something about health guidelines and chilli, for work, when suddenly Grace stood flustered in their hallway.

"Back already?" Nolan asked. Grace looked at him, urgency written plainly on her face. "What's wrong?" he asked, thinking some accident might have happened.

But Grace smiled and looked distantly down at the carpet. That smile that could make Nolan melt, on that face that could make him do anything.

But then...

"Nothing's wrong. I just..." Grace trailed off, meeting his gaze. "I'm... helping out Nate with something."

Nolan stopped in his tracks, dropping his phone somewhere, tilting his head. The last time they talked about Nate, Grace was annoyed with him. Now she was... helping him?

Nolan stood up to... greet whatever this was.

"With Nate?" Nolan asked. "Now?"

He tried to be tactful. Grace had sworn to secrecy, and by gods had she kept it. She had both kept secret indeed and had him on his toes at the same time. Sometimes it was nerve-wracking, sometimes it was easier to lean into the trust he had in Grace.

But it was always a battle.

He hoped for some sort of reassurance from Grace.

Grace hurried over, kissed his cheek, and said, "Trust me," followed by a step back. "I'll be back soon."

And then she was out the door.

The silence in the apartment stretched, the sound of Grace's exit echoing in Nolan's ears. His phone lay forgotten on the couch cushion, face down where he'd dropped it moments before. He crossed the room, his movements stiff as he bent to retrieve it. The screen lit up with the article he'd been reading—some nonsense about chili guidelines and health regulations—but the words blurred before his eyes. He knew what this was. Or who she was with, at least. And he knew there was nothing he could do about it. Not really. But a part of him—a small, bitter part—still wanted to. It wanted him to run after her, to confront Nate, to throw that asshole off a cliff if he had to.

Nolan's little fantasy, now breathing on the other side of their thin apartment wall, had become both a blessing and a curse. It was thrilling, imagining Grace with another man, the thought alone enough to make him hard at the most inconvenient times. He loved that edge of danger, the way his stomach dropped when he thought about it too hard. But right now, with the silence in their apartment stretching thin as old rubber, it felt mostly like a curse. His heart hammered against his ribs, and he couldn't decide if he was more turned on or terrified. Maybe both. That was always the problem with this particular fantasy.

Nolan ran a hand over his face, letting out a slow breath. Grace had told him not to worry, but he couldn't help it. Nate was dangerous, he knew that. Grace had been telling him that for months now. But there was something about the way she looked at him, the way she talked about him. It wasn't just the usual caution she took with people; it was something else entirely. Something that made him nervous and excited and angry all at the same time.

Trust. That's what Grace had asked for. Two syllables, simple enough, but they landed like stones in his stomach. And he did trust her, mostly. It wasn't the faith in her that wavered, but the trust in himself not to go insane thinking about what she might be doing with that asshole. Grace had come a long way from that first hesitant conversation about his kink—how she'd squirmed on the couch cushions, trying to understand, trying to accept. And she had. God, how she had. Sometimes it felt like she'd slipped into it more fully than he had, like this strange fantasy belonged to her as much as him now.

But still... sometimes he wondered if she understood what he needed.

A small part of him wanted her to say more. It wanted her to tell him all the filthy things Nate would make her do. Or the not so filthy ones, too. He'd listen, rapt with attention. He'd do whatever she wanted him to do. Be whoever she needed. He just needed to know what was going on. Needed to have some sort of insight or clue, or something more substantial than *'nothing wrong.'*

Nolan moved across the apartment, his phone in hand, without any real purpose. Just needing to feel something solid and real beneath his fingertips. His thumb traced the edge of the phone case, expecting a vibration or some sort of signal. Bat signal, Nolan mused, forcing himself to chuckle. But no vibration came.

He felt his free hand clench and unclench, a nervous rhythm. When would all of this become normal to him? When would his time with Grace be his, and only his? It wasn't lost on him how Grace adjusted her sleeves, glanced at her wrist, how she carried other less visible marks. But Nolan struggled with finding that balance of what he wanted. He wanted his time with Grace to be his. He wanted Nate to have his, if any was his, but he also wanted some control... or perhaps some insight on what they were doing when they had their time together.

*

Nolan ate himself some dinner, saving a good portion of his homemade lasagna for later in case she was hungry, as Grace had left before she had time to get any. It tasted hollow, but he knew that was his taste buds being as numb as he was. Thyme in tomato sauce couldn't be underestimated, though.

Afterwards, he cleaned the dishes, doing the breakfast plates too, as they rarely had time to do them in the morning. The dishwasher had broken down while they were away, apparently, so it was the good ol' ways for now. That was how he was taught anyhow. The traditional ways of a household. Nolan shook his head. That had been shaken to its core, that was for sure.

But the routine was soothing. Hot water. Soap. A little effort. Soon enough the whole kitchen was spotless, and Nolan felt slightly less tense than he had been before. He dried his hands on a dish towel, the familiar feeling grounding him. Grace had taken the time to choose matching towels with matching patterns on them. Not just cute, but a sense of a household.

With the dishes out of the way, Nolan went to his laptop, hoping to use this dead time he'd otherwise occupy with his partner productively. There was always something to read, some report to fill out or send, or a guide to write. While the Tex-Mex folks were still deciding on what socks to wear, Nolan was forward-leaning. He had had an idea to make a magazine-type ad, but those were more or less obsolete in this day and age with social media and whatnot. People saw right through it.

No, they wanted influencers, hip, modern types, or just people that kids these days resonated with. Nolan wondered if he could get one of the people Luna Calhoun managed to at least visit the restaurant. But she had been out sick for a bit, so maybe it was best to not worry her too much.

As Nolan sat, he felt himself shifting in his chair. It seemed hard to find a comfortable position. The leather squeaked annoyingly when he moved, and there seemed to be a something pressing from somewhere. He got up, squatted down to inspect it. Nope. Nolan saw nothing. It was just his chair. Frustrated, he stood up, fists planted in his waist, squinting down at the old thing. Maybe it was time for a new one.

Suddenly, Nolan raised his head and looked around, seemingly suddenly aware of the very quiet apartment. He could hear himself breathe. The joints in his fists as he once again clenched them. The void of life except his own.

"Hello?" he tried, glad no one was around to see what the hell he was doing. He let out a half-chuckle, shaking his head as he rubbed his neck. What a weirdo.

Still, that void...

Nolan's phone buzzed, and he lunged for it. He felt his heart beat faster as he fumbled with the screen, almost dropping the damn thing. His hand shook a bit as he swiped his thumb across the lock screen. His heart dropped when he realized it was just a calendar alert about some appointment. He exhaled, letting out the breath he didn't realize he was holding.

Calm. Slightly excited. That was probably a better description. Nolan knew why he was here. Knew why he had been left alone. Nolan sat back down at his laptop. He was wallowing in melodrama. This week had been intense, but he knew he could trust Grace. She was thinking of him. Yes.

Even if something had felt different.

Nolan drew in, held, then let out a deep breath. He shook out his arms and legs, trying to relax the tension in his body. It wasn't easy, but he did the best he could. His mind settled. And with a calmer mind, Nolan found himself wondering what they were doing, what Grace was 'helping' Nate with. His mind raced through the possibilities—the things she might be doing, the ways

Nate might be touching her. And instead of pushing those thoughts away, he shielded himself with his trust in Grace and basked in the imagery.

Another hour. Then two.

Nolan found himself slipping into rhythm with work—reading reports, drafting emails, sketching ideas for the next conference. The familiar tasks helped quiet the noise in his head, the questions about where Grace was, what she was doing with Nate. He clicked through another document, his fingers flying across the keyboard, almost convincing himself this was normal.

Then his eyes caught on his watch. 08:47 PM.

His fingers froze mid-tap. He blinked, the numbers swimming into focus. Had she really been gone that long? Almost three hours now? Nolan leaned back in his chair, the leather groaning in protest. The lasagna he'd saved sat untouched in the fridge, growing cold while he sat here pretending his world wasn't tilting on its axis.

Nolan felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, and his heart leapt into his throat. He scrambled to pull it out, fumbling with the screen as he unlocked it. Grace's face lit up the screen, a photo from their trip to the beach last summer he used as a background. Her eyes sparkled with laughter, her hair tousled by the sea breeze, and Nolan felt something warm and soft unclench in his chest at the sight of her.

But there was no phone call. No gospel of Grace's evening, no exciting story of what she'd been doing with Nate. Instead, the text message was short. But precise. And very effective. A single line—*'if you want'*—followed by a link.

Nolan sat up from his otherwise slumped position, his back protesting after hours hunched over his laptop. This was curious. Grace's promise of doing something for him regarding getting to see something, to be in on the action, was starting to form itself. But how?

Nolan clicked the link without thinking twice. It took him to Google Maps, and he saw a small dot that certainly wasn't him. It had to be Grace. And it was moving along a road he recognized. Not a terribly long drive. A bit out of town.

The sheer anticipation shot through Nolan, and he didn't know whether to stand up or sit down. But he did so. His hands felt like they were buzzing with electricity, and he had to take a deep breath to calm himself.

Well, that was it then, Nolan thought. No more hypotheticals, no more pretending. Until now, he'd known about it, but it had all happened somewhere else, some other reality he couldn't touch. Now, though, this was his chance to see—to actually see—that it was real. His heart hammered against his ribs as he stared at the moving dot on his phone screen, that little blue pin crawling along a road he knew well. Grace wasn't just texting him about it; she was showing him. Giving him a front-row seat to whatever was happening out there. His hands shook as he stood up, the chair scraping against the floor. The apartment swam around him for a moment—spotless kitchen, silent rooms—then steadied as his gaze locked back onto that glowing dot. This wasn't the fantasy anymore, the late-night whispers and what-ifs. This was happening now. And Grace was offering him a ticket.

He looked down at his trembling hands. Not from being scared or because of overwhelming doubt. He was excited. The kind of excitement that made his fingers tingle, that sent little shocks up his arms. His palms felt damp, and when he flexed them, he could feel how they wanted to curl into fists, like his body wasn't sure what to do with all this energy. Nolan had imagined this moment so many times, been told of so much, but now that it was happening, now that his phone showed that little blue dot moving along a road he knew, it felt different. More real. More terrifying. And more goddamn thrilling than anything he'd experienced in his life.

Was this too much? Was he really ready for this? But it was too late for that. He'd already pressed the button, opened the link, and opened himself to a world of curiosity and excitement. He couldn't unsuspend it. But he also didn't want to. He had no idea what Grace had in mind, but he knew he had to see. She'd invited him, after all. It was what they had talked about, what he

wanted. Yes. A part of him was scared shitless, but another part... another part wanted to see what would happen.

Nolan looked down at his clothes. A hoodie, worn jeans. Good enough.

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If Nolan was a bad driver in general, now he was even worse. He drove like a madman, almost missing turns, and he was sure the speed limit was less than 80 mph, but who cared. He needed to get there before... before Nate had...

Nolan couldn't even finish the thought, let alone his sentence. The road seemed to go on forever, and every time he glanced at his phone, he wanted to throw it out the window. That little dot was crawling along, like it was taunting him. He gripped the steering wheel, trying to focus on the road, on his driving. The car lurched forward, engine growling as he pressed down on the gas. Thank god his Ford Equinox had good torque.

But his mind still wandered to what he might come to see, how far they had gotten already. Did he even want to know? He couldn't stop himself from imagining what was happening, what Nate and Grace were doing. The sound of their laughter, the smell of their sweat, the heat of their skin. He gritted his teeth, jealousy and lust building the anticipation.

Maybe this was too real. Heavy, that was the word Nolan couldn't help repeating to himself as he pressed the accelerator harder. This wasn't some late-night fantasy anymore, wasn't pillow talk between tired lovers. This was him, actually driving down a dark road to watch his girlfriend—the woman he'd take a bullet for, no question about it—being intimate with another

man. And not just any man. Nate. The same neighbor who, at their very first meeting, had slapped Grace's ass like some backwoods degenerate who'd never been taught how to treat a woman. It was then that Nolan had almost unwillingly started to imagine the two together.

Grace had never seemed particularly fond of Nate, always complaining about his creepy stares and crude comments. But somewhere along the line, something had shifted. Maybe it was that darkness in Nate, that raw edge Nolan sometimes saw reflected in Grace's eyes when she talked about him, when she agreed to help Nolan explore his own twisted desires. Whatever it was, she was drawn to it, to him, in a way that made Nolan's stomach churn with equal parts jealousy and terrifying anticipation.

And now it was real. And he was about to learn how real it was.

He gripped the steering wheel harder, knuckles going white as he pushed down on the gas. The engine roared in protest, tires squealing as he took a turn too fast. He glanced at his phone and saw that the dot had stopped. When had that happened?

He immediately recognized where they had stopped as a parking lot. Nolan had assumed they were driving, but now it was probably confirmed. It was about ten minutes away. But there was nothing there really, just a strip mall that was closed hours ago. It was known to be a somewhat isolated, quiet area.

Nolan glanced down again, his heart pounding in his chest. The blue dot remained unmoving. He gritted his teeth and glanced for a third time. It was still there.

"Oh shit," Nolan muttered urgently when he looked up, turning the wheel abruptly to avoid a lamp post. A horn blared somewhere behind him, but he didn't care. His mind raced as he tried to make sense of what was happening.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Nolan saw the parking lot. He checked his mirrors, for once, and dimmed his lights. He didn't want to barge in on whatever was going on here, after all.

And he wasn't sure what he'd find. He slowed down to a crawl as he turned into the lot, eyes scanning the shadows for any signs of life. There were no other cars, just a few scattered lampposts casting pools of light across the pavement. The air felt thick with anticipation, the silence broken only by the sound of his own breathing and the rumble of his engine.

He drove past the stores, searching for the blue dot on his phone screen. The strip mall was small, so it shouldn't have been too hard to find, but somehow it was taking forever. Where the hell were they? Nolan scanned the rows of darkened storefronts, looking for any hint of movement, any sign that Grace was here.

Finally, he decided to park and walk instead, letting his other senses help out too. His footsteps echoed in the stillness of the night, the sound bouncing off the buildings around him. The air was cool and damp, a faint breeze ruffling his hair. He couldn't hear anything but his own breathing, and the occasional sound of a car on the road somewhere behind him. It was like the world was holding its breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

The end of the strip mall came into view, and Nolan's heart hammered against his ribs with each step he took. Every sound seemed amplified in the stillness—a distant siren, the hum of a streetlight, and then, something else. Metallic sounds, rhythmic and close. Too close.

Nolan rounded the corner, his breath catching in his throat. Nothing. No Grace, no Nate, just emptiness and shadows playing tricks on his eyes. But there, tucked away in the darkest corner of the lot, half-hidden by the overgrown hedge that separated this neglected space from the road beyond, was a car. A Volkswagen Golf.

Nolan moved closer, sticking to the shadows like they were old friends. The Golf sat there, engine dead, lights off, silent except for that metallic sound from before—steady, rhythmic. God, that sound. Then Nolan noticed it: the car was moving. Not driving, no. It was rocking. Just a little at first, then more, each small motion timed perfectly with that squeaking beat coming from somewhere inside. The whole damn thing was moving.

Nolan could barely breathe, let alone move. It was all he could do to keep standing as he watched the Golf rock back and forth, each movement sending a wave of jealousy and desire crashing through him. His skin felt hot, too tight, his heart pounding so hard he thought it might burst. The image was burned into his mind, searing away every rational thought that tried to claw its way in.

He didn't want them to know he was here yet, didn't want to disturb them. But he had to see this. He inched his way over, the dozen yards feeling like a mile. The more he looked, the more details he took in. The slow, methodical rhythm of someone taking their time. How the windows were fogged up. The slight sound of someone gasping, moaning. The way the car rocked with their movements. The way they moved as one.

And then he saw it. Through the fogged-up glass, in the back of the car, Nolan saw a pair of bare feet—Grace's feet, he knew them with an certainty that twisted something deep inside him. They weren't just dangling there. No. They were pointing straight up toward the ceiling of the car, toes curled tight, bouncing with that same rhythm that made the whole vehicle shudder. Up and down they went, in time with the muffled groans and gasps that escaped through closed windows, a frantic rhythm that told him more than he ever wanted to know about what was happening inside that Volkswagen.

This was them.

This was what he had been sent here to see.

Knowing something and seeing it were two very different things. And this was real. Grace and Nate were actually doing it, right here, right now. His face felt hot, a flush creeping down his neck. His skin suddenly felt too tight, pressing against his bones, and his heart hammered against his ribs as if trying to break free. Each squeak of the car, each rhythmic rock, sent another shockwave through him—part jealousy, part something darker he didn't want to name. His knees felt weak, his mouth dry, but he couldn't look away.

Now, watching it happen, seeing them together, he knew there was no going back. There was no way to unsee this. Undo it. Grace had experienced this, and by the sounds of it, he wondered if she would want to return from it.

Grace had said she didn't want him there for her first time with Nate. Now, Nolan thought maybe he finally got it. It was supposed to be this way. For both of them. She needed space to untether herself, to let go without his eyes weighing her down. And him? Maybe he needed this buffer too, to ease into the reality of it all—the squeaking of shocks, the fogged windows, the rhythmic motion he couldn't look away from.

The sounds from inside that Golf weren't just sounds anymore. They were evidence, proof, reality crashing down on him. Each gentle squeak of the suspension, each muffled gasp that escaped through fogged windows—Nolan felt them in his bones. It was like his body was a tuning fork, vibrating to the frequency of his girlfriend being with another man. His breath caught somewhere between his throat and his lungs, and his hands were shaking so badly he had to shove them deep into his pockets.

Nolan's heart hammered against his ribs, each beat echoing the squeaking from the car. He staggered back, his shoulder hitting the brick wall behind him. The coldness of it soaked through his hoodie, sharp enough to make him flinch. He leaned into it fully, letting the solid weight ground him, something real to hold onto when everything else was spinning. He pressed his forehead against the rough surface, the brick digging into his skin.

The rhythm from inside the car changed—became faster, more desperate. Nolan's hands clenched into fists in his pockets, nails digging into his palms. Nolan's mind raced, filling in the details he couldn't see, honing in on those he heard. He could imagine Grace's hips and thighs so clearly, the way they'd tense and flex as she squirmed beneath Nate, her muscles working, her body responding to every thrust.

Nolan swore he heard some sort of exclamation that had to be Grace, and he imagined how Grace would flex her ass as she met Nate, drawing out more of whatever he did right, her hands

flat against the opposite car door, pressing into the glass as he drove into her again and again. He bored his eyes into the car door, wondering what she looked like in that cramped compartment—hair plastered to her forehead with sweat, mouth slightly agape, those steel-blue eyes glassy with desire.

Was she looking at Nate? Was she thinking of Nolan? Or was there no room in her mind for anything but what was happening in that moment?

Nolan's throat felt tight, his stomach twisted into knots. This was it—the reality he'd asked for, the fantasy come to life.

It was like standing in front of an open fire on a winter night, letting the flames lick at your skin just to feel something—anything—real. And Nolan, standing there in the shadows of that desolate parking lot, had never felt more alive or more destroyed in his entire life.

He found himself holding his breath in order to hear more, desperate for more clues. A small thud. Was Nate adjusting how Grace lay, maneuvering her to his liking? The jolting momentarily shifted before resuming. Nolan tried to look through the fog, finding it impossible, and he didn't dare step closer.

Even still, through the muffle, it seemed to Nolan that Nate knew what he was doing. The whole thing wasn't some clumsy fumbling in the backseat of a car—this was planned, deliberate. Methodical. Nolan could hear it in the rhythm of the squeaks, in the way the Golf moved like it was following some predetermined choreography. Nate probably knew exactly where to touch Grace, exactly how to make her squirm and gasp. Probably learned it from a dozen other women, Nolan thought bitterly, his stomach twisting.

Nolan had tried before, tried to get those sounds out of Grace, to make her body arch like that. But it had never been like this.

Grace's reactions with him were quieter, more reserved compared. Polished. What he was hearing now was raw, unrestrained. The kind of pleasure that stripped away all pretense, leaving nothing but the bare essentials: need and fulfillment.

But beneath the storm brewing in Nolan's chest, there was something else—a current pulling him in a different direction. Grace had sent him here. That link on his phone—that dot moving along a road he knew—hadn't been an accident. She'd wanted him here, wanted him to see this unfold. The thought struck him with such force that it nearly knocked the air from his lungs. Despite everything, despite the way his stomach churned and his hands shook, Grace had chosen this. Chosen to invite him to witness her with another man. And somehow, that knowledge cut through the jealousy like a beam of light, leaving something warm and unsettling in its wake.

He remembered when they had first talked about it. How she had been so hesitant, so unsure. But now, looking back at the months that had passed between then and now, Nolan could see how much she'd changed. How much they both had. This was her way of showing him, of giving him what he wanted without making him ask for it. She had asked for his patience and trust. Here was the reward: a muddled display of her making him a cuckold.

It tapped right into what had started this secret week: that venom of not knowing, the uncertainty, wallowing in masochistic dread.

Not just that she was with Nate, but not knowing how, in what way, if she enjoyed it, if it meant anything. That's what kept Nolan's heart racing, made his stomach twist into knots. And now, here he was, watching that Volkswagen Golf rock in time with their bodies—and he still didn't have the whole picture. Even so, what he could see was more than enough to tear him apart.

Nolan swallowed hard, the lump in his throat making it difficult. His hand slid down his chest, over his stomach, coming to rest on the front of his jeans. He could feel his cock straining against the fabric, his body responding to the scene playing out before him. He couldn't help it. He was only human, after all.

He stared at the car, each breath catching in his throat.

Grace had stepped into it. And now, so had he.