

*

"Black?" Anna asked, bringing them each a cup from the small kitchen beside the waiting room. Nate nodded. "You know me," he chirped with the easy familiarity he had been cultivating for weeks, following her into the office.

When he first started therapy, he had brought his own coffee. Somewhere along the line, he had stopped that, and now it had become a habit that Anna ran two capsules through her coffee maker instead of one, even letting Nate use one of the in-house mugs. With time, he had politely told her that he didn't really like milk in his. He didn't give a shit if there was milk in it or not, but it was a gesture of modesty after weeks of drinking cafe lattes, and Anna's professionalism slipping ever so slightly when the 'truth' finally came out. She had said her sorrys and since made his coffee black.

"New car?" he asked as he took his seat. "A black sedan suits you."

"Not yet," Anna said with a slightly warmer smile than one would give a patient. "It's just a rental."

"You ever seen the old Michael Winslow bit about rentals?" Nate asked. Anna's professionalism returned like a slow tide. It had faded in place almost without notice. She shook her head. Curt. Nate waved his hands. "Pff, kids these days. Or maybe I'm just old."

No response.

Nate stole the moment to trace her figure, making it look like he was just thinking while sipping his coffee. Her dark hair was in a tight ponytail. She wore a green blouse and a white cardigan. And a knee-length skirt that looked both practical and sexy. Her feet were clad in dark pumps.

She had a killer body. Those curves that only a mature woman could have, that complexity that could make a man do things he wouldn't normally do. Nate wasn't a stocking type of guy, but Anna was changing his tune with her calves barely hidden behind a layer of sexy nylon. And her skirt sat at a perfect height.

She didn't give an inch.

Nate felt a rush of excitement. He loved the chase. And he loved the chase even more when the prey was well aware, and gave him just enough rope to hang himself.

He took another sip, then placed his cup on the table between them.

"So..." Anna said, sitting down, crossing her legs, and letting her skirt ride up her thigh a bit.

"You're on time."

"Yeah," Nate said, leaning back in his chair. "I try."

"You said last time you were late because you had a lot of things going on. Is that still the case? Do those things impair your general mood?" Anna asked.

Nate shrugged, wanting to seem boisterous, but also not one of those rough-neck blue-collar guys who hated talking about their feelings. Instead, he wanted her to know that he was trying, that it was a hurdle to get past.

"Kinda, I guess. You know," he began, looking off to the side. He let the moment rest a moment before he looked back, meeting her brown eyes. "It's a woman."

No change in expression. Just waiting for the follow-up. Something one could call a dramatic pause in other situations.

"Romantic?" Anna asked.

Nate scoffed, as if romance was something for little boys in women's novels.

"She's something. Confident. Assertive. She runs her own landscaping business and dances ballet; what you think of that? And she's pretty. Like, if you're a man, you'd almost swerve off the road as you took a second glance driving past." Nate glanced toward the table.

"Sounds like quite the person."

"She is. A great person... Though, I'm starting to think I'm not good for her," Nate said, ending with a pained chuckle.

"Why is that?"

Nate looked back up again, meeting her eyes more deliberately.

"She's in a serious relationship," he said. Nate leaned back, changing his posture to show unease. "I feel conflicted afterwards. I do, honestly. It's the only downside to that woman... but I continue returning to the well despite knowing this."

Anna nodded, making a note.

"And you haven't told me about the relationship part last time," she said.

"I wasn't sure what to make of it," Nate said.

"Because of the morality of it?" Anna asked. Nate nodded. "And what have you concluded?"

"That I'm a horny bastard who doesn't care about anything but getting laid," Nate said. Anna chuckled.

"Do you?" she asked.

A humorless chuckle escaped Nate's throat. "God, I wish. But yeah, I do."

He let out a slow breath, staring at some fixed point on the wall. "The boyfriend... he seems harmless enough, you know. That almost makes the whole thing worse. Almost feel sorry for him." Nate paused, his gaze hardening. "But that's the problem, isn't it? He's just... in the way. She has so much potential and is such a force; I feel she's too much for a guy like her boyfriend. She's quite the wildfire."

"Is that why you keep going back?" Anna asked. "You like her because of her *'fire'*?"

"Among other things. I mean, she's a great lay, but she's a great person too. She is a woman with a plan, not some bimbo I can just have my way with," Nate explained. "No offense to all the bimbos out there, but her confidence and her character are really a magnet to me. I don't think I've ever been quite that into someone."

"*'A great lay'*, and the way you talk of this boyfriend, you talk of them as if they are things in your world," Anna observed.

Nate held up his hands, as if held at gunpoint.

"Those rough edges again. I mean, I don't know," Nate said, stuttering to seem more conflicted about this than he was. "It's not something you'd expect a guy like me to think or feel, so I guess I protect myself by making it crude. I don't know, I'm not as adept as some talking about feelings and people and all that."

Anna's eyes narrowed a fraction. "I think you're more adept than you say."

Say. Not *'think'* or even a *'that you give yourself credit for'*. She was sharp. Nate loved that in a woman.

"Maybe."

"So let's try it. Talk about how this makes you feel," Anna prompted.

"Well, all the sneaking around, it feels shitty," Nate lied. The thrill of it, of having Grace when Nolan was just in the next-door apartment, or at home dutifully waiting for his girl to get fucked, was a constant, electric hum under his skin. "Especially, I hate how she feels about it. While we're together, she's all in, but I can see it in her afterward—the guilt. And honestly, I feel it too, but it's different. I don't want to be the thing that breaks them. I'm just tired of being a secret. I hate being on pause, not knowing when I get to have her. It could be days of silence, then suddenly she's pulling me back in. We've been on real dates, and those were perfect... and I think I just want more of that. More of her."

"You don't sound ashamed of being with her. You sound resentful that you only exist when she has time for you," Anna remarked.

Nate shifted in his chair, the cheap vinyl groaning beneath his weight. Anna was sharp indeed. Her observation hit a nerve he hadn't realized was exposed. The way she saw through his carefully constructed narrative about guilt and remorse unnerved him, though he'd never show it. He'd have to remember that for later. Both her remark and her face as she made it.

Instead, he leaned back, nonchalantly draping an arm over the back of his chair. He let a slow, deliberate smirk play on his lips, the kind that said she'd hit close but missed the mark by a crucial inch.

"Resentful?" Nate scoffed, though the sound lacked genuine conviction. "Lady, I'm not a pining poet. I don't pine." He watched her expression, the slight raise of her eyebrow, and knew she wasn't buying it.

"So what do you want?" Anna asked.

"What I want?" Nate said. He let his eyes roam her for a moment. Not an obvious leering stare, but just looking through his thoughts for the correct one. "Isn't it curious, wanting something, but not being able to pinpoint exactly what? I want..." Nate trailed off.

He wanted Grace. Simple as that. But what the hell did that actually mean? That's why he kept coming back to these therapy sessions, even without the pills and even with the extra chase he got from trying to get Anna to bend a little. It was like a playground, testing his ideas out on a stranger who supposedly had all the answers. A pretty stranger at that. He had to be careful though. Anna wasn't some bimbo he could easily wrap around his finger. She saw too much. Felt too much. And that made her dangerous in a way that was almost as exciting as Grace.

"There's a difference between being desired and having a recognized place in someone's life," Anna offered after Nate's silence stretched a little too long.

Nate disliked the phrasing Anna used. Sounded too much like neediness, like a handout. He wasn't some charity case. But he couldn't deny how it landed, how it made him pause. A flicker of something sharp and useful in his mind. He'd hold onto that. File it away for later. A tool, perhaps. Nate knew better than to dismiss a sharp edge when it was offered to him.

He didn't reply right away, letting the weight of her observation settle. What did it mean for him, if you took away the semantics? A recognized place in life. To Grace, that was Nolan. He occupied space in Grace's life. Sharing her meals, running errands for or together, following up on her ballet, sleeping beside him, planning a future. Marriage, kids, all that was the trajectory of a 'recognized place'.

It annoyed Nate. It had been a lie that he disliked the secrets and the intensity that came with it, but now his take was morphing. He didn't dislike it, but there was an imbalance that was irritating him. Nolan was getting Grace's official life. Irritating indeed.

Then, with calculated nonchalance, he waved a dismissive hand in the air.

"Maybe I should simply walk away," Nate suggested.

"Is that what you intend to do?"

"I didn't say that."

Anna let a long silence stretch between them, studying him for a bit, then refocused to make a few notes. After a few moments of scribbling, she sighed conclusively and looked up.

"You returned to work after years away, then managed to get yourself suspended almost immediately," Anna said. "You've stopped the medication, and now you've entered a relationship that depends on uncertainty and conflict. I'm asking whether any of this is actually helping you."

Nate smiled. "Depends on what you call helping."

"Does it make you happier?"

He considered lying. "It makes me feel awake," Nate said.

Anna studied him for a moment. "Those aren't always the same thing."

"Close enough," Nate chirped.

"And this woman, is it her you want, or the feeling you get from taking something another man is his?"

Nate's smile remained, but it required more effort.

"You make it sound ugly," he said.

"I'm asking you to distinguish between them," Anna said.

"Maybe I don't have to."

Anna made another note. "Then you should at least consider what happens when she asks you to. Feeling awake is not the same as being well, Nate."

Nate's jaw tightened at the reminder. He had lied through his teeth to get his hands on that Zolof so he could make Nolan impotent. It was a strategy he had abandoned a long time ago. But it was still biting him in the ass. Apparently, he had played a convincing role, if nothing else.

"Close enough for now."

Ten minutes later, the session was done. Her hand touched the middle of his back as she guided him through the doorway. It might have meant nothing. Nate preferred the alternative.

The therapy sessions had a tendency to be quite a bore, and if it wasn't for Anna, he'd ditched them a long time ago. But today was different. A particular phrase Anna had used stuck in Nate's mind. 'Recognized place.' A mouthful, but it was something he knew he could use for later.

Well, for now, it was off to his apartment to edit the last photos for the soap pilot for later this week.

*

By Thursday, Nate had finished the edits, assembled the client's response into a presentation, and returned to an office that felt entirely different from when Nate had last been there two weeks ago. It was always a nice enough office, the ad department always a bit louder than the others.

While Nate had been suspended, the higher-ups had landed a political account large enough to reorganize half the department. If Nate recalled, it had already begun before his suspension, but now it was almost mayhem. Nate had no idea what office the woman was running for, and cared even less, but the money had apparently been good.

Hence why Nolan had been put in charge of his own corner, with Nate himself and a few others under him, and apparently, they were now handling most of the 'smaller' contracts. The threshold for what counted as success had risen.

Nate's grin was wide and smug, thinking Nolan's precious Tex-Mex contract was now smaller. His smirk would've faded when he realized his soap ad would likely be the same, but Nate was in a good mood today, so fuck it.

Nolan looked up at him as he arrived, and Nate had no idea how to read that kid anymore. He wasn't sure if he just had a resting bitch-face or if it was because he was face-to-face with the guy who was turning his girl into his little plaything.

Nate almost squirmed. No. Grace was more than that. His previous relationships had been playthings. Grace was too much woman to just be someone's toy. She was his equal. His partner. She challenged him. Thrilled him. Made him feel awake. Alive.

"Morning, Bickle," Nate greeted with a nod, and a slight tilt of the head to make it seem like he was respecting him.

Nolan didn't smile. Just looked back at his screen. Grace had said over text that she shouldn't have spent the night with him. Nate deduced Nolan had reacted to that and now was a cooldown period. He knew better than to nag; Grace was a stonewall when she wanted to. But it annoyed him still, dancing to this kid's tune, to live at other people's whim.

And while Grace had said that she shouldn't have spent the night, no mention of the photoshoot or all the delicious fucking being a mistake, so Nate took it as a few days' vacation to focus on picking out the best pictures, finding a few different slogans, working on angles for the ad. In that regard, it was actually nice to have a few days for himself.

Nolan went to get them coffee. Meanwhile, Nate sat reading the newspaper, the old-fashioned way, waiting to be called up by the big man himself. Josh didn't know why Nate had been suspended, as Mirella kept him on a need-to-know basis when it came to such issues. Mirella had apparently kept the reason on a need-to-know basis, sparing Nate the indignity of explaining himself in detail or rebuilding his image from scratch.

A few minutes later, Josh was waving him into his office, with all the bravado of someone who hadn't seen a friend in years. Nate understood quite easily why so many were smitten by Josh's charisma.

Nate glanced at the sling around Josh's arm but did not ask. With the Calhouns, there was always some story Nate had no interest in hearing.

Josh steeled himself as he sat down. "So, you're back."

"I am," Nate said, gesturing toward the opposite chair. Josh nodded, and he sat down.

"How've you been?" Josh asked, sounding friendly but a tad distant.

"Better," Nate said. He took a deep breath. That's what people do. "Look, I know I'm not your favorite person, and I can take some responsibility for that. But I just want to say that I'm sorry. For all of it. I can be an ass—"

"You're right," Josh said, standing up. "I wouldn't have taken you in at all if it wasn't for Nolan."

Nate's heart rate increased. How much had Mirella told Josh? He watched carefully as Josh made to stand behind his own chair, looking down toward Nate, a gulf of an office chair, a table, and a vastness of differences sitting between them. Nate wasn't valuable enough to not get rid of. Yet.

"I'm not coming back empty-handed," Nate answered. Josh didn't react. He had expected nothing less. Nate knew then if he hadn't taken the initiative, he'd be sitting here getting fired. He should've seen that coming. "I'm working on a soap ad of all things," he continued, masking his increased pulse with a convincing casualness.

Nate turned in his seat and produced a folder out of his old leather satchel. In the corner of his eye, he could see that Josh liked his satchel of all things. It was an heirloom from Nate's dad from when he had been in Vietnam. It wasn't rustic by design; it was authentically worn. A rarity among fashion designers, Nate would've scoffed if he wasn't already walking a thin line.

He pushed the folder across the desk toward Josh, commanding him to at least come back around his chair to inspect it. Josh picked up the folder, opened it, and started reading through a report Nate had worked on, which included a written endorsement from an executive at South Georgia Personal Care and Hygiene, SGPOCH for short, one of the biggest soap manufacturers in the Midwest, and a request for an extended pilot. He read the few specific product lines, such as the bathing oils, the bathtub soaps, and even a couple of the shampoos and shower gels.

He also read how they enjoyed Nate personally, his visual concept, his humor, and his understanding of target audiences. Some of that he had sugar-coated a bit, but it was all on paper.

"These are the kinds of products you'll find in homes throughout Ohio and Michigan," Nate explained, hoping Josh would sit down. He did.

Josh flipped to the next page, his eyes landing on the photos of Grace. While the shots were mostly PG, the way her gaze cut through the lens – steel-blue eyes boring deep into the viewer — had a way of making any grown man forget his own name for a second. Josh was no exception. That particular mix of bored superiority and raw confidence, the look that said 'I've

seen you, sized you up, and found you wanting,' had ensnared plenty of men before. Nate watched Josh's throat work as he swallowed, a small but satisfying confirmation that he'd hit his mark with Grace as his model.

"Whoa. I've never seen Grace like that before," Josh said. "She's doing our backyard, but she's always in overalls. I mean, she's attractive but god damn."

"Right?" Nate chuckled, standing up to round the table and look down at the pictures himself, but with a respectable distance to the big man.

"Nolan is cool with this?" Josh asked.

"Grace said she'd want to help me out on this one. And she has a knack for it, right?" Nate said. "This one is particularly good." It was one of the last pictures he had taken. Grace was looking over her shoulder, shirt tied up, jeans tight around that perfect, absolutely flawless ass. Just looking at it, remembering how that ass had felt like, made Nate's palms sweaty and his crotch start to pump with blood.

"She sure does," Josh said.

Nate went back to his seat. He gave Josh a moment to let the idea of Grace do her thing settle in. Nate knew he didn't need much more. Josh was a man, after all. He flipped back to the testimony.

"I'll have Mirella confirm the client request and authorize a limited pilot budget," Josh said. "If the paperwork checks out, you two can do two more shoots, an assistant to start, and a proper modelling fee for Grace. Tell Nolan this is your primary account now, and pick one or two people you work well with, should you need it."

Josh stood.

"Bring me something good, and we'll talk about your contract," Josh concluded, closing the files. "I sort of brought it up to her before, but I think she'd be great advertisement for Entrendy too."

That was Josh's own clothing company. In other words, huge for Nate.

"Her just wearing any of it in itself is plenty, but if she'd model... Do you reckon she'd help out with that too?" Josh asked, sounding hopeful.

"I can ask," Nate said, making it known that he was the go-between man. "She's not a professional, so she prefers working with people she knows." Like Nate. And only Nate.

"She'd fool me," Josh muttered.

Five minutes later, Nolan was extending his hand, a genuine smile plastered on his face as he offered his congratulations. Nate's grip tightened just enough to make it a contest, though the other man didn't seem to notice. This was worse than jealousy. This was respect. Professional courtesy. It made the whole thing feel like some corporate training exercise where Nolan was playing the part of the generous mentor, and Nate was the gifted student who had suddenly surpassed expectations.

Nate hated it. The memory of Nolan patiently explaining advertising semantics to him during those first weeks—like he was some clueless apprentice—surfaced with a vengeance. Now here was Nolan, patting him on the back like they were equals, colleagues who just happened to work in the same department. The whole scene grated on Nate, undermining the victory. This wasn't supposed to be about camaraderie. This was supposed to be a reckoning. A silent acknowledgment that Nate had taken something Nolan thought was his—his girlfriend, his confidence, his place as the golden boy at work—and made it his own. Instead, Nolan was treating it like Nate had just landed a big client and earned a bonus.

"Yeah, Grace really helped out on this one," Nate said, wiping that stupid grin off of Nolan. The kid composed himself fast enough, but it landed.

"She did," Nolan agreed, his voice a touch cooler. "She's talented."

Nate's grin stuck to his face as he found his desk, the cheap metal chassis groaning under his weight. The air around him had shifted. He could feel it—new glances tossed in his direction from every corner of the open-plan office. Some carried the weight of begrudging respect, others dripped with envy. Nate let it all wash over him, savoring the small victories.

'Pilot went well. Need you for another shoot. Come by after work,' Nate typed, sending it to Grace. Then he added, with a satisfied smirk, *'And I intend to celebrate properly.'*

'I can come by, but we need to talk first,' she replied shortly after. There it was again. Four words that never brought anything good and never kept her away for long. Ominous. The celebration, apparently, would have to wait.

The rest of the day flew by quickly. He made plans for a new shoot, reconnected with the folks at SGPCH about the progress being made, and drew a full map of the different products that would group well together into a nice campaign.

*

When Nate arrived home at his apartment, he was pleasantly surprised to see that Grace was already there. She had used her key. As he entered, he was immediately met by the feminine scent of her perfume and the small sounds of his coffee machine dripping. It felt almost... domestic.

Nate saw that her work jacket hung on a coat hanger in the hallway, hanging there as if it belonged there. He kicked off his own shoes and put down his satchel, and as he moved toward the kitchen, he found Grace facing the sink, not noticing his arrival just yet.

He studied her for a moment. The sunlight streaming through the window caught the flyaway strands in her long neon-blonde hair, turning them to gold. She had that way of standing, shoulders squared, spine straight, as if she owned whatever space she occupied. Even his kitchen. Especially his kitchen. His eyes roamed her exposed back, her top revealing just enough to tease him. He remembered that back, remembered how it looked when she was cuffed to his hotel bed, the muscles tensing as he drove into her.

But what affected him was not merely the view. It was the ease of her. The jacket in his hallway, the coffee dripping into one of his mugs, Grace standing in his kitchen as though it was partly hers. She looked less like a visitor than she had ever before.

"Hey there," she gasped as he pressed himself up against her, his hands finding her hips, running up to cup her breasts.

"Fancy seeing you here," he muttered, kissing the back of her neck. Grace shivered, her body responding instantly to his touch. She leaned her head back against his shoulder, giving him better access.

"I thought we could celebrate," he said, his hands moving lower, slipping under the hem of her top to trace the skin above her waistband. That taut belly, the way her muscles fluttered under his touch...

"We need to talk," Grace said.

"That phrase again?" Nate chuckled. "And I here I wanted to bend you over this counter and celebrate my successful day."

Grace turned in his arms. "Is that what I am to you?" she asked in a playful enough mood. "Just a nice ass to bend over a counter?"

"Far from it," Nate said. "But you do have a really nice ass." And he squeezed it for good measure. Hard.

"So how was your day then? Seems like you're in a great mood," Grace asked.

"Josh loved the pilot and gave me a budget for a new shoot or two. I was thinking this weekend. Striking while the iron is hot," Nate said. "If this thing goes well, I'm up for a review of my contract. Might even get a more permanent position."

"Damn. You've really done something," Grace said, genuinely happy for his success. "Honestly, I felt it during the shoot. You had a vision and everything."

Nate smirked. "Yeah, I've got a vision," he said.

"Next weekend might be a bit hard, though. I think Nolan was planning something," Grace said, stepping away from the counter. "Especially after last weekend."

"Fond memories of that," Nate said.

"Nolan followed us," Grace said. Nate had no reaction to that. "I sent him a location-sharing link. He has been dying to get included into this thing with us, and I knew it would be such a thrill if he came over... us. And he did, to the parking lot."

"Then he heard you screaming my name in the back of my car?" Nate asked, smugly. "What did you tell him? That my dick is bigger?"

Grace's expression soured. "Nate, be serious."

"I am. What did he see?"

"He saw enough," Grace said. "Enough to get him all hot and bothered. But not enough to actually be included. I honestly forgot when we were done, and he followed us to the hotel. He waited around in the lobby and everything, and I never gave him a signal or anything, so he just sat there waiting for the next phase or something," Grace said. "So he went home alone. Hurt. Hurt because of me."

"He sat in the lobby?" Nate asked, amused, moving away from the counter to go sit in his recliner.

"Shut the fuck up, Nate," Grace barked. "Sorry. I mean, don't talk like that about him." Nate raised his hands in apology.

"It wasn't the hotel that upset him. Or, not only the hotel," Grace said. "I made him think he was part of it."

"He followed you."

"Because I told him to. Perhaps not with words, but I knew what that location would mean to him," Grace said. "And I never followed-up. I sent that link as if that was the end of it. Or, I sent without thinking about any end at all."

Nate tried to discern the difference. To him, it sounded mostly as Nolan asking for a larger role in what Nate and Grace were doing. It was normal; Grace and Nolan were, after all, the actual couple, but it was annoying nonetheless.

"I handled it badly. I rushed in on Saturday after work, gave no explanation, then invited him partway in," Grace said.

Nate ran a hand over his face, the scruff catching on his palm. He wasn't hiding jealousy—not that he'd admit anyway—but the way Nolan could still affect her like this, still matter enough to make her talk about forgetting him with such concern... that part grated. That part made him feel

like he was still playing in someone else's sandbox, following rules Nolan had somehow set, even when he had Grace bent over bed and begging for more. Cuffed and naked and his. But not entirely.

"So Nolan wants a clearer framework. If I want privacy, I'll say so, if he is to be included, I need to be better at defining how. No more half-invitations... and that sort of brings me to, well, his inclusion," Grace began. She moved to lean against the wall separating the kitchen from the hallway. "He wants to watch."

"He wants to sit in the room?" Nate chuckled, thinking it was some sort of joke.

"And he wants me to want him there."

That wording irritated Nate further.

"Absolutely not."

"Why?" Grace asked. She didn't seem surprised by the answer.

"I'm not putting on some sort of show for him," Nate said. "What, is Nolan to give direction too? Am I just there to fulfill this kid's fantasy?"

Grace stared blankly at Nate, probably not sure what to say. Nate turned softer, changing his tactics, but not entirely.

"I'm not sure either of us would be able to enjoy it even," he said. "I mean, it wouldn't be the same."

Nate knew that Grace would be watching for Nolan's reaction too. She loved him too much, and would see how Nolan would handle Nate plowing his most cherished possession right in front of him. She'd be part with Nate, and part with not-Nate.

Grace sighed.

"I don't disagree. Those are among my concerns as well. I worry if he's there that it becomes... performative."

"Then why are we even discussing it?"

"Because he asked me. And because this involves you."

Nate stood from his seat and turned away. He was hiding his anger. He wasn't some fucking ingredient. A tool. A logistical component of Grace and Nolan's relationship. Nate went over to one of his plants and nipped out some moss, grounding himself in something mundane.

"So you two sat down and decided where I fit?" he said, his voice steady.

Grace came over and joined him, taking a seat on the couch opposite him.

"No. We talked about us," Grace replied.

"No, you talked about me," Nate retorted.

"Don't be childish. Nolan is my boyfriend and my relationship with him comes first and will always come first. I'm sorry to inform you, but I happen to love Nolan," Grace said. "It's only natural that we discuss boundaries. And I've fucked up enough as it is, so you better get used to it. And don't pretend you haven't benefitted from Nolan's openness over and over."

"I don't want to be a guest in my own relationship with you," Nate said.

"Relationship?"

A small involuntary silence snuck between them. Nate plucked moss from the plant Grace had planted for him months ago. He could feel her eyes on him.

"Do you consider yourself my boyfriend?" Grace asked, rather bluntly.

"Not 'boyfriend'," Nate replied.

Nate opened the door to the balcony and tossed the moss over the edge.

"Sleeping together and going on dates doesn't automatically make our 'relationship' equal to me and Nolan's," Grace said.

"I didn't say 'equal'," Nate said.

"Then what did you mean?" Grace asked.

Nate didn't turn back toward her right away. He saw a bird fly by his apartment, looking for seeds perhaps.

"So what about Saturday?" Nate asked.

"I can't promise anything. Nolan and I may have plans," Grace said.

"So when do I get you?" Nate asked.

"You have me now," Grace replied, raising her eyebrows.

"I mean properly. When's my turn?"

"Nolan is my boyfriend, Nate. What do you expect?"

"I expect you to stop saying that like it answers every question."

Grace's face shifted, and it looked as if some realization came to her. For the first time, Nate thought she understood what he was actually asking. This was getting serious. Very serious, and Grace didn't seem in the mood to like it. Nate shifted his angle.

"Here's what my issue is," Nate said. "All this secrecy bullshit. Every time something happens, you go home feeling guilty, he gets hurt, and the two of you come back with another rule. Then you disappear until you decide it's safe to see me again."

Nate slumped down in his recliner, letting out a convincing sigh.

"And I can't lie, I don't enjoy that part," Nate lied. "Seeing how it affects you, seeing how a real relationship suffers because of ambiguity? I'm not a monster. And I'm also not something you borrow whenever you have a few hours."

They studied each other for a moment. Nate's face was serious, Grace's full of mixed emotions. "Hell, if I'm doing all this to you guys, maybe it's best if I step away," Nate concluded.

"No," Grace said. It was all the proof Nate needed. The answer had come before she could make it less revealing. Her expression hardened. "And don't do that."

"What?"

"Pretend this is concern for us when you're angry that you don't get to choose the terms," Grace said. "Don't pretend you've been reluctantly dragged through any of this. You loved the secrecy when it made you feel like you were stealing something. And you're not *'on pause'*. I have a life when I'm not standing in your apartment."

"So what is it then?" Nate asked.

"I came here to tell you what Nolan asked, not how to restructure my life," Grace said, a bit more resignation in her voice than before. She didn't buy what she was selling, Nate wagered. "I just wanted you to know."

Nate nodded. "I'm informed. Go home then," he said.

Grace looked at him, confused, raising her eyebrows. She was surprised. Both by him rejecting her, but also how this whole thing played out. Nate figured she wasn't used to being told no, too. "Apparently it's his night," he said.

Grace furrowed her brow. "I didn't say it's Nolan's night?" she said with growing annoyance. "Exactly. Nobody knows whose time anything is."

Grace stared at him blankly for a moment. She slowly stood up. Nate saw the conflict. She had known he wouldn't like Nolan watching. But she didn't realize he'd object to his entire position. "So the answer is no?"

"The answer is that I'm not doing it for him," Nate replied.

There came no reply from Grace. She simply walked over to where her jacket was, fetched it, and disappeared out the door. A moment later, he heard the neighboring door closing. The small rack of jackets looked much emptier now. On the kitchen counter, her mug stood completely untouched.

*

Nate stared at where Grace had stood just moments ago. The apartment had not felt empty before she arrived, but it did now. He looked at her mug standing there, steam no longer coming from it. Was that regret? Not guilt. He knew guilt well enough to counterfeit it. This was simpler and more irritating: knowing he wanted one thing, said another, and watched Grace walk out because of it.

No. This was more akin to looking back on a conversation, knowing you said something stupid, and wondering whether you could've approached it better.

He had wanted to be clear and direct about where he stood, but perhaps he could've done something different.

"Fuck that," Nate said, though 'that' wasn't anything in particular. He grabbed Grace's mug and threw the coffee in the sink. Why the fuck had he sent her back to Nolan when he wanted her for himself? Why the fuck was he this stubborn? Pride? Was he playing the part of a scorned girlfriend? What was this?

No. His dismissal was perhaps harsh, and perhaps too impulsive and driven by emotion, but he knew it would affect Grace. She had wanted to keep things going, but he was the one sending her away. Yet, it was the sort of after-the-fact justification that annoyed Nate.

Nate paced around his apartment, his mind circling back to the same damn thing every time. That wimp next door. Nolan had this way of worming his way into Nate's time with Grace, even when he wasn't physically there. None of tonight's awkwardness would've happened if it wasn't for how Nolan had a way of becoming central when he was nowhere near the room. Nate stopped walking and looked at his reflection in the dark window. There was a small smile creeping onto his face, crooked and ugly. Nate's mind made a small adjustment. Was this how Nolan had felt when he and Grace had talked about Nate? How Nate was present even when he wasn't? The thought brought a flicker of satisfaction. Small, but satisfying nonetheless.

Anna's words from therapy echoed in his mind—'*recognized place*.' The phrase had stuck with Nate like a burr under his skin, irritating and impossible to ignore. Now he understood why. Nolan already owned the official parts of Grace's life—the shared meals, the weekend plans, the future they talked about over breakfast. That was his territory, his recognized place. And now, somehow, Nolan wanted more. Now he wanted access to the one part of her life Nate could pretend belonged only to him.

Why did they have to change anything at all? Nate scoffed. Grace was right, of course. He loved the secrecy. It made Grace's choices feel that much more exciting, and the thrill and anticipation of being able to pull her over a line. Sure, the new rules were always nonsense, but they made for new chases, and Nate always enjoyed a good hunt. And most importantly, it gave time with Grace that Nolan didn't have access to, and if Grace chose not to indulge, he'd never know. Grace was no one else's but Nate's in those moments.

Nate brought his coffee out on the balcony. It was almost fall now, so this balcony had seen way less action lately than it used to. Damn shame. He missed having Grace sunbathe in that black and green bikini. Another thing that was his and hers and nobody else's. Come to think of it, he wasn't sure if she had worn all the clothes he got her either.

A bird flew past again. Was it the same one? Who knows. Who cares.

And how awkward would it be to have Nolan in the room? Nate barely managed to fake politeness to him at work. He tried to picture it. Nolan in Nate's own bedroom, huffing and panting his balls off, staring at Grace and Nate. He imagined he'd be distracted by the constant feeling of Nolan's staring eyes. Hearing him try to talk to Grace about something he wanted Nate to do differently and them awkwardly pausing what they were doing to do Nolan's bidding. Nate almost chucked his mug at the fucking bird as it flew past once again.

And that was Nolan. What about Grace? She loved Nolan and wanted to please and avoid hurting him. Would she lay it on thick just for Nolan's amusement? Would she be worried when Nate was making her cum that it would hurt Nolan's feelings?

Nate loved sleeping with Grace, as anyone did, but having some random asshole sitting in a chair in the corner looking at them? Why the fuck would he want that? He didn't even have that many chairs to begin with. Fuck if he'd drag his recliner into his bedroom just for that.

No. It wouldn't happen. Nate saw no reason for it. And why would he? Why would he want to share that? Every version he imagined had Nolan contaminating the room. Grace checked his expression, slowing down to reassure him, turning every choice into a question about whether her boyfriend could handle it.

Then Nate imagined one detail differently.

Grace would look toward Nolan. She saw him sitting there, understood exactly what he wanted from her, and then turned back to Nate anyway.

The image held.

That wasn't Nolan directing anything. It wasn't a performance designed for his approval. Nolan would merely be present enough to understand the choice being made in front of him.

A witness.

Nate paused. He'd been standing there, but his mind finally caught up to what he was imagining. The nuance shifted something in him. Witness. Not director, not participant—just witness. If Nolan was in that chair, he'd have to watch with his own eyes as Grace chose Nate again and again. The cruelty was not that Grace might forget Nolan. Forgetting could be excused as heat, distraction, a moment getting away from her. Nate imagined her looking directly at Nolan, reading every expression on his face, and turning back to Nate anyway. Every glance would become another choice. Nolan would not have to wonder where he stood. Grace would show him.

He'd see Grace slide into Nate's bed, take him into her mouth for his pleasure—and for hers—but never for Nolan's. He'd understand why Grace was drawn to him, why she'd forgotten Nolan at the hotel. He'd witness her reactions to things Nolan had only ever imagined. Nate would command Grace's full attention while Nolan would be outside that circle, seeing everything unfold, understanding finally why Grace needed this, why she needed Nate. Why she had said 'no' to Nate walking away.

And if he was in the room, Grace would have to see what Nolan thought of all of it. Nolan would finally see why she kept coming back, and why she had forgotten about him at the hotel. And would again in the future.

"Holy shit," Nate muttered, his voice almost trembling.

Grace had said Nolan wanted a place. Perhaps Nate could give him one without giving him any power. The thought arrived vague, ugly, and unexpectedly difficult to dismiss.

Nate wouldn't be performing for Nolan. Nolan would be watching what he was missing, what Nate would've done anyway. And Grace's attention? It would be fully on Nate, and if her mind floated in the direction of Nolan, it would be a reminder of what her boyfriend was and wasn't. *'Tell him I changed my mind.'* Nate deleted the draft and wrote a new one. *'Maybe he should see it.'* Deleted.

No. It was just as well. He had already acted rashly once today. He wasn't even sure if he was on board with the witnessing idea. It was just a new thought. He still truly didn't want Nolan in the room. But perhaps his flat-out denial wasn't as absolute.

*

Nate noticed Nolan's chair before he noticed Nolan. It was an ordinary chair, too narrow and too cheap to resemble anything Nate had imagined the night before. Still, the association came, and Nate pushed it aside before Nolan looked up.

"Drew, could you fetch me that insurance thing?" Nolan said from behind his desk as Nate approached.

He sat in front of most of the other guys handling the smaller contracts, Nate included, his desk annoyingly well organized. Nate scoffed. It still didn't sit right with him to be under a kid like Nolan. Not only was Nate his senior by at least two decades, Nate also had way more experience in both sales and advertising.

Nate glanced down at Nolan's chair, before dismissing any intrusive thoughts.

"Mornin'," Nolan called when he saw Nate, without looking up.

"Good morning," Nate grunted, throwing his satchel up at the desk before going to fetch him his first cup of coffee.

On his way back, Nate made sure to pay extra attention to Nolan. He looked extra tired; there was that. He had already avoided eye contact once, and didn't look up as Nate made his way back to his desk. It wasn't the easiest tell, but Nolan seemed a bit nervous; Nate couldn't tell whether it was because Grace told Nolan everything or because Nolan merely knew she went next door yesterday.

"Mirella told me the client confirmation came through, and a limited budget has been approved. We just need you to submit dates, expenses, Grace's modelling paperwork, and any equipment requests. A nice list, if you will," Nolan said, not even looking up from his paperwork.

Nate disliked that Nolan was still involved in what was his, but he also heard something useful in Nolan's tone and what he said. This was being treated as Nate's project rather than trying to control it.

"You planning to supervise?" Nate asked, casual as can be.

Nolan looked up then, with a puzzled expression.

"The shoot?" he asked.

"What else?"

"Oh. You brought it in. Unless you ask for help, I'm staying out of it. I don't think you need me standing over your shoulder," Nolan said.

What irony was this? Now he didn't want to join in on the fun?

"So you're not interested in watching me work?" Nate asked.

Nolan paused. His face and posture shifted slightly.

"Did Grace agree to another shoot?" Nolan asked, trying to turn back to business. It was an awkward transition considering who he was talking about and to.

"She came over last night," Nate said instead of answering.

Nolan's fingers stopped over the keyboard. He glanced at Nate before quickly looking at a nearby desk. Color began to climb Nolan's neck.

"For the shoot?" Nolan asked.

"We got around to discussing it," Nate replied. Nolan adjusted a pencil on his desk. He was clearly a bit nervous. "But we mostly talked about your idea."

Nolan quickly looked around the office, then leaned in a little over his desk and looked at Nate. "Could you not call it that here?"

"What should I call it?" Nate asked quietly, his voice matching Nolan leaning in.

"Nothing. We don't need to discuss it here."

"But Nolan, you wanted to discuss it in my bedroom?"

Nolan's jaw tightened, and he clearly shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Fuck, where was I?" he mumbled, trying to turn back to the monitor.

"She was making coffee in my kitchen when I got home, actually," Nate said. That stopped all motion from Nolan. He sat there, staring blankly at the screen in front of him. He was probably thinking along the same line as Nate had thought when he saw Grace in his home, using his kitchen like it was her own. "Your girlfriend gave me quite the proposal."

"Grace spoke to you because it involves you," Nolan said. He was surprisingly calm, but Nate could still hear the strain.

"I told her no."

Nolan exhaled slowly and closed his eyes. Was it immediate disappointment? Relief of nothing imminent? Embarrassment that Nate knew what Nolan wanted? From Nolan's body language, it was hard to tell. Unless, which was likely, that it was all of them and more.

Nolan opened his eyes, but still avoided Nate's gaze, opting for staring blankly at whatever was on his screen.

"Okay," he replied. It was controlled, but with some effort.

Nolan didn't follow up; he just sat there still.

"That's it?" Nate asked.

"What do you want me to say?"

Drew returned then, threw a thick folder onto Nolan's desk before going off on his own adventures.

"You went through all that trouble to have Grace ask me, and now it's just 'okay'?" Nate asked, lowering his voice.

"I didn't send Grace over to ask you," Nolan said. "One doesn't send Grace to do anything."

"She came over because of what you wanted."

"No, that's not it," Nolan said, looking up finally. "She came over because, well, it involved you and, uhm, she didn't want to make another decision behind anyone's back."

Nate narrowed his eyes a fraction. "I'm not putting on a performance because you want a show."

Nolan immediately looked around to see if anyone heard that. He returned to pretending to read, his knee fidgeting up and down like a nervous tic. He glanced around occasionally before replying.

"That's not what I asked for," Nolan finally said.

"You want to sit there while I make her cum. Over and over. Sounds like a show."

Nolan's flush returned with a vengeance. Nate got some sort of sick pleasure from watching Nolan squirm, how difficult it was for him to hear the situation stated so plainly, right here in their office.

"It isn't... I don't want to tell either of you what to do," Nolan said.

"Then why be there?"

"Because I want..." Nolan trailed off before looking away again.

"Because you want what, Bickle?"

"To be included. Because I want to be included," Nolan almost whispered.

"Included while what? While I fuck your girlfriend?"

"Yes," Nolan managed to get out, the sound barely audible over the office chatter.

Nate let that hang in the air for a good, long moment. He watched the internal struggle playing out across Nolan's face. He looked trapped between wanting to retreat and needing to answer. "You want to sit there and watch her forget about you again?" Nate asked.

This time, Nolan looked right at Nate immediately. The mixed bag of emotions was briefly replaced by anger.

"No," he said, firmly at that. Nate didn't say anything, so Nolan followed up. "I want her not to forget I'm there."

The firmness lasted only until the words were out. Nolan looked away again, but he had said them. He tried to pretend to read, his go-to nervous tic, but it was very apparent that Nate had

struck a nerve. A deep wound. And it told Nate that Nolan didn't fly away or shell up; no, Nolan would stay. That could be tested repeatedly.

"What if she doesn't forget?" Nate asked. Nolan looked back at him. "What if she knows you're there the whole time, but chooses me anyway?"

He opened his mouth several times, trying to say something, but nothing got out. The only thing that came was redness and stammering.

"I don't know."

"Again, why ask, then?"

"Because not knowing doesn't stop me from wanting to find out. That's not why I left the hotel," Nolan said.

"You left because Grace forgot you."

"Exactly," Nolan said. "But I didn't ask you to do anything for me. I didn't leave because you were with her. I left because I didn't know if I was even supposed to be there or not."

"You asked to watch," Nate said.

"I told her what I wanted when she asked me. She brought it to you because you get a choice too. Now," Nolan said, returning to his keyboard.

While Nolan attempted to work, Nate studied him. The imagined scene from yesterday now attached itself to the real Nolan. His flush, how he fidgeted, how he seemed to not know what to do with himself. The way merely discussing Grace with Nate seemed to disrupt him. If talking about Grace and fucking Grace did this to him, what would seeing it do?

"Grace looked disappointed when I said no."

"Disappointed about what?" Nolan mumbled.

"Ask her," Nate said dismissively. "But maybe my answer wasn't as final as Grace thought."

Nolan became immediately flushed again. The implication was enough to have the kid reeling.

"Why?"

"Professional curiosity," Nate replied easily.

"Then talk to Grace," Nolan said.

"She's the one who came to me."

"And she's the one you should answer."

Just then, Mirella came over with the confirmation paperwork, a bunch of forms Nate needed to submit, interrupting their little sparring match or whatever one might call it. Nolan had to go and talk to Sean about another contract that was in a conflict of interest or something. But before he went away, Nolan tapped two fingers on Nate's desk.

"Production list before lunch."

As Nolan walked away, his flush was already receding. When Mirella first came over, he had been flustered too, but managed to either mask it or recover from it.

But if talking about it made the kid turn red, Nate could only do what the real thing would do. Nolan wanted to be included so Grace would not forget him. Nate wanted to see whether she would anyway.

