

The following day, Jax approached Grime Mart with a mix of excitement and tiredness . As he stepped inside, the familiar scent of dust and old wood filled him. He could already hear the faint rattle of boxes shifting and the distant clattering of items being rearranged.

“Hey, Jax!” Mandy called from the back, her voice bright and cheerful. She was already elbow-deep in an overflowing box filled with vintage trinkets. “I saved the best stuff for you to unpack today!”

“Awesome!” Jax replied, trying to match her enthusiasm. As he joined her, he noticed the bags under her eyes that stained her pale skin seemed to have darkened overnight, but he brushed it off, attributing it to her ambitious work ethic.

They worked well together at first, sharing jokes and digging through layers of junk to uncover hidden gems. Mandy pointed out interesting finds—a beautiful porcelain bunny, a carved wooden figure, and an old clock that still somewhat ticked, “See? Treasure!” she exclaimed, her laughter infectious.

But as the day wore on, the atmosphere shifted. Jax found himself increasingly aware of a strange tension in the air. Suddenly, Mandy’s demeanor changed. Her cheerful chatter twisted into an edge of impatience. “Can’t you just speed it up a bit? We have so much to do!” she snapped unexpectedly, glaring at him as if he’d personally offended her.

Jax blinked in surprise. “Uh, sure. I’m just trying to be careful...” he stammered, bewildered by her abrupt harshness.

“Careful?” Mandy replied, her voice dropping to a whisper, a smile twitching on her lips that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “You think this place cares about careful?”

There was something unsettling about the way she spoke, as though her words were covered by an eerie undertone. He felt a shiver run down his spine, but before he could respond, she seemed to shake off whatever had possessed her. “S-sorry!” she said, she seemed to be herself but she was sad, maybe even scared, like she didn’t know why she spoke like that.”let’s take a break...”

They sat on a couple of old crates, munching on snacks Mandy had brought. When she started sharing ridiculous stories about the odd customers who frequented the store, it reminded Jax why he liked her so much. But in the back of his mind, unease lingered.

As they resumed unpacking, she abruptly leaned in closer to him, her grin widening in an almost dark way. “You know, Jax, sometimes you have to dig deeper than just the surface to find the real treasures,” she said, running her fingers lightly over a dusty box that seemed almost too dusty to touch. “What do you think lies inside?” He looked closely at her eyes, they were heavy with guilt and sadness, this was not Mandy.

Before he could answer, her expression shifted again, sliding into something dark. “Maybe ghosts... or more grime,” she hissed, the playful tone replaced by an unsettling edge.

“Um... I don’t know,” Jax mumbled, caught off guard. The words fell from her mouth like a curse, transforming the moment into something eerie. “Mandy, are you-”

walls?

“Why do you keep hesitating?” she interrupted, her voice filled with an odd tone. He glanced at her, searching for the sweet girl he’d met the day before, but was met with a gaze that felt different .

For a moment,he saw something flicker behind her eyes, as if another presence was taking over. “This place is more than it seems, Jax,” she said softly, the intensity of her gaze making him squirm. “It changes us, takes over us, you know? It takes over.”

Then, just as quickly, she was herself again, the spell broken. “Come on... Let’s get to work.”

As they separated items, Jax couldn’t shake the chill that gripped him during her sudden transformation. It felt like the walls themselves held secrets ,echoes of stories left untold. As they uncovered more objects, each with its own history, he could sense a tangible energy enveloping the store, something alive that pulsed beneath the layers of dust and neglect.

By the end of their shift, Jax felt exhausted, both mentally and physically. As he left, he glanced back at Mandy, who was now humming under her breath while sifting through the remnants of the day’s work. She looked normal again, yet something inside him felt unsettled.

The dingy little store, once merely cluttered and chaotic, now felt distinctly haunted, and Mandy? She was a mystery he felt compelled to unravel. He walked home, thoughts swirling like the dust in the air. What was happening to Mandy? And what secrets did Grime Mart hold tight within its

