The Bad Tenant

by Eddie Wilder

Ch. 01

It was a quiet Saturday morning in Austin, Texas. The late June sun had begun its relentless ascent, promising another day of crushing heat, but inside the Marshall residence, the air conditioning maintained a cool refuge from the sun's intensity.

Jessica Marshall made one final pass with the vacuum across the cream-colored rug and then clicked it off with a satisfied sigh. After hours of cleaning, organizing, and rearranging, the lower floor of their home finally looked polished and welcoming. What had once been a glorified storage space and a seldom-used guest room was now transformed into a comfortable apartment.

Jess stepped back, resting her hands on her hips, taking it all in. The room was simple but stylish. Muted beige tones on the walls created a warm atmosphere and light wooden accents added texture and depth. A plush, cream-colored rug lay beneath the coffee table and a potted plant with glossy leaves added life to a corner. The space felt cohesive and intentional, everything she'd designed it to be. It looked like something from one of her interior design portfolios, the kind of space she'd proudly show a client.

Jess, as always, was meticulous in her presentation, whether it was a room or herself. She turned heads wherever she went, and had the kind of curves that made men forget their names. Her beautiful face had even graced several modeling campaigns before she chose Interior Design as her profession. Even now, dressed in simple black leggings and a fitted dark blue T-shirt, there was a grace to her movements that couldn't be taught or practiced.

There was something else about her too, something harder to define. She possessed the ability to look insanely sexy without trying. It was an almost unconscious sensuality that radiated from her in the smallest gestures. It was the sway of her hips when she walked, the way she absentmindedly bit her lower lip while thinking, her slight frown of concentration, the curve of her smile, all a seemingly innocent combination that created something magnetic. She exuded pure, raw sexuality and moved through life with a natural allure.

Upstairs, she could hear Tom's voice, slightly muffled but still distinct, echoing through the house. He was on the phone, probably handling work calls even on a

Saturday. Even after six years together, four of them married, his deep, steady voice still had the power to calm her nerves.

Tom was tall and lean, his body toned from years of dedicated running. His dark brown hair was always styled and his handsome face always clean-shaven. Tom was always well-groomed and always presentable. He was ambitious, reliable, steady, and in many ways, the perfect husband. He was always there when she needed him, never too demanding or confrontational. He handled life's problems with a level head, even when Jess felt like screaming in frustration.

Their differences complemented and balanced each other. He was more serious and structured. She was more spontaneous and passionate. They were the kind of couple others envied: attractive, intelligent, ambitious, and hardworking. Yet beneath the surface, subtle cracks were starting to form.

Jess and Tom had met in college through mutual friends, and their connection had been instant and electric. They fell deeply in love and married soon after graduation, certain they'd found their perfect match. That felt like a lifetime ago, their youthful optimism now tempered by the realities of adult life.

Today, financial strain weighed on them. Rising interest rates on their mortgage, car payments for both vehicles, and their goal of accumulating savings for a future baby were starting to suffocate them. But it wasn't just the mounting expenses that poked at Jess's peace of mind.

It was Tom's mistake, the cryptocurrency investment that still stung the most. Jess had been furious when he'd lost a significant portion of their savings in that ill-fated gamble, and even though she'd softened her stance outwardly over time, the anger had never truly gone away. It simmered underneath, a dull, ever-present resentment that flared up whenever she thought about their financial situation.

Her eyes moved to the clock on the wall, its hands approaching noon. Robert, their first prospect, would be arriving any minute. From his application, she knew Robert was a twice divorced, fifty-five-year-old man. He stood out from the other, younger applicants. Robert had been more forward during his phone conversation with Tom, mentioning how he could help around the house, fix things, and even upgrade their plumbing. It was a tempting proposition. After all, Tom wasn't exactly the handyman type, and Jess loved the idea of finally making some of the changes she'd been fantasizing about for their home.

"Jess?" Tom's voice floated down from upstairs. "Can you come up here?"

"Just finished," she called back, unplugging the vacuum. Her top clung to her curves as she stretched, working out the kinks in her lower back.

Upstairs, Tom was pacing their kitchen, phone pressed to his ear. He gave her a smile as she entered.

"Yes, Mr. Caldwell, we're definitely still on... No, that won't be a problem at all... Perfect, we'll see you soon." He ended the call and immediately pulled Jess into his arms. "You've been cleaning for hours, babe. Take a break."

"Can't." She squirmed away playfully. "We have tenants coming."

"The place already looks amazing," he assured her, reaching for her again. "And you look amazing."

Jess dodged his grasp with a laugh. "Tom! I'm all sweaty."

"I like you sweaty," he growled, finally catching her around the waist. His hands slid down to cup her ass through her leggings.

"Stop it," she giggled, even as she responded to his touch. "We don't have time for this."

"We always have time for this." He nuzzled her neck and Jess allowed herself to melt into him.

Then reality intruded. The doorbell chimed.

"Shit," Tom muttered, releasing her reluctantly. "That must be Robert. I didn't think he was that close."

Jess brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear and straightened her top, smoothing the fabric over her curves. "I'll get it. You finish up your work stuff."

Opening the door, Jess blinked in surprise, momentarily taken aback by the figure that filled her doorway. Robert Caldwell stood there wearing a faded blue T-shirt that clung a little too tightly over his belly and jeans that were slightly too baggy hanging low on his hips. He was bigger than she'd imagined, taller than Tom, and wider too. He was bald, and his face, with its stubble, had a rugged quality that showed his fifty-five years plainly.

"Afternoon," Robert greeted with a slight nod. "Jessica, right?"

"Yes, you can call me Jess," she confirmed, offering a bright, professional smile and extending her hand. The moment their palms met, she felt the roughness of his skin, calluses built up from years of manual labor. They were working hands, strong and capable, marking him as someone who spent his days building and fixing rather than typing at a keyboard. "And you must be Robert," she added.

"Call me Bob," he said, stepping past her into the foyer with casual confidence. He didn't waste time with pleasantries or small talk, instead he immediately began to

assess his surroundings. His eyes moved methodically around the space, taking in the details of the house as if he were already planning improvements.

Jess was momentarily caught off-guard by his complete indifference to her presence. Men, especially new acquaintances, usually couldn't help but steal glances or even stare blatantly. They typically got flustered or stumbled over themselves around her, their words becoming awkward, their smiles too eager. It wasn't something she actively sought out, but she couldn't deny the satisfaction it brought her. But Bob barely seemed to notice her at all.

"So, this is the place," he said, turning to face her with an appraising look. His eyes weren't on her but on the crown molding above her head. "You've done a good job with it. Clean. Neat. Could use a few upgrades though."

Jess raised an eyebrow, slightly taken aback by his directness. "Upgrades?"

"Yeah," Bob said, nodding toward the ceiling. His arm extended upward, drawing her attention to the lighting. "See those lights? They're old, gonna start flickering soon. Probably need new wiring. And that door frame over there?" He gestured toward the entrance to one of the bedrooms. "Looks like it's shifted a bit. I could take care of that too, tighten things up. Same with the plumbing. If you've got older pipes, they're gonna need a good looking over. I could take care of all that."

Jess blinked, slightly overwhelmed by the flood of information and his assured manner of delivery. Bob's tone wasn't critical or condescending, just matter of fact, as if he were reading a list of simple tasks. She was used to clients pointing out things they wanted changed when she worked on interior design projects, but this was her home, and his immediate assessment of its flaws made her feel strangely defensive.

"That sounds... helpful," she said, trying to maintain her professional composure. "But why don't I show you the whole apartment first? I'm sure you'll want to see it before making any plans for improvements."

Bob gave a nod, seemingly satisfied with her response. As they moved through the apartment, he scanned each room with that same appraising eye. Jess watched as he moved around the space, running his hand along the walls, checking the door hinges, and even crouching down to look at the baseboards. He was thorough, methodical even. He moved through the space like he was already fixing it in his head.

In the bedroom, Bob gave the bed a little shake, testing its stability. "Gonna need something sturdier than this."

Jess felt her cheeks flush. "I'm sure we can arrange-"

"Hey there!" Tom's voice broke through as he bounded down the stairs. "Bob Caldwell? Tom Marshall. Sorry about earlier."

As the two men shook hands, Jess found herself glancing between them, taking in the stark physical contrast. Tom with his boyish good looks, lean runner's frame, and soft hands stood in sharp contrast against Bob's weathered appearance, broad shoulders, and rough hands. It was like looking at two different species of men, each representing opposite ends of some primal spectrum.

"Nice place you've got," Bob rumbled. "Needs some updates though."

"Oh?" Tom's eyebrows rose. "Like what?"

For the next twenty minutes, Bob led them on a meticulous tour of the apartment, pointing out issues that Tom and Jess had overlooked or hadn't considered significant.

"See these baseboards?" Bob crouched down, running a finger along the edge. "They're starting to separate from the wall. Easy fix, but if you leave it, moisture can get in."

Tom leaned in, intrigued. "I never would have noticed that."

Bob moved to the kitchen, opening and closing cabinet doors. "Hinges are loose here. And here." He pointed to barely visible gaps. "I can tighten those up, maybe replace a few."

In the bathroom, Bob turned on the faucet, watching the water flow. "Pressure's not bad, but I bet I could improve it. Probably some mineral buildup in the pipes.

Tom's eyes widened. "You can do that?"

"Sure," Bob nodded. "It's not complicated if you know what you're doing."

They moved to the electrical panel, where Bob explained the benefits of updating to a more modern system. "It'll be safer, more efficient. Could even save you money on your electric bill."

Throughout the tour, Tom peppered Bob with questions. Jess observed the interaction, noting how Tom was clearly impressed by the older man's breadth of knowledge.

Back in the living room, Bob's eyes swept the room one final time, taking in the details she'd so carefully arranged. "Nice layout. Feels private down here. I like that."

Jess nodded. "Yeah, that's what we were going for. It's got everything you need. Living room, two bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom. It's completely self-contained, so you have your own space."

"You two live upstairs?"

"Yes, that's right. Tom and I live on the second floor," Jess replied, walking over to the sliding glass door that led to the backyard. "You'd have access to the yard and the pool too. It's mostly private." she said, sliding the door open.

Bob followed them out where the pool shimmered under the midday sun. He surveyed the backyard with the same careful attention he'd given the interior, his eyes narrowing as he took in the small luxuries: the pool, the patio, the lounge chairs.

"Looks good," he said, giving her a nod. "Real good. You two did a nice job setting this up."

"Thank you," Jess replied, her tone a little more relaxed now. "Actually, I'm an interior designer, so I put a lot of thought into the space."

Bob raised an eyebrow, looking directly at her. "Interior designer, huh? So you provide the ideas, and I do all the hard work making it happen?"

"Exactly," she replied with a grin.

Bob smirked. "That's the way it's supposed to be. You handle the pretty stuff, and I'll handle the heavy lifting."

As they made their way back inside, Tom turned to Bob. "Do you have any questions, Bob?"

Bob paused for a moment. "I meant to ask, is there laundry?"

"Yes, there is," Jess answered. "It's beside the garage, just a few steps outside the unit. We'd share it, though, since it's the only one in the house."

"That works," Bob replied. "Better than lugging my laundry to a laundromat every weekend."

As they reached the front door, Tom gave Bob a quick smile. "If you think of any questions, feel free to call. We'll be in touch soon."

"Sounds good," Bob replied, shaking hands with the both of them. "Thanks for showing me around."

Once Bob left and the door clicked shut behind him, Tom turned to Jess with a grin and ran a hand through his hair. "What do you think?"

"He's..." Jess searched for the right word. "Intense."

"But helpful, right? All those repairs he mentioned... sounds like he knows what he's doing."

"Tom." She placed a hand on his arm. "Are you sure about this? Having someone like him living downstairs?"

"Someone like him?" Tom's eyes gleamed with something she couldn't quite read. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," she said finally. "Just... he's different from what I expected."

Tom laughed, patting her shoulder reassuringly. "Come on, babe. He's just a harmless old man. Trying to impress us with all that handyman stuff. It's not like he's gonna take over the house or something."

Jess almost laughed at Tom's naivety. "Harmless old man?" Jess thought. There was nothing harmless about Bob. Everything from his broad shoulders to his subtle knowing smirk suggested a man who took what he wanted. The thought made her nervous but she didn't push the subject. Tom saw what he wanted to see. But Bob would be helpful, no doubt about that.

"Yeah, well, we'll talk about it later," she said. "We have other people to consider too."

Tom nodded, though his expression remained thoughtful. "Yeah. I'm going to go make a few more calls, see if any other applicants are worth looking at." He headed back upstairs, leaving Jess alone with her thoughts.

Jess walked back into the apartment, surveying the space one more time. It felt different now, as if Bob's presence had somehow changed it. His assessment of all its flaws had stripped away some of the polish she'd worked so hard to create. She could see what he meant about the lights, the door frame, all the little imperfections she'd overlooked in favor of aesthetics.

The weekend had been a blur of unfamiliar faces and forced smiles as Tom and Jess played host to a seemingly endless parade of potential tenants. Each showing blended into the next, their home invaded by strangers who poked and prodded at every corner. By Sunday evening, they had a stack of applications on their dining room table and the both of them were drained. They still hadn't reached a consensus on their future tenant though Bob's assessment of their home's flaws lingered in both of their minds.

Monday morning arrived with its usual subtle cruelty. Tom's Apple Watch vibrated against his wrist, the gentle buzz pulling him from dreams he couldn't quite remember. Beside him, Jess slept peacefully, wrapped in Egyptian cotton sheets, a splurge from better times.

Her blonde hair spilled across the pillow, and even in sleep she radiated a sensuality that both thrilled and terrified him. The gentle rise and fall of her breasts beneath the thin fabric and the way one leg had escaped the covers to reveal a stretch of tanned

thigh took his breath away. She stirred slightly at his movement but didn't wake, instead shifting to expose more of her flawless skin.

As Tom gazed at Jess's sleeping form, his cock hardened involuntarily. He imagined other men seeing her like this, their eyes roving hungrily over her curves, their hands aching to touch. The image of a faceless stranger's fingers tracing the outline of Jess's nipple through the sheet sent a jolt through his body. The confusing mix of arousal and anxiety coursed through him, his stomach knotting with insecurity even as his cock strained against his boxers.

He had a nagging fear that he wasn't enough for someone of Jess's caliber, that he wasn't truly worthy of such a goddess. What if she realized she could have any man she wanted? It was this very anxiety that propelled Tom out of bed each morning, driving him to work longer hours and push himself harder. He had to prove, both to Jess and to himself, that he deserved to be by her side. With renewed determination, Tom steeled himself for another grueling day at the office, reminding himself that every extra hour, every difficult client, was a step towards securing the life Jess deserved.

With practiced stealth, Tom slipped from their bed, the hardwood floors feeling cool against his feet. He tossed his shirt over the plush oversized armchair in the corner of the room, its burgundy velvet surface already laden with yesterday's discarded outfit, before making his way to the master bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror, he ran his electric shaver over his stubble. A quick three-minute shower followed before he dried off with a fluffy towel. The familiar routine played out as it always did: bathroom, dress, breakfast, departure.

His wardrobe choice was the same predictable business casual attire he wore most days; dark chinos, a button-down shirt, and his signature brown leather oxfords. He could almost hear Jess's playful criticism of his conservative style choices. 'You dress like a congressional intern,' she'd tease, her fingers often toying with one of his shirt buttons. 'Would it kill you to wear something different? Maybe even roll up those sleeves and show off those forearms?' Tom would respond with his usual chuckle and a noncommittal promise to 'think about it,' both of them knowing full well that tomorrow would bring another variation of the same outfit.

The morning commute crawled along Austin's increasingly congested highways while talk radio murmured about tech stocks and housing markets, each word hammering home his financial predicament. Tom's fingers drummed against the leather steering wheel of his Lexus IS, a car that now felt more like a burden than anything.

His mind drifted to the stack of rental applications on their dining room table. The extra two thousand a month would help patch the hole his crypto disaster had torn in their savings, but it felt like an admission of failure, a declaration that he couldn't provide for Jess the way she deserved. Every application was a reminder that their dreams of starting a family were suspended, that the nursery they'd planned was now destined to become a stranger's bedroom.

The office was already buzzing with activity by the time Tom arrived. A chorus of keyboard clicks and phone conversations filled the air as he made his way to his desk, balancing his leather briefcase and a fresh cup of coffee from the break room. He settled into his ergonomic chair, one of the luxuries the company provided.

As a Management Consultant at Davis & Associates, Tom's days were filled with analyzing business processes and streamlining operations. His current project was with Meridian Healthcare, a large regional healthcare provider struggling with outdated systems and inefficient processes. The company was in the midst of a massive transition to a new Enterprise Resource Planning system, a change that would affect every aspect of their operations from patient care to billing.

"Morning, sunshine," a familiar voice called out. "You look like you could use another coffee."

Tom looked up to see Miles, his friend and fellow consultant, leaning against his desk with his characteristic easy smile. Miles was about Tom's age, and they'd been hired around the same time, which had quickly led to a friendship that made the long hours at work more bearable. Where Tom was reserved and analytical, Miles was outgoing and quick with a joke.

"Morning," Tom replied, leaning back in his chair. "Tenant interviews. Ever spend two days watching strangers judge your house while pretending they're not?"

"Sounds like my mother-in-law," Miles chuckled. "Any prospects?"

"A few. Jess and I can't seem to agree on anyone though."

"Women," Miles shook his head exaggeratedly. "They actually care about who lives in their house. Crazy, right?"

"Tell me about it. One guy, this retired tradesman, pointed out everything wrong with the place. Jess wasn't thrilled, but he knows his stuff."

"Speaking of things that need fixing, did you catch the Cowboys game last night? Defense was a mess."

Tom shook his head. "Missed it. I was showing the apartment all weekend."

"Well, you didn't miss much. Just another classic Cowboys choke." Miles leaned against Tom's desk. "Though there was this one play in the fourth-"

Tom's phone buzzed with a meeting reminder. "Meridian call in five. Tell me about their epic failure at lunch?"

"Sure thing, bud. Your treat since you bailed on our watch party."

"Dream on," Tom laughed, already pulling up his meeting notes.

The day started with a series of virtual meetings with Meridian's leadership team, their faces arranged in a grid on Tom's laptop screen as he sat at the conference room table surrounded by his project team. Meridian's CEO, a stern-faced woman in her fifties, Linda Maxwell, praised their latest presentation. "Impressive work, team, but we need faster solutions. Our staff is drowning in paperwork, and patient care is suffering."

As his team fielded questions from Meridian's executives, Tom found himself drawn to the challenge. The complexity of the project, the high stakes, the need to balance speed with accuracy, it all combined to create a puzzle that engaged his analytical mind.

In quiet moments between meetings, Tom's mind wandered to the early days with Jess. They'd met at a party in their college years. He remembered being struck by her confidence, the way she commanded attention without seeking it. She'd worn a simple black dress that night, her blonde hair in a loose bun. She was gesturing animatedly as she talked to her friends across the room. Tom had stood on the periphery, nursing a glass of mediocre wine, until fate, or more precisely, his friend Brandon, had pushed them together.

"Hey," Miles' voice pulled him from his memories. "Earth to Tom. You planning to hibernate at your desk, or are we still on for lunch?"

Tom glanced at his watch, surprised to see that it was already past noon. "Yeah, sorry. Davis wants to see me first, though."

James Davis' office occupied the corner of the building with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a privileged view of downtown Austin. The man himself sat behind his imposing desk, reading glasses perched on his nose as he reviewed their latest project proposals. Davis had been running the consulting firm for over two decades, his reputation for being both brilliant and demanding well-earned.

"Tom," Davis looked up, gesturing to one of the leather chairs across from his desk. "Have a seat. Meridian is impressed with the team's work."

Tom settled into the chair, noting how the leather creaked expensively beneath him. "It's more complicated than we initially anticipated. Their legacy systems are deeply cemented, and the data migration is challenging."

"And that's exactly why they need us," Davis removed his glasses, placing them carefully on his desk. "I've been watching you closely these past months, Tom. Your attention to detail, the way you handle client relationships, it's exactly what we need more of here."

Davis leaned forward. "We're looking to expand our reach. Several companies in California, Colorado, and New York have approached us. They want fast-track implementations like Meridian, and I need someone who can deliver. I'm putting you up for Senior Consultant."

Tom's mind raced with possibilities. The money would help ease their financial strain, possibly even allow them to start the family Jess desperately wanted. But the travel, the hours...

"Before you worry," Davis continued, reading Tom's expression, "this isn't a relocation offer. You'd stay based here in Austin. But there would be travel involved, week-long trips, sometimes two. The compensation bump reflects that commitment."

Tom felt relief wash over him. With a raise, they could rebuild their savings in months instead of years. Maybe they wouldn't even need a tenant for more than a year.

"Thank you, sir," Tom said, unable to contain his smile. "This is... this is exactly what I needed. When do we start?"

Davis returned the smile, clearly pleased with Tom's enthusiasm. "Get through the Meridian implementation first. Show me what you can do there, and we'll fast-track everything else."

"I won't let you down, Mr. Davis."

"I know you won't, Tom. That's why you're getting this opportunity."

As Tom walked back to his desk, his steps felt lighter than they had in months. Finally, a real chance to fix everything.

The walk to Whole Foods with Miles provided a welcome break from the office's recycled air. Austin's summer heat hit them like a wall as they stepped outside. "Jesus Christ," Miles groaned, dramatically wiping his forehead. "I swear, one of these days I'm going to melt into a puddle of sweat and overpriced cologne. They'll have to scrape me off the sidewalk with a spatula."

Tom chuckled. "Maybe then you'd finally lose those love handles you've been complaining about."

"Hey now," Miles patted his stomach. "These aren't love handles. They're tactical fat reserves for when the apocalypse hits and we're all fighting over the last Twinkie."

Tom laughed. "Keep telling yourself that."

Miles's expression turned slightly more serious as they crossed the street. "So what's the story with Meridian?"

"Their current systems are a mess," Tom replied as they entered Whole Foods' blessed air conditioning. "Decades-old software, incompatible databases, paper records in some departments. We're basically rebuilding their entire infrastructure while they're still trying to run a hospital."

They grabbed chicken salads and joined the lunch crowd of tech workers and yoga enthusiasts. "The CEO's desperate," Tom continued. "Patient care is suffering, billing is a nightmare, and staff morale is low. We're racing against the clock to get the new ERP system up and running before things fall apart."

"Sounds like a clusterfuck," Miles said between bites. "How's the team handling it?"

"Dani's about ready to quit. The client keeps changing requirements mid-sprint, and Kevin's working weekends just to keep up with documentation."

Miles leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Word is Davis is eyeing you for Senior Consultant over this project. That true?"

Tom stabbed a cherry tomato with his fork. "Maybe. He mentioned something about it today."

"But?" Miles prodded, knowing his friend well enough to hear the hesitation.

"But it means more travel. Longer hours." Tom sighed. "Jess and I... we're trying to start a family. Or we were, before the crypto thing."

"Ah." Miles nodded knowingly. "The famous Marshall crypto disaster. How's she handling that these days?"

"Still comes up whenever we discuss finances." Tom stabbed at his salad. "We're renting out our unit to help cover the mortgage."

"Damn. That's rough." Miles paused. "Though I gotta say, if I had a wife who looked like Jess, I'd be working every angle too. No offense, but she's way out of your league, buddy."

Tom forced a laugh, but Miles's words hit too close to his private fears. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Hey, I just call it like I see it. Remember that Christmas party where she wore that red dress? She looked like a god damn supermodel. Half the office couldn't string two words together."

The rest of lunch passed with lighter conversation about safer topics like sports scores and office gossip, but Miles's casual observation about Jess lingered in Tom's mind long after they returned to the office.

Back at his desk, Tom pulled out his phone, his thumb hovering over the screen for a moment before typing out a quick message to Jess: "Need to decide on the tenant tonight. Love you."

The three dots quickly appeared before her response came through: "Love you too. Come home early?"

Tom glanced at his calendar, at the meetings he could probably reschedule. "I'll try," he promised, and he meant it.

Tom found himself struggling to focus on the afternoon's tasks. He opened his browser and pulled up their online banking statement, a habit he'd developed since the crypto investment went south. Gone were the spontaneous weekend getaways, the fancy dinners where Jess would order whatever caught her eye, the casual shopping trips where she'd model outfits for him at Nordstrom. Now every purchase required careful consideration. He clicked through their monthly expenses, wincing at each automatic withdrawal. The mortgage payment loomed largest, followed by both car payments, his Lexus and her Tesla, symbols of their former prosperity that now felt like golden handcuffs. Their lifestyle, while modest by Austin's tech crowd standards, had been built on the assumption of continued growth, not sudden loss.

The crypto disaster hadn't just been about losing money. It had been about losing Jess's trust. He remembered the night he'd finally told her, how she'd sat perfectly still on their couch, her face blank as he explained how their savings had evaporated. She hadn't yelled or cried. Instead, she'd simply asked, "Why didn't you talk to me first?" That question had hung between them ever since.

The memory of her expression that night still haunted him. It was the way her usual warmth had frozen over, how her body had subtly shifted away from his reaching hand. It was the first time he'd seen her look at him with something close to contempt, as if suddenly realizing that he wasn't the man she thought she'd married. In that moment, he'd felt the ground shift beneath their marriage, creating hairline fractures that still hadn't fully healed. Their dreams of starting a family, of moving to a bigger

house, of Jess finally opening her own interior design studio, all of it suspended in limbo because he'd gambled their future without consulting her.

Tom found himself checking the time more frequently, his mind drifting to Jess at home. At five o'clock, he began packing his things, his movements hurried yet precise, like a man trying not to seem too eager to escape.

The drive home was unusually quick, traffic cooperative for once. As he pulled into their driveway, warm golden light spilled from the upstairs windows, promising comfort.

He sat in his car for a moment, studying the home they'd bought with such optimism three years ago. Back then, they'd spent weekends choosing paint colors and arguing playfully about furniture placement. They'd christened every room with passionate lovemaking, marking their territory like newlyweds drunk on possibility. Now the bottom floor loomed dark and empty, waiting for a stranger to claim it. Taking a deep breath, Tom grabbed his briefcase and headed toward the front door.

An hour later they were finally sitting down to decide on a tenant. With the move-in date set for the coming weekend, postponing wasn't an option anymore.

The dining room's pendant light cast a warm glow across the crystal wine glasses they'd received as wedding presents, unused except for these makeshift business meetings they now called dinner. Jess pushed a piece of chicken around her plate, her movements distracted. The food was getting cold, but her appetite had disappeared somewhere between reviewing applications and watching the increasingly exhausted expression on Tom's face.

Across the table, Tom was hunched over his laptop, his fingers flying across the keyboard as he responded to work emails. The blue light from the screen cast harsh shadows across his face, deepening the circles under his eyes. Beside the laptop lay a stack of tenant applications, which he glanced at intermittently.

Their eyes met across the table as Tom reached for his wine glass. For a brief moment, Jess saw a flicker of the playful man who used to steal her phone during dinner just to make her pay attention to him. She opened her mouth to remind him of that habit, but his laptop chimed with another notification, and the moment evaporated.

"The chicken's going to turn to rubber if you keep pushing it around like that," Tom said, his eyes flicking between his screen and her plate.

Jess managed a small laugh. "Sorry. Just thinking."

"About?"

"About us," she said. "About how different things are now."

Tom's fingers paused over the keyboard and he looked up at her. "Different how?"

"Remember when we used to actually talk during dinner? Not about bills or work or tenants, but about... anything else?" She set down her fork, the metal clicking against the ceramic plate. "When was the last time we just sat and enjoyed a meal together without your laptop as a third wheel?"

Tom partially closed his laptop screen, as if making a concession to her need for connection. "Babe, I know things have been tough lately. But once we get a tenant, it'll help with the financial pressure. We'll have more breathing room."

It wasn't his fault, she reminded herself. They were working towards something bigger, a dream of a secure life, a beautiful house, maybe even starting a family soon. Jess knew that Tom wanted all those things, too, and his constant work was proof that he was committed to that dream. But when had they gotten so serious? She couldn't remember the last time they'd shared a genuine laugh over dinner, just the two of them.

Her heart also ached at the thought of children. At twenty-seven, Jess felt like she was in her prime. She was healthy, strong, and at the perfect age for motherhood. This space was meant for their family, a place for dreams and future memories, not a solution to their debt problems. It was a bitter pill to swallow, this feeling of being trapped by circumstance.

Jess nodded, her eyes drifting to the stack of applications. "Speaking of tenants, we should probably go through these."

"Right," Tom said, pulling the stack closer. He picked up the first application. "Okay, so we've got Alexis Baker. Thirty-eight, works as a nurse."

Jess leaned forward, interested. "A nurse could be good. Stable job, probably keeps regular hours."

Tom nodded, but his brow furrowed as he read further. "Says here she works night shifts, though. That could mean she'd be coming and going at odd hours. Might be disruptive."

"I hadn't thought of that," Jess admitted. She took a sip of her wine, considering. "Who's next?"

Tom set the application aside and picked up another. "Mark and Lisa Tanner. Both thirty-two, no kids. He's an accountant, she's a teacher."

"They seemed nice when we met them," Jess said, remembering the couple's visit. "Very polite, asked good questions about the neighborhood."

"True," Tom agreed, "but remember how they mentioned wanting to start a family soon? If they have a newborn baby, that's going to mean a lot more noise. And they might want to move to a bigger place sooner than we'd like."

Jess sighed, realizing he had a point. She reached for another application. "What about this one? Toby Ortiz?"

Tom glanced at his laptop screen, then back to the application. "Right, the grad student. Twenty-five, studying engineering."

"He was very enthusiastic about the place," Jess recalled. "Said he loved how close it was to campus."

"Yeah, but grad students aren't known for their financial stability," Tom pointed out. "And his lease would only be for the academic year. We'd be back to square one in a few months."

As they continued to discuss the applicants, Tom's attention kept drifting back to his laptop. He'd pause mid-sentence to type out a quick reply or check an incoming notification. Jess found herself growing increasingly frustrated, both with the tenant options and with Tom's divided attention.

"What about Jason and Claire?" Jess asked, remembering the young couple. "They seemed nice. Young, friendly. They reminded me a bit of us when we first moved in together." She smiled at the memory.

Tom glanced up from his screen. "Nice, sure," he said. "But they also mentioned they had a dog. That's gonna be a problem with the hardwood floors downstairs. Plus, I got the sense they were looking for something more temporary. They seemed like the kind of people who'd break the lease early if they found something better."

"You don't know that for sure," Jess countered. "Sometimes young doesn't mean unreliable."

"No, but it often means unpredictable. We can't afford unpredictable right now, Jess." Tom's attention was pulled back to his laptop as a new notification pinged.

Jess frowned, watching as Tom's focus shifted once again to his work. "What about that photographer?" she asked, trying to pull Tom back to the task at hand. "The one who wanted to use the space as a studio?"

Tom looked up. "Oh, right. Yeah, I'm not comfortable with strangers coming in and out all the time. It's supposed to be a rental, not a business."

"The portfolio he showed us was beautiful though," Jess said, remembering the striking black and white portraits. "Very artistic."

"Beautiful doesn't pay the mortgage," Tom replied, then winced at his own tone. "Sorry, that came out harsh. I just mean we need something stable." He turned back to his laptop, frowning at something on the screen.

Jess sighed, pushing her plate away. "So who does that leave us with?"

Tom's eyes softened as he looked up at her from the screen, and she caught a glimpse of the man she'd fallen in love with, the one who used to look at her like she was the only person in the room. "Honestly, Bob seems like the best option. He's older, so he's probably not going to be throwing any wild parties or anything. He looks like the type to go to bed at nine and wake up at five. Plus, he can fix things around the house. That alone could save us some money in the long run."

Jess bit her lip, contemplating his words. Her mind flashed back to Bob's large, rough hands gripping hers when they first met. He wasn't like Tom. There was nothing polished about him, nothing smooth or carefully maintained. Everything about him was raw and unrefined, from his calloused palms to his direct gaze that seemed to cut through all pretenses.

"I don't know," she said slowly, tracing the rim of her wine glass. "He's a bit... intense. Did you notice how he kept talking about all the changes he wanted to make? It's like he was already planning to move in before we'd even decided."

Tom shrugged, finally setting the laptop aside and taking a bite of his now-cold food. "Maybe, but I don't think we can afford to be picky right now. We need the extra income, babe. The bills aren't going anywhere, and with the interest rates going up..." He trailed off, but the implication was clear.

The weight of their financial situation pressed down on her again; increased mortgage payments, car payments, credit card bills that seemed to grow no matter how much they paid off each month, and the lack of savings for their future child. Tom was right. They couldn't afford to wait. They needed the money, and Bob was offering more than just rent. His skills as a handyman could help them in the long term.

"Okay," she said finally, her voice quiet but firm. "Let's go with Bob."

Tom gave her a small, relieved smile, reaching out to squeeze her hand across the table. His palm was warm against hers, and for a moment, she wanted to hold on, to pull him closer. "Good call, babe. This will help us out a lot. I'll call him tomorrow and let him know."

Jess returned the smile. She let her fingers linger in Tom's for a moment before pulling away. The decision was made, but as she looked around their dining room, at the carefully chosen decor and the life they'd built together, she couldn't shake the feeling that they were about to invite something unpredictable into their ordered world.

"I should probably clean up," she said, standing and gathering their plates. The sound of ceramic clicking against ceramic filled the silence that had settled between them once again.

"I'll help," Tom offered, but she waved him off, knowing he needed to return to his endless stream of emails.

"No, you finish your work. I know they're waiting." She moved toward the kitchen, leaving him with his laptop, the blue glow once again illuminating his features.

After cleanup, they settled into their evening routines. Tom disappeared into his home office, the glow of his monitors spilling into the hallway.

In the master bathroom, she took her time with her evening routine. She could hear his muffled voice through the wall as she moisturized her face, catching fragments of "project timeline" and "implementation schedule." In their early days, he would have joined her, sitting on the edge of the tub and telling her about his day while she went through her skincare routine. Now the bathroom felt too large, too empty.

Afterwards, she curled up in bed with her iPad, scrolling through interior design blogs while half-watching a Netflix show.

Around midnight, Tom finally emerged from his office, his shirt wrinkled and hair messy from running his fingers through it in frustration. Their eyes met across the room, another moment of wordless communication. She understood his apologetic look and he read the forgiveness in her slight smile.

In bed, Tom reached for her, his hand finding hers in the darkness. The gesture spoke volumes, apology, love, reassurance all wrapped in a simple touch.

"Night, babe," he murmured, already drifting off.

"Night," she whispered back, listening as his breathing evened out into sleep.

Later that week, Jess woke up to an empty bed, the sheets still slightly warm where Tom had slept beside her. As usual, he was gone by the time she got up, his morning routine starting before hers. She stretched lazily, her silk pajama top riding up slightly to reveal a strip of toned midriff, a testament to her dedication to staying fit through

a mix of hot yoga, Pilates, and strength training. She then opened the curtains to let the sunlight brighten up their master bedroom.

The master bathroom became her stage as Jess prepared for the day ahead. Steam from her shower lingered in the air, fogging the mirrors as she went through her morning routine. She had mastered the art of looking effortlessly put-together, a skill that served her well in an industry where appearance and confidence went hand in hand.

After the shower, she walked across the plush carpet to their walk-in closet, a space that had been one of the main selling points when they bought the house.

As she opened the doors, the automatic lights flickered on, illuminating a treasure trove of fashion. Rows of designer clothes told the story of her evolution from college graduate to successful professional. One section had her power clothes, consisting of tailored suits and silk blouses that commanded respect in client meetings. Another had her more casual wear for site visits and weekend brunches with Madi. Jess ran her fingers along the fabrics, enjoying the different textures like the slip of silk, the weight of wool, the softness of cashmere.

At the back of the closet, behind a frosted glass door, lay her lingerie collection. Delicate pieces from La Perla and Agent Provocateur that Tom had gifted her hung alongside racier pieces she'd bought herself. There were lacy bras in jewel tones, sheer teddies, garter belts, and thongs that were more string than fabric, all reminders of a more adventurous time. These days, the practical nude bras and cotton panties in the drawer below got more regular use.

Today, Jess chose a matching set of black lace underwear. Even if no one else saw it, wearing something sexy underneath her work clothes always gave her an extra boost of confidence. She then chose her outfit with deliberate care, going with a cream silk blouse that had a neckline revealing just enough to be professional yet intriguing. She paired it with tailored charcoal trousers that clung to her ass in a way that made her feel powerful. She added a few accessories that were simple yet elegant: a delicate necklace drawing attention to her collarbone, small hoop earrings that caught the light, and of course her wedding ring.

She tousled her blonde hair, giving it that mix of purposeful and effortless, and then gave herself one last check in the mirror. Her mother's voice echoed in her head: "Dress for the clients you want, not the ones you have." The woman in the mirror looked back at her with knowing eyes, a creature of carefully crafted allure wrapped in a veneer of professional polish. Yet beneath that polished exterior lurked something wilder, something that had been sleeping too long.

She looked at the clock. There was definitely enough time to meet Madi for their standing coffee date.

Flexibility was one of the things she loved about her work as an interior designer. She could work from home or at the office, or drive around the city for client meetings and site visits. The creative freedom of her job was something Jess cherished, especially now when everything else felt so constrained. It contrasted sharply with the rigid, exhausting demands of Tom's work schedule.

The drive gave Jess time to think, the seats of her Tesla Model 3 cradling her shapely ass as she navigated through Austin's morning traffic.

The familiar scent of coffee and fresh pastries enveloped Jess as she entered Café Luna, spotting Madi already settled at their usual corner table. Her friend exuded the confident sexuality of a woman who knew exactly what she wanted, who took pleasure without apology. Watching Madi's uninhibited sensuality made Jess increasingly aware of how much of herself she'd locked away in pursuit of being the perfect wife.

"There's my gorgeous girl," Madi called out with a smile. She wore a white top that emphasized her tanned skin and designer jeans that probably cost more than most people's monthly rent. Madi's entire outfit screamed 'look at me' and Jess found herself doing just that.

As Jess settled into her chair across from Madi, a young barista approached their table, his eyes widening slightly as he took in the sight of the two beautiful women. His name tag read "Alex", and Jess could practically feel the heat of his gaze as it lingered on her silk blouse.

"Welcome back ladies," he managed, his voice cracking slightly. "The usual?"

Madi's smirk spoke volumes as she watched his gaze drift back to Jess. "Please," she purred. "Oat milk latte for me."

"Just black coffee," Jess added, pretending not to notice his attention towards her.

"Coming right up," he stammered, nearly tripping over his own feet as he retreated to the safety of the counter.

Both women watched him go, Madi openly admiring the way his ass filled out his uniform pants. "I swear," Madi giggled once Alex was out of earshot, "if that boy stared any harder at your tits, he might have burned a hole through your blouse. Not that I can blame him."

Jess felt her cheeks warm. "Madi!" she hissed, rolling her eyes, glancing around to make sure no one had overheard.

Madi smiled and leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with that familiar conspiratorial gleam. "So," she began. "How's life in landlord land? Did you guys pick a tenant yet?"

Jess nodded, unconsciously biting her lower lip as she thought about their new tenant. "Yeah, we did. His name's Bob. He's an older guy, twice divorced, a retired contractor. He's moving in this weekend." She tried to keep her tone neutral, but something in her voice must have given her away.

Madi raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow, her smile widening as if she'd just heard something juicy. "Older guy? Divorcee? Sounds like a plot twist waiting to happen." She wiggled her eyebrows playfully, clearly enjoying the idea of some drama unfolding. "Please tell me he's a silver fox. You know, like that actor in that movie we watched last month. What was his name? The one with the salt and pepper beard?"

Jess laughed, shaking her head in amusement. "Oh, stop. You've been watching too many of those streaming shows. He's not quite the 'silver fox' type. He's more... rough around the edges, but he's going to help us with repairs. Tom thinks he's the best option. You know, someone who can help fix things up without charging us for every little repair."

"Ooh, rough around the edges?" Madi leaned forward, her smile mischievous. "The good kind or the 'call the cops' kind?"

Jess laughed again. "It's not like that. He's just... direct. Confident. The way he walked through our house, pointing out everything that needed fixing... it was like he already owned the place."

"Sounds like someone needs to remind him who the landlady is," Madi teased, but her expression grew serious as she studied Jess's face.

The conversation paused as Alex returned, balancing their drinks on a black tray. His movements were careful, but his eyes still couldn't help but wander back to Jess's blouse as he placed their orders on the table. "Can I get you ladies anything else?" he asked.

"We're good, thanks Alex," Madi purred, her smile making the young barista blush deeper before he retreated. She watched him go with amused eyes before turning back to Jess. "That poor boy. You really should be more careful with those blouses of yours. I swear he almost spilled our drinks when you moved."

Jess rolled her eyes, though a small smile played at the corners of her mouth. The power she held over men like Alex both thrilled and unsettled her lately. She couldn't remember the last time Tom's gaze lingered on her like that.

"So, what's really bothering you? Come on, spill. What's going on in that pretty head of yours?"

Jess hesitated, her fingers still playing with the spoon in her cup. The ceramic clinked softly against the sides as she stirred, creating a tiny whirlpool in her coffee. "I'm just... I don't know. Things have been weird lately. With Tom, I mean." She could feel her chest tighten as she admitted it, the words feeling somehow more real now that they were spoken aloud. Talking about her marriage in anything less than glowing terms wasn't something she did lightly. But if there was anyone she could be honest with, it was Madi.

Madi's expression softened instantly, her playful demeanor giving way to genuine concern. She reached across the table, her manicured fingers wrapping around Jess's wrist. "Weird how?" she asked gently, giving Jess her full attention. The background noise of the café seemed to fade away as Madi fixed her with that understanding look that had gotten Jess through countless crises over the years.

Jess sighed, glancing out the café window as she gathered her thoughts. Outside, people rushed by with their morning commutes, wrapped up in their own lives and problems. "Things with Tom are... different," Jess said, still stirring her coffee. "Remember how we used to have sex everywhere in the house? Now he barely looks up from his laptop." She smiled wryly. "Though I caught him checking me out in the shower last week. He actually dropped his phone when I 'accidentally' dropped my loofah, so there's hope."

"Oh? Do tell."

"Nothing happened. He had a meeting." Jess laughed. "But at least I know he still notices." Jess adjusted her blouse, remembering how the young barista's eyes had lingered. "You know what's weird? I kind of miss how possessive Tom used to be. Remember that time at Brandon's party when that guy wouldn't stop hitting on me? Tom practically dragged me to the bathroom and bent me over the sink."

"I could hear you moaning through the door! Brandon still brings it up sometimes, you know. Says it was the hottest thing he's ever heard."

Jess felt her cheeks flush. "He does not!"

"Oh honey, he absolutely does. Usually late at night after a few drinks," Madi winked. "Speaking of Brandon, have you noticed how he looks at you? Like he's imagining recreating that bathroom scene himself."

"Madi!" Jess hissed, but she couldn't help but laugh. "You're terrible. Besides, I thought that whole thing with you and Brandon was over."

"Oh sweetie," Madi leaned forward with a flirty smile. "It's never really over with Brandon. Trust me, I know. That man is like fine wine, gets better with age. And that cock of his..." She bit her lip. "It's just pure pleasure. God, the way he'd stretch me out...

I still have dreams about it. And don't even get me started on what he can do with his tongue. Best sex of my life, hands down."

"Oh my god, Madi!" Jess felt her face grow hot, remembering all the explicit details Madi had shared about her encounters with Brandon over the years. It wasn't the first time Madi had raved about Brandon's sexual prowess, and each time the stories seemed to get more detailed.

"I'm just saying, maybe Tom needs a little competition to wake him up. Remember how crazy it used to drive him when guys would hit on you?" Madi's eyes gleamed. "And now you've got this rough handyman moving in downstairs... plus Brandon always sniffing around..."

"Stop it," Jess giggled. "Besides, Tom's just stressed with work."

"Then unstress him! Send him some naughty pictures during those boring meetings of his. Wear that red lingerie set I made you buy."

"The one that's basically just strings?"

"That's the one! Trust me, one peek at you in that and his laptop won't stand a chance."

Jess's smile faded slightly as she traced the rim of her coffee cup. "I shouldn't have to try so hard though, you know? It used to be effortless between us."

"What changed?"

"Life, I guess. Work. Bills. The crypto thing." Jess shrugged. "Though lately... I don't know. Something's shifting. Remember how Tom used to surprise me with little things?" she continued. "Weekend trips, random flowers, even just bringing home my favorite takeout when I had a rough day? Now it's all about work and bills and being responsible. I get it, we're adults, but..." She trailed off, not sure how to finish the thought.

Madi tilted her head, her brow furrowing as she processed Jess's words. "That's tough," she said, her voice filled with empathy. "But that happens in relationships, you know? The whole drifting apart thing. You two have been through a lot. It doesn't mean it's broken, but it sounds like you two need to find your spark again. When was the last time you two did something just for fun? And I mean real fun, not Netflix and chill on the couch."

Jess nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I've thought about that. I want to try, but everything else feels like it's getting in the way. The money, the bills, and now with Bob moving in, it feels like there's even less space for Tom and me. Like we're constantly having to deal with things instead of focusing on us". She paused,

biting her lower lip. "And honestly? Sometimes I wonder if Tom even notices that anything's wrong."

Madi sipped her coffee thoughtfully before leaning forward, a sympathetic look in her eyes. "Have you talked to him about it? Like, really talked. Not just hinting at things, but actually telling him what you're feeling? Men can be dense sometimes; they need things spelled out." She smirked. "Trust me, I've had to draw diagrams for some of the guys I've dated."

Jess shook her head, a smile playing on her lips despite the seriousness of the conversation. "Not really," she admitted. "He's just so stressed with work. He's working more hours than ever, and when he's home, he's either on his laptop or too tired to do anything. I don't want to add to his stress. And besides, I don't even know what to say. I can't exactly explain what's wrong because I'm not sure myself. How do you tell someone you miss them when they're right there?"

"Jess, you have to talk to him," Madi insisted. "If something's bothering you, he needs to know. Otherwise, it's just going to keep building up, and before you know it, there's this huge wall between you two. Trust me, I've seen it happen too many times. Remember Lisa and Mike?"

Jess nodded, remembering their friends' messy divorce last year. The thought sent a chill down her spine. She knew Madi was right, but the idea of bringing it up with Tom filled her with dread. How could she tell him that she was feeling restless, that she craved something more, without making him feel like he wasn't enough? She didn't want to hurt him, but she also couldn't deny that something had changed between them.

Before Jess could respond, her phone buzzed, reminding her of the time. It was a notification for her big meeting. "You're right Madi. But anyways, I've got to run today," she said, gathering her things. "I have a big meeting today at 11."

Madi finished her drink and stood, pulling Jess in for a quick hug. "Well, go crush your meeting. And Jess?" She pulled back, holding Jess by the shoulders and looking her in the eye. "Don't keep everything bottled up. Remember, walls don't just keep people out. Sometimes, they keep you locked in, too... well unless they're walls you're being pressed against by your lover."

Jess laughed and nodded, hugging Madi tightly, grateful for her friend's wisdom. As she walked to her car, Madi's advice echoed in her mind. Talk to Tom. It sounded so simple, but it felt like the hardest thing in the world right now.

Jess's Tesla Model 3 cut through Austin's late morning traffic as she headed towards the office. Café Luna had been a good start to her morning, and the warmth of Madi's company still lingered, but it was her friend's suggestive words about sending Tom naughty pictures that now captured her thoughts. She hadn't done anything like that in years, not since her brief modeling career when the intoxicating thrill of being desired had consumed her every waking moment.

It wasn't until that photoshoot with Georgio that she truly understood the power she wielded. His studio had been intimate, professional, the lighting equipment creating pools of warmth in the otherwise cool space. "Arch your back more," he'd instructed, his Italian accent thick. His voice was professional yet commanding. "Let the fabric pull across your breasts... yes, like that." The white set had been simple, a cotton bralette that cupped her full breasts and matching bikini underwear that rode high on her hips.

She remembered how Georgio had approached with the spray bottle. The first spray of cold water had made her gasp, her nipples hardening instantly against the thin fabric. She'd watched, transfixed, as the cotton transformed from opaque to nearly transparent, clinging to every curve and valley of her body. Each additional spray had been strategic and calculated, turning the innocent white cotton into something far more provocative. "Perfecto," he'd murmured. "Now look at me like you're keeping a delicious secret, bella."

She'd moved instinctively, each pose more daring than the last. When he'd suggested she hook her thumbs into the waistband of her underwear, teasing at what lay beneath, she'd felt a surge of power. The final shots had been masterful, some innocent enough for the boutique's spring campaign, others far too provocative for public consumption. Georgio had given her the entire collection. They still lived in a hidden folder on her laptop, protected by a password that only she knew, digital proof of the wild creature that lived beneath her polished exterior.

Her phone chimed, drawing her gaze to the console. Tom's name appeared on the screen with a message: "Good luck with your big presentation! I'm heading into back-to-back meetings till 2. Love you."

A smile tugged at her lips. Jess hit the voice to text button and dictated her reply. "Thanks! Good luck with the meetings. Heading to the office now. Love you too."

The Austin Design Group's offices occupied the entire thirty-fourth floor of a modern glass and steel tower. Jess's heels clicked against the polished marble floors as she made her way past the open-plan workspace where junior designers huddled over their drafting tables and computer screens.

With her conversation with Madi still echoing in her head, Jess slipped into the executive bathroom, grateful that the space was empty. The bathroom was luxurious, with marble countertops and soft lighting that made everyone look like they were glowing. A full-length mirror covered one wall; its pristine surface perfect for what she had in mind. Her heart raced with excitement as she checked that the door was locked. Standing before the full-length mirror, she slowly unbuttoned her silk blouse, Madi's words about "waking Tom up" fueling her boldness.

The first photo captured her reflection as she let the blouse fall completely open, exposing her entire black lace bra, her hand sliding up to squeeze her breast through the delicate fabric while her other hand held the phone. Her lips were parted, eyes heavy with desire.

For the second shot, she unclasped her bra, letting it hang loose. She cupped her bare breasts, nipples hard and visible between her fingers as she arched her back. The silk blouse framed her exposed chest perfectly.

For the third, she hesitated only a moment before turning her back to the mirror. Holding the phone up to block her face, she slowly slid her tailored trousers down past the curve of her ass. The black lace panties hugged every curve, the material disappearing between her cheeks. She arched her back, making her ass look even more spectacular. The photo was pure sex, black lace against tanned skin, and that magnificent ass on display.

"Missing you," she typed, sending all three in quick succession. She imagined Tom opening them during his meeting, having to shift in his seat to hide his throbbing erection as he stared at his phone under the conference table.

Jess quickly pulled her trousers back up and rebuttoned her blouse, smoothing the silk back into place. Her cheeks were flushed as she checked her appearance one final time, making sure every button was properly fastened.

Back at her desk in the open office area, she tried to focus on her upcoming presentation while sneaking glances at her phone, wondering if Tom had seen the photos yet. The thrill of what she'd just done made it hard to concentrate on the mock-ups spread across her workspace.

Her desk phone rang with the distinctive double chime of the front desk line. "Jessica speaking."

"The Skyline team just arrived," Caroline chirped from reception, her voice carrying that wide eyed enthusiasm of a twenty-two-year-old college senior still dreaming of her own design career. "They're in the lobby. Chris Webb is with them." Caroline had

only been with the firm for three months, but her bubbly personality and eagerness to please had already made her a favorite among clients.

"Have them settled in the main conference room. Tell them we'll be there in five. And let Sam and Annie know I'll meet them in the small conference room right away."

"On it," Caroline replied, her youth and energy radiating through the phone.

Jess remembered when she'd been that young and earnest, that eager to please. Jess stood and took a deep breath, her nipples still hard against the lace of her bra from taking those photos.

The Skyline Austin project could make her career. Forty stories of luxury overlooking a lake, and she'd spent weeks perfecting the interior concepts for the penthouse units.

She adjusted her blouse, ensuring it revealed just enough to command attention without crossing any lines. Her mother's voice echoed in her head: "Men make decisions with their eyes first, their wallets second, and their brains last." She'd learned during her modeling days that a carefully calculated appearance could be as powerful as any business strategy.

Jess gathered her presentation materials and headed to the small conference room. Sam and Annie were already there, their nervous energy palpable. "Alright, team," Jess said as she entered, her confidence infectious. "Let's do this."

The conference room buzzed with anticipation as they entered. Chris Webb, the developer behind Skyline Austin, sat at the head of the table, his presence commanding attention without effort. At forty-eight, he embodied success with every gesture, his custom suit and quiet confidence speaking of wealth earned rather than inherited. His eyes, sharp and appraising, swept over Jess.

Margaret DeVore, the Austin Design Group's Executive Design Director and Jess' mentor, watched from her seat with keen interest.

"Ms. Marshall," Chris greeted her warmly. "We're excited to see your team's vision for our penthouses."

Jess felt her nervousness transform into something else, that familiar thrill of having all eyes on her, of knowing she could capture and hold their attention. "Likewise," she smiled, letting her natural confidence shine through. "Let's get started."

For the next hour, Jess and her team commanded the room. Their presentation flowed seamlessly as they walked the Skyline team through each concept. Sam's emphasis on sustainable materials clearly resonated, while Annie's passion for eco friendly design was infectious.

"The master suite," Jess explained, pulling up the rendering, "features floor to ceiling windows with automated privacy glass. We've created a seamless transition between the bedroom and the ensuite, using marble and custom millwork to frame the views of the city."

The board members leaned forward in their chairs, clearly impressed. By the time they had finished, Chris Webb's usually stoic expression had softened into approval.

"Exceptional work, Ms. Marshall, Mr. Thompson, Ms. Davis," Chris said, standing to shake each of their hands in turn. "This is exactly what we envisioned. We'd absolutely love to work with your team on this project."

Jess felt the glow of accomplishment wash over her. "Thank you," she said, her voice steady despite the flutter in her stomach. "We're thrilled to be a part of it."

As they filed out of the conference room, Jess couldn't help but feel a sense of triumph. They'd nailed the presentation, secured a major project.

Minutes later in the small conference room, the team gathered with Margaret DeVore. "Well done, all of you," Margaret said. "Especially you, Jessica. You commanded that room like a seasoned pro."

Jess felt a flush of pride at Margaret's words. She'd always looked up to the older woman, seeing in her a glimpse of what her own future could hold. "Thank you, Margaret. We couldn't have done it without Sam and Annie's contributions."

Margaret nodded, her sharp eyes taking in each member of the team. "Sam, your emphasis on sustainable materials was spot on. The board was eating it up. And Annie, your passion for eco friendly design is infectious. Keep that fire burning."

Sam straightened his tie, a pleased smile playing on his lips. "Thank you, Ms. DeVore. I've been researching cutting edge sustainable materials for months. It's good to see it pay off."

Annie, still flushed with the excitement of her first major presentation, nodded eagerly. "I'm just thrilled they were receptive to the green initiatives. Do you think we could push for even more eco friendly elements in the final design?"

Margaret chuckled. "Easy there, tiger. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. But I like your enthusiasm. It reminds me of Jessica when she first started here."

Jess remembered those early days, how Margaret had taken her under her wing, guiding her through the world of high-end design.

"Now," Margaret continued, her tone shifting to something more serious, "let's talk about next steps. Chris Webb isn't an easy man to impress, but you've managed it. That means expectations are going to be sky high moving forward."

The room sobered quickly, the gravity of the situation settling over them. For the next hour, they dissected the presentation, Margaret offering insights and strategies that only years of experience could provide.

Back at her desk, the adrenaline of the presentation still coursed through Jess's veins. She picked up her phone, a thrill running through her as she saw Tom's message: "Jesus, Jess. You're killing me here. Almost had to excuse myself from a meeting. How'd your presentation go?"

Jess bit her lip and her fingers flew across the keyboard: "It went great. Nailed the Skyline pitch. We should celebrate tonight. I miss you." She hesitated, her thumb hovering over the send button, before adding: "Feel like we haven't really talked lately."

Tom's response didn't come for nearly an hour: "That's amazing babe! So proud of you. Swamped with the Meridian implementation today. Lots of fires to put out. Rain check on celebrating? Promise we'll do something special this weekend after Bob moves in. Love you"

Jess spent the rest of her afternoon fine tuning the Skyline designs. Caroline kept her fueled with coffee, and by the time five o'clock rolled around, Jess felt the satisfying exhaustion that came with a productive day.

The drive home gave her time to think, but her thoughts refused to organize themselves into anything coherent. She wasn't unhappy, far from it, but something about the way she and Tom had been moving through their days felt off, like they were partners in a dance whose rhythms had somehow gotten out of sync.

Jess sat in her car for a moment, staring at their beautiful house with its soon to be occupied downstairs unit. Everything in their life looked perfect from the outside. They were an attractive young couple living the dream with successful careers and a lovely home. So why did she feel like something was missing?

Once inside, Jess kicked her high heels off by the door and rolled her neck to release the tensions from a long workday. Her silk blouse clung to her skin from the Austin heat, so she started unbuttoning it as she made her way up the stairs. In their bedroom she let it slip from her shoulders to reveal the black lace bra beneath. She tossed the blouse onto the plush velvet armchair in the corner and then moved to the kitchen, her bare feet silent against the hardwood floors.

She poured herself a generous glass of Cabernet, watching the deep red liquid flow out of the bottle. Taking a long sip, she let the wine roll across her tongue, savoring it. She heard the front door open and then footsteps as Tom walked upstairs.

Jess took another sip of wine as Tom appeared in the doorway, his tie loosened and sleeves rolled up. His eyes immediately locked onto her exposed skin, drinking in the sight of her standing there in just her black lace bra and tailored pants.

"Well hello," he said. His gaze traced the swell of her breasts, lingering on where the delicate lace barely contained her curves, the same bra she'd teased him with in those photos earlier.

"Hi," she cooed, deliberately arching her back as she took another sip of wine. The movement made her breasts strain against the lace, her nipples visibly hard beneath the sheer fabric. "Want a glass?"

Tom crossed the kitchen in three long strides and Jess, placing her wineglass down, stepped forward to kiss him. Her lips parted slightly as they met his, her tongue teasing along his bottom lip. Tom's hands settled on her hips.

"How'd the presentation go?"

"It was incredible," Jess said, her excitement bubbling to the surface as she pressed against him, wrapping her arms around his neck. "They loved it, they want to work with us on the project. Skyline is going to be huge for the firm."

Tom grinned as his fingers tightened on her waist. "That's amazing, Jess. You deserve it." His eyes sparkled with something more than just pride. "Actually, I have some news too. Davis called me into his office a few days ago. Once the Meridian implementation is complete, they're promoting me to Senior Consultant."

"Tom! That's wonderful!" Jess pressed closer, genuinely excited. "When?"

"After we wrap up Meridian. There'll be some travel involved, some week-long trips, but the compensation bump will help us get back on track." His hands slid up her bare back, fingers tracing her spine. "Maybe we might not need Bob as a tenant for too long, maybe less than a year to build our savings back up. We can finally start thinking about that family we want."

"Really?" Jess's eyes lit up with genuine excitement, her body pressing closer to his. The thought of finally being able to start their family made her heart race. She'd been suppressing that desire for so long, trying to be practical, but now hope bloomed in her chest. "God, Tom, that would be amazing. A baby..." She bit her lip, imagining their future. "How much of a raise are we talking about?"

Tom grinned, clearly pleased by her enthusiasm. "Enough to make a difference." His hands tightened on her waist. "Plus, the travel means extra per diem, hotel points, airline miles. We could even take some weekend trips together when I'm in interesting cities."

"Mmm, hotel sex," Jess murmured, running her fingers along his tie. "Remember that time in Vegas?"

"How could I forget? You were wearing that little black dress..."

Jess nodded slowly, processing everything. "We'll make it work."

"I know we will," Tom said. "I just don't want it to feel like we're losing us in the process."

His words struck a chord. "I've been feeling that too. Like we've been so focused on everything else, we've forgotten to focus on... this." She gestured between them, her breasts pressing against his chest.

Tom pulled her tighter as he nuzzled her neck. "We're still us, Jess. We've just got to remind ourselves why we work so well together."

Jess rested her head against his chest, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat grounding her as his hands roamed her body. The promise of their future, of finally starting their family, mixed with the heat of desire building between them. "We're going to be okay, aren't we?" she whispered.

"Better than okay," Tom promised, pressing a kiss to her forehead before capturing her lips in a deeper, more demanding kiss. His tongue invaded her mouth, tasting, claiming, as if he could erase all her doubts with the force of his passion.

Tom's fingers tangled in her hair, tugging gently to expose more of her throat to his hungry mouth. "Those pictures you sent earlier... fuck, Jess. I almost lost it. If the meeting wasn't so important I would have excused myself to the bathroom."

The image of Tom stroking himself in a cramped bathroom stall, stifling his moans as he came to her photos, sent a fresh wave of arousal through Jess. She smirked, grinding her hips against the hard bulge in his pants. "That was the idea," she said quietly, her hands working at his belt. "I wanted you thinking about me all day."

Tom growled, spinning her around and pressing her against the kitchen counter. The cold marble bit into her skin through her bra, her nipples hardening to stiff peaks. Tom's hands slid around her waist, his fingers working at the button of her tailored trousers with urgency. "Oh, I was thinking about you alright," he said. "Thinking about bending you over my desk, stripping these pants off you..."

Jess gasped as Tom's fingers unbuttoned her trousers, sliding inside to cup her mound through her lace panties as her trousers fell. "Fuck, Tom," she moaned, arching into his touch. "Please..."

Tom's fingers slipped beneath her delicate lace panties, stroking her slick folds. "So wet for me," he murmured. "I've been daydreaming about this pussy all day."

Jess closed her eyes, losing herself in the sensation. She rocked against Tom's hand, chasing the pleasure building inside her. His thumb found her clit, circling the sensitive bud with maddening precision. "Oh god," Jess moaned, her hips bucking as Tom inserted a finger, stretching her deliciously. Her moans got louder when he slid another finger inside her. She then reached behind her, fumbling with his zipper.

Tom groaned as she wrapped her hand around his cock, stroking him to full hardness. "Fuck, baby," he panted. "I need you so fucking bad."

"Wait," said Jess, turning to face him with a wicked smile. She sank to her knees, her eyes never leaving his as she licked her lips. Tom's eyes widened as she eagerly yanked his pants and boxers down, freeing his already hard cock.

"Holy fuck, Jess," Tom gasped as she took him into her mouth, her skilled tongue swirling around his head before sliding down his length. The memory of their first time flooded back. She remembered how she'd shocked him by taking him completely down her throat without warning, a technique she'd learned before him though he didn't know with whom. Her head bobbed steadily now, taking him deeper with each stroke, her nose brushing his pelvis as she suppressed her gag reflex. She hollowed her cheeks, creating intense suction as she dragged her lips back to his tip.

Jess had always loved giving head, especially the intoxicating power it gave her over men. She lived for the desperate sounds she could extract from them as they begged her not to stop, the way their thighs would quiver as she worked them with her expert tongue. Though Tom had been her only cock for the past six years, she hadn't lost her touch. She glanced up at Tom through her thick lashes, maintaining that sultry eye contact as she buried him in her throat, knowing how wild it drove him.

Tom's fingers tangled roughly in her silky hair, guiding her movements as she serviced him with practiced skill. "God, your fucking mouth," he groaned. "Nobody sucks cock like you do, baby." If only he knew just how much practice she'd had before him, she thought wickedly.

Jess increased her pace, her free hand massaging his balls as she took him repeatedly to the back of her throat. She could feel him getting close, his thick shaft pulsing against her tongue as his grip tightened in her hair. The slight pain only aroused her more, her pussy dripping with anticipation.

"Fuck, stop," Tom growled, yanking her up by her hair in a way that made her cunt clench with need. "I want to fuck that tight little pussy." He spun her around and bent her over the kitchen counter, his saliva-slicked cock sliding between her soaked folds. His swollen head nudged her entrance, making Jess whimper as she pushed back against him, silently begging to be filled.

Tom thrust into her in one swift motion and Jess cried out, her fingers gripping the edge of the counter as he set a punishing pace. The sound of skin slapping against skin filled the kitchen, punctuated by their breathless moans and the wet squelch of his cock plunging into her soaked pussy.

"Harder," Jess begged. She arched her back further, offering herself up completely. "Make me feel it tomorrow. Want to feel you every time I move."

Jess loved feeling him lose control like this, loved knowing she could still drive him wild after all these years. Each powerful thrust sent waves of pleasure through her body. The way he filled her was everything she needed. His possessive grip on her hips would leave marks, and the thought of wearing his fingerprints on her skin tomorrow made her even wetter.

"Yes, yes, fuck me," Jess gasped, pushing back against Tom's thrusts. She imagined how they must look, her bent over the kitchen counter, her ass raised as Tom pounded into her. The dirty, primal nature of it all heightened her arousal. This was what she'd been craving, this raw connection, this moment where nothing existed except their bodies moving together in sync.

"Touch yourself," Tom commanded, his voice rough with lust. "I want to feel you cum all over my cock."

Jess snaked a hand between her legs, her fingers finding her swollen clit. The dual sensation of Tom's shaft and her fingers working her sensitive clit had her climbing rapidly toward release.

"Oh fuck, oh god, don't stop," she babbled. "Gonna cum, gonna cum so hard!" Her words dissolved into a loud moan as her orgasm slammed through her. Her pussy clamped down on Tom's cock, rhythmically milking him as waves of pleasure wracked her body. Tom's thrusts grew erratic.

Jess suddenly remembered that she removed the IUD. They shouldn't risk it, not with their finances still unstable. "Wait," she gasped, pushing back against his chest. "Not inside. Let me taste you."

She spun around and dropped to her knees in one fluid motion, taking him deep into her throat. The taste of her own arousal on his cock made her moan around his shaft. Tom's hands fisted in her hair as she worked him frantically with her mouth and

tongue, desperate to make him cum. Her skilled tongue swirled around his swollen head before she took him completely down her throat again, her nose pressing against his pelvis.

"Fuck, gonna cum," Tom groaned, his hips jerking. "Take it all, baby."

Jess relaxed her throat as Tom erupted, swallowing every drop of his hot cum as he pulsed against her tongue. She kept sucking until he was completely spent, cleaning him thoroughly before releasing him with a wet pop. She looked up at him with her cheeks flushed. "Better than finishing in the office bathroom?" she asked with a smirk.

Tom smiled and lifted her up, crushing his mouth to hers in another demanding kiss. As they broke apart, Tom's eyes darkened with renewed hunger. "Think you can go again?" he asked. "Because I'm not done with you yet. Not even close."

Jess bit her lip, feeling a fresh wave of arousal course through her at his words. "Bedroom," she breathed, already backing toward their room. "I want you to fuck me until I can't remember my own name."

The Bad Tenant Ch. 02

Jess woke up Saturday morning satisfied in a way she hadn't felt in months. A lazy smile tugged at her lips as flashes of last night played in her mind like scenes from a porno. She remembered her own desperate cries as Tom manhandled her, the way he'd taken her again and again until they both collapsed from exhaustion.

For those precious hours, their problems had disappeared, hungry kisses and desperate touches replacing them. No mortgages, no tenants, no work, just husband and wife, skin on skin, breath on breath, two bodies remembering their old rhythm.

She rolled onto her side, propping her head on her hand to study Tom's peaceful sleeping face. At rest, the usual tension had melted away, making him look younger and more carefree, reminding her of the young man she'd first met in college. "I've missed you," she whispered softly. She'd needed this reminder that beneath the distracted husband buried in spreadsheets and work emails lurked the same man who once couldn't keep his hands off her.

Jess glanced at the clock. In less than half an hour, Bob would arrive to move in downstairs. The thought of their new tenant's imminent arrival should've sparked anxiety, but after last night's intimacy, it felt less threatening. Her body was too relaxed, too satiated to harbor any real concern. Still, she'd have to adjust. Their world was about to change whether they were ready or not.

Tom stirred beside her, his eyes fluttering open to find his wife watching him. "Mmm… morning beautiful," he mumbled, rolling to face her. He lazily reached for her, his palm sliding down to cup her ass, pulling her closer towards him.

"God, you're absolutely insatiable," she laughed, deliberately grinding her thigh against his morning wood.

"Says the woman who kept begging for more," he teased. He playfully mimicked her breathless pleas from the night before, "Harder Tom! Deeper! Don't stop! Don't you dare fucking stop!"

Jess laughed and blushed, burying her face in his chest. Those passionate cries hadn't been about physical pleasure alone. They'd been a release of pent-up frustration and longing that had been building for months.

His hand moved to her breasts, softly squeezing, his touch was now gentle where it had been demanding hours before. "You were so fucking loud last night," he continued. "Good thing Bob isn't moved in yet. These walls aren't that thick."

The thought of their soon-to-be tenant hearing her screams sent an unexpected jolt through his body. He tilted her chin upward and kissed her while his hands explored as if they had all the time in the world. She let herself melt into it, let herself forget the clock ticking on her nightstand, but when his hand drifted to the waistband of her panties, she caught his wrist.

"Bob's coming at noon," she reminded him.

He sighed and let his head fall back onto the pillow. "Of course he is."

"You're cute when you pout," she said, crawling out from under the covers and crossing the room. She could feel his eyes on her as she deliberately made a show of stretching.

"Christ, Jess…" he said from the bed.

She flashed him a smile over her shoulder. "You coming? Or do I get all the hot water to myself?'

He didn't need to be told twice.

Jess had always loved showering with Tom. She loved sharing the confined space, pressing up against him, feeling his hands explore her body.

Their shower ritual dated back to their college days. Even then, there'd been something uniquely intimate about sharing that confined space, about being completely bare, with nothing to hide behind. Every scar, every imperfection was exposed under the bathroom light.

Their showers had evolved into something deeper now. It was a place where the outside world couldn't intrude. Sometimes they'd make love, but more often than not they'd simply wash and care for one another's bodies.

The memory of their first shared shower remained vivid in Jess' mind. She'd been self-conscious at first, worried about him seeing her without makeup. But Tom had looked at her bare face and whispered "You're so fucking beautiful" with such raw honesty that her insecurities had melted away. That vulnerability, that complete exposure to each other, had formed a cornerstone of their relationship.

Jess reached for the bar of soap, but Tom took it from her. "Let me," he said, his voice carrying a gentle command.

His hands moved slowly over her body, lathering her back, and moving down to her ass. When she turned to face him, his eyes were locked on to hers.

"You're staring," she said.

“You’re dangerous, you know that?” he replied.

Before she could respond his lips were on hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. But somewhere in the back of her mind, she still registered the faint rumble of a truck engine outside.

“Shit,” she muttered, pulling away. “That’s him.”

Tom sighed, resting his forehead against hers. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

They scrambled out of the shower as the intimate moment evaporated.

Jess slid her tiny black tong up her long legs and then fastened the matching bra as her breasts filled the cups.

“Jesus, Jess,” he groaned as she bent over to pull on her yoga pants.

“Focus,” she replied, pulling an oversized t-shirt over her head.

They moved to the window and peered outside, where Bob’s F-150 sat in their driveway. Its faded blue paint and well-earned dents looked completely out of place next to Tom’s Lexus and her Tesla.

They watched as Bob unloaded his truck, moving unexpectedly fluidly for a man his age and size. Between loads Bob paused, hands resting on his hips, calculating eyes sweeping across what was his new domain.

“Not much stuff,” Tom observed, noting a surprisingly sparse collection in the truck bed. Sturdy boxes, heavy-duty metal shelving units, a grill, and a large suitcase completed the humble inventory. “For someone his age, you’d think there’d be… more.”

“Maybe he’s learned to travel light,” Jess murmured, though part of her did wonder. Two divorces had to leave some sort of baggage, even if it wasn’t visible in the truck bed. She found herself curious about what kind of women his ex-wives had been.

“Let’s go say hello,” Tom suggested, stepping away from the window.

They made their way downstairs and through the front door, coming out into the warmth and bright sunshine.

“Afternoon, Bob,” Tom called out, stepping forward with his hand extended. “Welcome to your new home.”

Bob straightened up, wiping his palm across his jeans before gripping Tom's hand in a firm handshake. "Afternoon," he rumbled, his eyes flickering to Jess as she offered a warm smile. "Nice day for moving."

“Need a hand?” Tom offered.

Bob paused for a moment and conducted a quick assessment of Tom's physique. "Think you can manage this one?" he asked, gesturing toward what had to be one of the heavy boxes.

Tom didn't miss a beat, letting out a quick laugh. "I'll give it my best shot," he replied.

Bob turned his attention to Jess. His expression softened, and with a level of care, he handed her a smaller box labeled 'KITCHEN.' "And you, ma'am, get the fragile stuff. No offense."

"None taken," Jess said lightly, adjusting the box in her arms.

Tom and Jess made their way to the side of the house where Bob's new private entrance was located. Inside, Jess set her box on the kitchen counter while Tom placed the heavier case near the wall.

She then moved to the windows and raised the blinds, allowing natural light to flood the space, highlighting the finishes she'd selected.

"The light in here's gorgeous," she commented.

"Yeah, it makes this space feel bigger."

"That was the goal." She paused, considering the space through their new tenant's eyes. "But I have a feeling Bob might rearrange things."

They shared a look before heading back outside where Bob removed more things from his truck.

The unit transformed with each trip. His battered coffee maker took up residence on the countertop. His tools took up space on the floor of the spare bedroom.

Bob revealed an unexpected gentleness with his grill, pulling a rag from his back pocket and wiping down the surface before wheeling it toward his entrance.

With the last of the items moved in, they gathered around the dining table. "Let's get the paperwork squared away," Jess suggested as she spreading out the documents.

"Sure thing. Let's make it official," Bob commented, already reaching for the pen. His writing was neat and controlled, at odds with his rough exterior. The scratch of his pen against paper was the only sound until Tom cleared his throat.

"Keys," Tom prompted, and Jess snapped into action.

"Right." She passed over the ring of keys. "Front door and back entrance."

Bob then reached into his back pocket and pulled out a thick leather wallet, worn and weathered like everything else about him.

“Here’s the rent and deposit.” He counted out three thousand in hundreds and laid them on the table. “Two thousand for the month, one for damage.”

Tom’s eyes lit up at the sight of the cash, a mixture of relief and excitement evident in his expression. Each bill represented another small step toward financial recovery. He reached for the cash, folded the bills, and slipped them into his pocket.

Tom then pulled Jess close and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. Bob’s eyes flickered to them watching the display.

“Well, let us know if you need anything,” Jess offered with a warm smile. “We’re usually around on weekends.”

“Will do.” Bob replied. “I’ll start settling in and maybe tackle some of that unpacking.”

Tom extended his hand with a friendly nod. “Again, welcome to the house, Bob. Looking forward to having you here.”

Bob’s handshake was firm and solid like the man himself. “Yeah, well… guess I should say thanks for lettin’ me crash here.”

The laundry room took on new meaning as they passed through it. The space served as a connecting hub with three exits: the door they’d just entered through leading back to Bob’s apartment, a door leading to their garage, and a third connecting to the main house where the stairs led up to their private sanctuary.

Tom was careful to lock this last door behind them. The soft click represented more than just security. It was the sound of their world being divided into ‘ours’ and ‘his’.

“That went well,” Tom said, his voice light but carrying a trace of relief as they ascended the stairs back to their space.

“Yeah,” Jess agreed, following behind. “It feels... right. Like everything’s finally starting to move in the direction we wanted.”

Upstairs, Tom wrapped his arms around Jess and pulled her close enough that she could hear the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against her ear. “We’re good,” he murmured.

Jess tilted her head back, meeting his eyes. “Yeah… we are.”

The moment was short-lived. Reality, as it always seemed to, intruded in the form of Tom’s phone buzzing in his pocket. His mouth twitched into an apologetic half-smile before he pulled the device out, frowning at the screen.

“Davis,” he said, already swiping to open the notification. “Meridian’s getting anxious about the timeline … I have to check this.”

Jess gave him a smile, stepping back just enough to let him go. “It’s fine,” she said, meaning it. After he had satisfied her so deeply last night, she couldn’t bring herself to complain.

But she knew how this worked, how work always had a way of creeping in, stealing these small moments whenever it could. “Just two hours, right?”

“Just two hours,” Tom promised, though they both knew it could easily stretch longer. He leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “Then I’m all yours.”

Jess laughed and nudged him toward his office. “Go on, then, workaholic. The sooner you start, the sooner you finish.”

He grinned at that, flashing her a look that was all charm and boyishness before disappearing into his office. The door closing behind him left Jess alone in the quiet of their house.

Standing in the hallway, Jess’ smile faded. The sound of the door closing shut was too familiar, yet another unfinished moment between them. She understood, of course she did. The promotion, their financial recovery, their future family, all hinged on his dedication to work. But understanding didn’t make the constant interruptions any easier to bear.

In their master bathroom, Jess studied her reflection with the critical eye of someone who acutely understood the power of presentation. She applied a touch of gloss to her lips, then slipped off the oversized T-shirt and slid on a sports bra, adjusting the straps carefully to ensure a calculated amount of cleavage.

She swept her blonde hair into a high ponytail and adjusted it, allowing a few strands to fall loose in a way that appeared unintentional but was anything but.

The black Lululemon leggings she’d put on earlier were like a second skin. The high waist emphasized her tiny waist and the curves of her hips while it clung to her ass with almost obscene perfection. Her outfit walked that line between athletic functionality and raw sex appeal, a balance she’d mastered long ago.

She glanced at her wedding ring as she reached for her water bottle and gym bag. It felt right, grounding her in the commitment they’d renewed so thoroughly last night.

“Heading to the gym,” Jess called toward Tom’s office. She heard his muffled acknowledgment through the door followed by the sound of rapid-fire typing. She smiled. Her passionate man was in work mode but that was okay. She knew exactly how to bring him back out when she wanted to. Besides, she thought, sometimes a little distance made the reunion sweeter. Last night had proved that much at least.

The drive to Elite Fitness was quick. When she pulled into the parking lot, it was half-full. Not so empty she'd feel exposed and not so crowded she'd have to wait for equipment. Just the way she liked it.

The heavy glass doors parted as she made her entrance. The clang of weights and whir of cardio machines created a familiar backdrop, punctuated by occasional grunts of effort and the sound of pop music from overhead speakers.

At the front desk, the young attendant's eyes widened slightly as Jess scanned her membership card. She pretended not to notice his gaze as she headed towards the separate women's section.

For the next half hour, Jess moved through her routine, legs and core today.

She started with squats, thighs burning as she pushed through a high number of reps. The muscle fatigue was amplified by the effects of straddling Tom last night.

Romanian deadlifts followed as she bent forward with her legs straight, stretching her hamstrings while putting her ass on display. The position reminded her of being bent over the kitchen counter.

The Bulgarian split squats proved especially challenging. Her legs shook more than usual as she lowered herself down, partly from the intense exercise and partly from the previous night's exertions.

She finished with core work, though her abs were already somewhat fatigued. Each plank and Russian twist showed off her flat stomach and defined waist while intensifying the pleasant soreness that permeated her body.

Jess then made her way to her preferred spot in the cardio section. The spot offered a nice view of the entire gym floor while keeping her somewhat removed from the main traffic areas. The mirrors in front and beside her reflected her form as she started jogging.

For thirty minutes, she maintained a brisk pace and a focused mind. Each stride was purposeful, and her breathing remained controlled but heavy.

Her chest rose and fell in a hypnotic rhythm that drew wandering eyes like moths to flame. She'd caught more than a few men stumbling through their sets, their eyes glancing at her. Even a trainer helping a client kept stealing glances. She didn't acknowledge the attention but there was something deeply satisfying about knowing she could disrupt an entire gym's workout routine without even trying.

Her eyes drifted to the free weights section where Brandon dominated the space with his impressive physique. He was impossible to miss, standing six-foot-three, with lean muscle carved by countless hours in the gym. His tank top was damp with sweat,

showing off his chiselled arms, while black athletic shorts revealed his thick quads. He looked like he'd stepped out of a fitness magazine cover shoot, and he knew it.

Their eyes met and Brandon's signature smirk appeared instantly. Oh great, here we go, she thought as he set down a dumbbell and made his way over to her treadmill.

"Well fuck me sideways," Brandon drawled, propping himself against the adjacent machine. "If it isn't Jessica Marshall herself, making the rest of us mere mortals look bad. Didn't think I'd run into you today."

"Really?" Jess rolled her eyes, but she couldn't quite suppress a smile. "That's your opening line today? You're losing your touch, Brandon."

"Sweetheart, my touch is just fine." His grin turned wolfish. "Just ask Madi about-."

"Brandon," Jess interrupted, shaking her head. "Do you ever say normal things?"

"Depends. Would 'hi, how's your day?' get me the same reaction?"

"Probably. Try it sometime. Anyway, I'm here all the time. Shouldn't be that surprising."

"Oh, believe me," his eyes remained on her chest, making no attempt to hide his appreciation for her body. "It's always a pleasant surprise when you're here."

"You think that line's gonna work on me?" she teased, shaking her head.

"Just calling it like I see it." he replied. His eyes made a deliberately slow journey down her body and paused at her magnificent ass. "I have to say, those leggings are gonna give some poor bastard a heart attack."

"My eyes are up here, buddy boy."

"Can't blame a man for admiring art… and you, Mrs. Marshall… are a masterpiece."

Jess laughed. "You did not just say that… do you practice these lines in the mirror, or do they just come naturally?"

"Pure talent, baby," he replied, turning to the mirror and doing a front double bicep bodybuilding pose. "Speaking of natural talents..."

"Stop right there," she warned. "I don't need to hear about your 'talents'. Madi's already overshared enough."

"Oh?" His features took on that infuriatingly confident look. "And what exactly has our friend been telling you?"

"Nothing that needs repeating," she replied.

"Where's the fun in that?" He shifted closer and the corner of his mouth lifted in that way that made her want to slap him. "By the way, there's something different about you today. You're… glowing. Tommy must've finally remembered what that gorgeous body of yours is for."

Heat crept up her neck. "Uh, just… a good workout," she managed.

"Uh-huh." Brandon's smirk said he wasn't buying it. "Nothing to do with why you're walking a little different today?"

"Brandon!" The protest came automatically, but inside her mind raced. Was it obvious? Could he really tell just by looking that she'd been thoroughly fucked last night?

"What? Just making an observation. But if Tommy's not treating you properly..."

"Don't you have someone else to annoy?"

"Plenty of options," he agreed easily. "But watching you pretend to ignore me is the highlight of my day."

"I don't pretend to ignore you. I actively ignore you. There's a difference."

"See? That right there, that sharp tongue. It's exactly why I find you so fascinating."

"Fascinating?" she turned to face him with one eyebrow raised. "Is that what you're calling it now?"

Brandon stepped closer. "What would you call it?" His voice dropped lower. "This thing between us?"

"There is no 'thing' between us," Jess said. "There's you, being annoying, and me, tolerating it because you're Tom's friend."

"Mmm," Brandon hummed. "Is that why your pulse speeds up when I get close? Because you're tolerating me?"

"My pulse speeds up because you're irritating," she shot back, but there was no real venom in it.

"Right there! The way you pretend to hate me while your eyes say something completely different. It's fascinating."

"And what exactly do my eyes say, Brandon?"

He stepped even closer. "They say you enjoy our little dance. That maybe you've thought about that drink I keep offering. Just admit you're curious."

"Curious about what?" Jess challenged but she knew what he meant.

"About what would happen if you stopped pretending." His eyes held hers, unblinking. "About whether all this tension we generate could be put to better use."

"That's your friend's wife you're ogling."

Brandon grinned. "Tommy knows exactly who I am. I've never pretended to be anything else. Besides, he knew exactly what he signed up for when he married a smokeshow like you... so when are you finally gonna let me buy you that drink?"

"Like I said, still married, still not interested."

"You know, just because you're married doesn't mean you can't have a little fun conversation now and then" he said with a slow grin spreading across his face. "Or are you just scared you'd like it too much?"

"Goodness, Brandon."

When the treadmill beeped its final warning and slowed to a stop, Jess grabbed her water bottle and took a gulp. She barely noticed the stray droplet trailing down her throat to disappear between her breasts, until she caught Brandon's smirk. Brandon's eyes had followed its path.

"You've got an ego the size of this gym, you know that?" she said, twisting the cap back onto her water bottle.

"Just matching the size of everything else about me," Brandon countered, earning a genuine laugh from Jess.

"Good one," she replied, gathering her things. "Well, this has been fun, but I'm done with my workout. Goodbye, Brandon."

"Going already?" He stepped back to make space for her. "And here I thought we were just getting started."

"Maybe in another lifetime," she called over her shoulder, feeling his eyes burning into her ass with each step.

"One of these days," he called after her, "you're going to stop lying to yourself about how much you enjoy our little encounters!"

A few hours later, Jess reclined on one of the loungers arranged around their rectangular pool, letting the sun paint her skin as post-workout endorphins flowed through her tired muscles.

She toyed with the straps of her navy one-piece swimsuit, yet another calculated choice. It hugged her in a way that was modest enough for their new tenant's potential

appearance while still highlighting every feminine asset. The high-cut legs elongated her toned thighs and the scooped neckline offered just enough cleavage to be enticing without crossing into overtly tempting territory.

The sound of the sliding glass door drew her attention upward as Tom appeared on their balcony. His bare chest still gleamed with droplets from their earlier swim. He descended the wooden stairs with a refilled pitcher of margaritas in hand.

"Still thirsty?" he asked, pouring into waiting glasses.

"Always," she replied, letting the word drip with innuendo as she accepted her glass and took a long sip, maintaining eye contact over the glass.

"You look incredible in that suit," Tom murmured. "But I kind of miss that white bikini from last summer."

The white bikini in question had been little more than thin strings, designed to draw every masculine eye in the vicinity. Jess remembered how it would be practically transparent when wet, how it would reveal her nipples, how the bottoms would ride up between her ass cheeks with every movement.

"That wouldn't be very appropriate now that we have a tenant," she replied, though the thought of wearing it, of being seen in it, would undoubtedly be thrilling.

"No, I guess not," Tom agreed. "But the thought of you in it..." He trailed off.

"Behave yourself," she warned, finishing her drink. "Bob might come out any time."

Jess then rose from the lounger in one fluid motion, giving him a view of her ass. At the pool's edge, she glanced back over her shoulder. "Coming in? Or just going to stare?"

"Give me a minute," Tom replied. "I can't get enough of this view."

Jess smiled and slipped into the water, sighing as the coolness enveloped her heated skin. "God, this feels amazing." She pushed off from the wall, executing a graceful stroke that carried her to the opposite end.

Tom rose and launched himself into the pool, joining her with a splash. He immediately moved toward her. "Come here often?" he teased, stalking her through the water.

"Oh, is this your pool?" Jess played along. "I must have gotten lost."

"Lost, huh?" Tom stalked closer. "Maybe I should help you find your way."

"If you can catch me," she taunted, slipping away just as his fingers brushed her waist. She dove beneath the surface and her legs propelled her to the opposite end.

The chase ended inevitably with capture, her body sliding sensually against his as his arms locked around her waist. The margaritas had loosened their inhibitions, making every touch feel electric, every laugh more intimate.

"Got you," he growled against her ear.

"Mmm, so you have," she purred, pretending to struggle while grinding back against his erection. "Now what are you going to do with me?"

"Keep moving like that," he warned, "and you're going to start something we can't finish out here."

Jess bit her lip. Their private oasis felt simultaneously exposed and intimate. The high fence ensured privacy from their neighbors but the knowledge that Bob could appear at any moment diminished her arousal. "Maybe later," she promised.

They glided to the pool's edge where Jess rested her arms on the concrete, enjoying Tom's body pressed against her from behind. His erect cock nestled between her ass cheeks through their swimwear.

"So," she said, "what do you think about Bob?"

Tom's thumbs traced lazy circles on her hips, considering the question. "He seems solid. Competent. Professional. Why? Second thoughts?"

"No, just..." Jess thought about it for a moment, searching for the right words. "Different having someone else around. Going to take some getting used to."

"We'll manage," Tom murmured against her neck. "Besides, the extra income means we're one step closer to starting our family."

Jess leaned back into him, enjoying the solid warmth of his body despite the cool water.

"How was your workout?" Tom asked.

"Good," Jess replied. "Did my usual weights and cardio. Ran into Brandon there actually."

"Oh yeah? How's our resident Casanova?"

"Same old Brandon," Jess replied. "Showing off in the weight section, flirting with anything that moves."

"Including you?" Tom asked as his fingers skimmed the underside of her breasts.

Jess laughed lightly, though her nipples hardened at his touch. "You know how he is, being ridiculous as always, making inappropriate comments, trying to get a reaction."

"What kind of comments?" Tom's hands slid higher, gently cupping her breasts through the suit.

"Oh, just Brandon being Brandon. Said my leggings we're gonna give someone a heart attack. Called me a smokeshow. Real subtle, your friend."

"He's not wrong," Tom murmured, his fingers growing bolder in their exploration. "About the heart attack part. I've seen how men look at you."

Jess turned in Tom's arms and her eyes locked with his. "Thomas Marshall," she started, her voice carrying a tone of playful accusation. "Are you getting turned on thinking about Brandon flirting with me?"

The sound of the sliding glass door shattered their moment, making them spring apart guiltily like teenagers caught making out. They shared a look, both fighting smiles as they moved to a more respectable distance.

"This conversation isn't over," Jess whispered.

When Bob came out to the patio, his presence immediately altered the atmosphere between Tom and Jess.

Bob wore khaki cargo shorts and a white polo that stretched across his broad chest and protruding belly. In one hand, he carried a six-pack of beer.

"Hope I'm not interrupting," he stated. Bob's eyes swept over the scene before settling briefly on Jess. His gaze stayed on her for just a moment before shifting to Tom. "Thought I'd come say hello properly, maybe share a cold one with my new landlords."

Jess felt suddenly exposed under his appraisal. She shifted closer to Tom and he draped his arm across her shoulders.

"Not interrupting at all," Tom replied. "We're just enjoying the afternoon. Care to join us?"

As Bob sat on a lounger, the sturdy frame creaked under his weight. He twisted the cap off a beer and drained nearly half the bottle in one long pull.

He then concentrated on the simple plantings along the fence line before moving to study the aging deck furniture and concrete surrounding the pool. The space was functional and well-kept, but to someone with his experience, the potential for enhancement was obvious.

"So," he said after wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "What's the dinner situation? You two look too comfortable to be bothering with cooking."

"We hadn't really thought about it," Jess admitted. "Probably order something in."

"Nonsense. Let me cook for you both. A thank you for taking me on." Another long drink emptied the bottle. "Got some prime ribeyes in my fridge."

"Oh, you don't have to-" Jess started, but Bob waved off her protest.

"I insist. Been grilling steaks longer than you've been alive, darlin'. Trust me, you haven't had a proper steak until you've had one of mine."

"Well, if you're sure, we'd love to try your cooking." Said Tom.

"Excellent," Bob replied. "I'll get everything ready." He left his beers by the lounger and headed toward the house, pausing at the sliding glass door. "Hope you both brought your appetite. I don't cook for just anyone, you know."

"Well," Tom said, breaking the silence that followed Bob's exit. "That was..."

"Unexpected?" said Jess, finishing his sentence. She laughed lightly. "He definitely knows how to take control of a situation," she observed, then quickly added, "I mean, he just showed up and suddenly he's cooking us dinner."

"True," Tom agreed. "But I'm curious about these supposedly proper steaks of his."

They climbed out of the pool together, water dripping down their bodies. Tom grabbed their towels from the nearby chair and handed one to Jess.

Tom couldn't help but stare as Jess dabbed at her face and ran the towel down her arms. The swimsuit, chosen for its modesty, betrayed her in the most enticing ways as water droplets traced paths down her body. The conservative cut that had seemed so appropriate in dry conditions now served only to emphasize what it tried to conceal.

Finally, they settled onto the lounger together, Tom's arm finding its way around Jess's shoulders as she curled into his side.

The sliding door opened again moments later. Bob wheeled out his Weber grill and positioned it beside the outdoor dining table. He disappeared inside again, returning with a large cooler that he set down with a solid thunk. The deliberate way he arranged his grilling tools mirrored how he'd organized his work equipment earlier, with everything in its proper place. "Everything's marinating," Bob announced. "Needs an hour to really get good."

With everything arranged to his satisfaction, Bob settled back on the lounger. He picked up another beer and twisted the cap off. "So," he began, taking a long pull from his bottle. "Tell me about this neighborhood. Been here long?"

"Yeah about… three years or so," Tom replied, shifting to face Bob while keeping his arm draped around Jess. There was pride in his voice that made Jess smile. This house

represented everything they'd built together, every dream they'd shared. "Found it just before the market went crazy. Good timing, really."

"Smart move," Bob nodded approvingly. "Values nearly doubled." His eyes scanned the backyard thoughtfully. "Good bones on this place too. Just needs some updating to hit its potential."

Tom nodded. "So, what got you started in the trades, Bob? Seems like you've got a real passion for it."

Bob's face softened with nostalgia. "My old man's plumbing business. Started helping when I was fourteen, learning the basics. By eighteen, I could handle most repairs solo."

"Your father taught you everything?" Jess asked.

"Everything worth knowing," Bob confirmed. "Dad believed in learning everything properly. No shortcuts. Said a man's reputation is built on the quality of his work."

"Must have been quite the education," Tom commented.

"Best education a man could ask for," Bob agreed. "Started my own business at twenty-three, right after marrying Sarah." A shadow crossed his face at the name. "She was something else. Eighteen when we met, fresh out of high school. Cheerleader type."

"Sounds romantic," Jess ventured, curiosity piqued by the emotion in Bob's voice.

"Was for ten years." Bob's tone hardened. "Till the divorce." He drained his beer, reaching for another. "Second marriage wasn't much better. Karen, bank manager, seemed more grounded. But divorced her too."

"I'm sorry…" Jess said softly.

Bob waved off her sympathy. "Ancient history now. Business kept me going. Built it up from just me and a truck to twenty solid employees. Every job done right, no exceptions."

Tom leaned forward, chin resting on his hand, interest sparked. "That's impressive. How'd you manage the growth?"

Bob leaned back on the lounger as his eyes took on a distant look recalling his glory days. "You learn to focus on what matters. First big break came when I fixed a pipe at this fancy restaurant downtown. Owner was so impressed, he recommended me to all his rich friends. Soon I was renovating million-dollar homes, installing custom everything."

Jess found herself studying him as he spoke, noting how his hands punctuated each point, how his deep voice resonated with authority. The conversation flowed easily as Bob shared more stories from his years in the trades. He had a gift for storytelling, painting vivid pictures of challenging jobs and clever solutions. His tales were peppered with technical details that impressed Tom and human moments that interested Jess.

"There was one job," Bob chuckled, "renovating an old Victorian mansion. Owner was this art collector, had millions in paintings hanging everywhere. We're redoing the master bathroom, and my tile guy discovers this hidden area behind the wall. Inside? Letters from the 20s. Seems the original lady of the house was getting real friendly with the gardener." He shook his head and chuckled. "Houses keep secrets, you know?"

As Bob rose to check on the steaks, Jess squeezed Tom's hand and he squeezed back.

"You know," Bob said, returning, "I appreciate you two listening to an old man ramble."

"We're enjoying it, Bob," Jess said warmly, surprising herself with how much she meant it. "Really."

"What about your line of work, Tom?" Bob asked, steering the conversation. "It's interesting, though… your consulting work. Different problems and all. Still about fixing things, right?"

Tom nodded eagerly, the margaritas making him more expansive than usual. "Exactly! Right now, I'm working with this healthcare company, completely rebuilding their systems. Lots of moving parts, everything has to keep running while we make changes."

"The human element's always the trickiest part," Bob observed. "Whether it's getting an electrician to redo his work or convincing some suit their way isn't working, it's all about managing expectations."

Jess watched the interplay between the two men with growing interest. Tom was clearly impressed by Bob's practical knowledge and business acumen, while Bob seemed genuinely interested in Tom's more theoretical approach to problem-solving.

"Speaking of managing expectations," Bob turned to Jess, "must be a big part of your work too. Bet you get a lot of 'I saw it on HGTV types', huh?"

Jess laughed, surprised by his insight. "Oh god, yes. Everyone's an expert these days. I had this client last month who insisted on putting a massive crystal chandelier in their farmhouse kitchen because they saw it on Instagram."

“What did you do?” Bob’s attention was fully on her now.

“Convinced them to do a custom piece instead,” Jess explained as her obvious passion for design made her eyes almost sparkle. “Worked with this amazing local craftsman who made this beautiful fixture that actually fit the space. Clients need guidance to see what really works.”

“That’s the mark of a professional,” Bob nodded approvingly. “Not just giving them what they think they want but helping them discover what really works without making them feel stupid.”

The conversation continued to flow easily, touching on different aspects of their jobs. Tom shared stories about difficult clients and impossible deadlines while Jess described the challenges of managing client expectations. Bob listened attentively, occasionally offering insights from his years of experience that shed new light on their situations.

“We had this CEO once,” Tom laughed, “He insisted we could rebuild their entire system in two months and wouldn’t listen to reason. Finally, we had to walk him through every single step to show him why it would take at least six.”

“Sounds familiar,” Bob chuckled. “Rich folks always think throwing money at something makes it happen faster. Physics doesn’t work that way. Neither does proper craftsmanship.”

As the conversation pulled Tom in, his posture became more relaxed. Jess found herself laughing more freely, the initial awkwardness of having their new tenant join them dissolving. Even Bob seemed to have let down some of his guards as his stories became more personal and his laughter more frequent.

After just about an hour, Bob checked his watch. “Those steaks should be ready for the grill. Mind if I get started?”

“Please,” Tom replied. “Show us your expertise.”

Bob retrieved three ribeyes from the cooler, each thick enough to make Tom’s eyes widen. “Secret’s in the prep,” he explained, laying them on the grill. “Dry-aged and marinated in my special stuff.”

The sizzle of meat hitting hot metal filled the air as Bob worked his magic.

“Sarah had an eye for design,” Bob mused as he monitored the steaks. “She had that creative spark. Could have modeled too, had the looks for it. Agencies interested and everything.”

“Oh yeah?” Tom perked up. “Jess did some modeling back in the day. Didn’t you, babe? Those campaigns were something else.”

Bob’s eyes returned to Jess. “That so? Professional work?”

“Just local stuff during college,” she deflected. “Nothing serious.”

“Don’t be shy,” Tom insisted. “That shoot with Georgio was incredible. You should see those photos, Bob. My wife’s absolutely stunning.” Tom pulled out his phone, swiping through his gallery with clumsy enthusiasm. “Actually, the light’s perfect right now. We should take some pictures.”

“Tom!” Jess hissed, mortified. “Put the phone away. I haven’t modeled in years!”

“Come on, baby,” Tom persisted. “Just a few shots. You look amazing in that.”

“I’m not exactly camera-ready,” Jess protested, realizing her wet hair and lack of makeup. She shot a nervous glance at Bob, who maintained focus on his grill despite his obvious interest in the conversation.

“You’re gorgeous,” Tom declared. “Natural beauty, that’s what Georgio always said, right? No makeup needed.”

“That’s not...” Jess felt heat creep up her neck. “This isn’t appropriate, Tom. We barely know Bob.”

“I can make myself scarce,” Bob offered without looking up. “These need my attention anyway.”

“See? Bob doesn’t mind,” Tom stood unsteadily, phone already raised. “Just a few poses. Like the old days.”

“Tom, you’re drunk,” Jess said, but the familiar excitement was already building.

“Please? You used to love being photographed. Remember how alive it made you feel?”

Jess bit her lower lip, considering. The thrill of yesterday’s bathroom photoshoot flashed through her mind. That same electric energy was coursing through her veins now, amplified by the margaritas and Tom’s enthusiasm. She noticed that the afternoon sun was hitting the water at that angle photographers called golden hour.

“Fine,” she finally conceded, standing. “But just a few. And nothing provocative.” Even as she said it, she knew every pose would be inherently sensual. “And Bob, you don’t have to leave. Just... pretend we’re not being ridiculous.”

Bob’s low chuckle carried across the patio. “Trust me, I’ve seen plenty of ridiculous in my time. This ain’t even close.”

Jess took a deep breath, feeling the pre-shoot butterflies she thought she'd left behind years ago. The margaritas helped, but it was the old excitement returning, the thrill of being seen, of being captured.

"Ready when you are," she said softly.

The impromptu photo shoot began innocently enough, with Tom holding up his phone as Jess walked to the edge near the pool steps. The margaritas had loosened her inhibitions enough to make the attention feel thrilling rather than uncomfortable.

"Come on, babe. Show me what you got," Tom encouraged with an eager grin.

Jess felt a combination of nerves and excitement. The girl who once posed fearlessly, who commanded attention without shame felt like a different person. Now here she was, a respectable married woman, Mrs. Thomas Marshall, about to channel that same energy while her husband and new tenant watched.

"You're so ridiculous," she laughed, but found herself naturally falling into poses that felt like second nature. She sat at the pool's edge, letting her legs dangle in the cool water. Leaning back on her hands, she tilted her head and offered a natural smile. The pose accentuated her long neck and toned arms while keeping everything tasteful.

"That's it," Tom encouraged. "God, you're a natural at this. You just own the camera."

She rolled to lie on her stomach, propping herself up on her elbows. Her feet crossed at the ankles and lifted playfully behind her, toes pointed like a ballet dancer. The position showed the roundness of her ass and made her legs look endless. Each pose felt like rediscovering a part of herself she'd forgotten existed.

As she moved through familiar poses, memories of her modeling days flooded back. The lights, the energy, the intoxicating feeling of being desired. She'd traded the excitement of being watched for the security of being loved.

By the grill, Bob maintained an air of indifference that fooled exactly no one. His hands moved the steaks with care, but his eyes kept finding their way back to Jess.

Jess shifted to her side and rested her head on her palm. In her mind, she could hear Georgio's accented voice saying "yes, bella, hold that. Make them want what they cannot have." She made every attempt to keep things tasteful, but despite it, her natural sensuality made every movement charged with unintended eroticism.

"Fuck, you're incredible," Tom breathed, his voice carrying a note of awe. "Still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

“Need about ten minutes for these to rest properly,” Bob announced, arranging the grilled meat on a wooden cutting board. He covered the steaks loosely with foil and then he then grabbed another beer and settled onto the lounger. “Can’t rush perfection.”

An idea formed in Tom’s head. “Hey Bob,” he called out suddenly. His words carried the loose confidence of someone several drinks in. “You should take some shots too. Bet that phone’s got a better camera than mine.”

Jess’ heart skipped a beat.

Bob’s eyes moved between husband and wife, considering the offer. She could see him weighing the situation. “Wouldn’t want to intrude,” he said carefully.

“No, really,” Tom insisted. His eyes were bright with barely concealed excitement. “Come on, show us what you got.”

Bob pulled out his phone. His hands, so confident with tools, seemed almost clumsy with the device.

“Well,” Bob started. “Let’s see what we can do.”

Where Tom’s approach had been enthusiastic but amateur, Bob’s was ancient. He didn’t know about fancy angles or composition, but he knew what looked good. Years of commanding job sites had also given him an understanding of how to direct people. His directions were simple and direct.

“Turn around,” he commanded. The same voice that had directed countless construction crews now focused entirely on positioning Jess’ body. “Now look back over your shoulder.”

Jess complied. She could feel both men’s eyes on her, Tom’s eager and excited, Bob’s unreadable but unwavering.

“You know what would look great?” Tom suggested, his voice carrying an edge of excitement. “If you got in the water again. The way that suit looks when it’s wet...”

The suggestion sent heat flooding through Jess’s core. She knew how the swimsuit would reveal more than it concealed. This was their tenant, a virtual stranger, and proper boundaries needed to be maintained, she told herself. But beneath that proper façade, that wild creature inside her had never really gone away. It just lay dormant, waiting for moments like this to resurface.

“Why not?” she heard herself say. Her voice carried a sense of defiance against her better judgment. Without hesitation, she slipped into the pool, gasping as the cool

water embraced her. When she surfaced, she pushed her wet hair back, recreating one of her old modeling poses.

"Holy fuck," Tom breathed, forgetting the phone in his hand as he stared at his wife.

Bob kept shooting, though his hands weren't quite steady. "Come up the steps," he ordered. "Slow."

Jess complied, knowing exactly how the water would cascade down her body. She emerged from the pool like Venus rising from the sea. Each step was deliberate. Her toned legs carried her upward as water streamed down her body. She paused at the top of the steps, letting both men drink in the sight of her.

"Just one more," Bob's deep voice commanded. "Hands in your hair, arch your back, look up at the sky."

The pose was deceptively simple yet devastatingly effective. As Jess raised her arms to run her fingers through her wet hair, her back arched naturally, pushing her chest forward and her ass out behind her. With her face tilted up toward the setting sun, water droplets traced paths down her throat and between her breasts. The wet material might as well have been painted on, hiding nothing of her form.

"Christ almighty," Tom muttered.

Even Bob seemed to forget about photographing. His phone lowered slightly as he stared. The pose transformed Jess from beautiful woman to living fantasy, a siren emerged from the depths to tempt mortal men to their doom.

"Steaks are ready," Bob announced suddenly. His deep voice cutting through the charged atmosphere. "Let me get everything," he said before disappearing into his unit.

The spell broke. Jess felt reality crash back like a cold wave, leaving her breathless. She grabbed her towel, wrapping it around herself like armor. Her mind raced with the knowledge that Bob now possessed dozens of photos of her looking like every man's fantasy come to life. What kind of respectable wife lets another man photograph her like that?

Tom pulled her close as they walked to their outdoor dining table. He whispered hotly in her ear, "You were so fucking incredible. I can't believe I'm married to the hottest woman on the planet."

They settled beside each other on one of the long benches that flanked the rectangular table, choosing spots that gave them a view of the pool. The matching benches could easily seat five people each, though tonight only three total spots would be occupied.

“I can’t believe we just did that,” Jess whispered back. Her cheeks flushed as she adjusted her towel. “Bob probably thinks we’re crazy.”

“Are you kidding?” Tom leaned close. “Did you see how he could barely keep his eyes off you? Even a man his age knows beauty when he sees it.”

The pride in his voice confused her. Shouldn’t he be jealous? Instead, he seemed almost thrilled by Bob’s obvious appreciation.

Bob came back outside carrying a weathered wooden box. From it, he produced sturdy white plates, well-worn but quality silverware that spoke of years of use, and a pack of paper napkins. A bottle of cabernet, not expensive but carefully chosen, completed the meal.

“Let me help with that,” Tom offered, starting to rise, but Bob waved him off.

“Just sit and relax, you two,” Bob insisted. He made quick work of setting the table. There was nothing fancy about his setup but there was an efficiency to his movements.

The steaks arrived on a simple wooden cutting board, seared with textbook grill marks. As Bob served each portion, the aroma made their mouths water.

Bob then twisted the cap off the wine bottle. “Nothing fancy,” he said as he poured the dark liquid generously. “To new beginnings,” he proposed, raising his glass. The toast was simple and direct, much like the man himself.

“To new beginnings,” Tom and Jess echoed, lifting their own glasses.

Tom and Jess fell into comfortable silence as they savored their first bites of steak. The meat was expertly cooked, pink and juicy in the center with a beautifully seasoned crust.

“This is incredible,” Jess murmured after her first bite, the flavors exploding in her mouth.

“Timing’s everything,” Bob explained, carving into his steak, the meat parting effortlessly under his knife to reveal a medium-rare center. “Too many people rush it,” he continued as his eyes moved between husband and wife. “You’ve got to let the meat rest, let the juices redistribute. Patience makes all the difference.”

“What’s in the marinade?” she asked.

“Family secret,” Bob replied with a wink.

“Speaking of incredible,” Tom said as his hand found Jess’s thigh under the table, “You’ve got quite an eye for photography, Bob.”

“Had a good subject,” Bob replied matter-of-factly. “Reminds me of Sarah in her younger days. She had that same natural grace in front of the camera.”

“You mentioned she wanted to model?” Jess asked, partly to deflect attention from herself and partly out of genuine curiosity.

“Yeah, had the looks for it too. But I was old-fashioned back then, didn’t want my wife on display.” Bob took a long drink of wine. “Different times. Looking back, maybe I should’ve let her pursue it. Might’ve kept her happier.”

“It can be quite liberating,” Jess found herself saying. The wine had loosened her tongue. “When I was modeling, it wasn’t just about being looked at. It was about owning your presence.”

“You certainly owned it today,” Bob’s voice carried a note of appreciation. “That last pose especially. Reminded me of those classic pin-up shots.”

“God yes,” Tom agreed enthusiastically as his fingers tightened on her thigh. “It was like something out of a movie.”

“I’m sure photos came out well,” Jess said before she cut into another piece.

Throughout dinner, Tom found himself unable to resist touching Jess at every opportunity. When passing the wine bottle, his fingers brushed against hers. Their legs pressed together beneath the table. His hand kept finding its way to her thigh, fingers tracing patterns on her skin. She kept her face neutral but her breath hitched when his fingers crept higher, brushing dangerous territory while they maintained polite conversation with Bob.

They finished their meals quickly, the conversation staying safely focused on home improvement projects and maintenance tips.

Bob stood up and gathered his things, placing his items back in his box. “Thank you for a lovely evening,” he said. “We should make this a regular thing.”

“The steaks were incredible,” Tom replied. “We’ll definitely have to do this again soon.”

“Thank you for dinner,” Jess agreed. “Best I’ve had in years.”

When Bob disappeared into his unit, Tom’s control finally snapped. The tension from watching his wife pose had wound him tight as a spring. He pulled Jess against him. “Upstairs,” he growled in her ear with a needy voice. “Right now.”

They barely made it to their bedroom before Tom had her pinned against the wall. His mouth found her neck as his hands yanked at the towel wrapped around her. The terrycloth fell away to reveal her still-damp swimsuit underneath.

“Do you have any idea what you did to me out there?” Tom’s voice was hoarse as his hands explored her body. “Watching you pose like that… you looked like a fucking goddess…”

Jess melted into Tom’s touch but responsibility nagged at her. “Wait,” she managed, pushing against his chest. “We should clean up first. Can you grab the margarita pitcher and glasses from outside? And maybe check if we left anything else out there?”

“Fuck it,” said Tom, trying to pull her back. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“I don’t want Bob to think we’re careless slobs who can’t even clean up after ourselves,” Jess insisted. “We’re his landlords. We need to set a good example.”

Tom groaned in frustration but nodded. “You’re right.” He pressed his forehead against hers and chuckled softly. “Always the practical one, aren’t you? Even when you’re driving me absolutely fucking crazy.”

“You handle the backyard while I clean up in here?” she suggested.

“Such a responsible landlady,” Tom teased, stealing another kiss. His eyes swept over her body one more time, remembering how she’d posed under Bob’s direction. His obvious arousal tented his swim trunks as he turned toward the balcony door.

“Don’t take too long,” she called after Tom, her voice carrying a promise. “I’m not done with you yet.”

Tom descended the wooden stairs into the warm evening air, as his mind raced with images of Jess waiting. Their renewed intimacy felt precious, fragile somehow. What should have been a quick chore felt like torture, keeping him from her warmth.

Approaching the patio table to gather their abandoned drinks, a sliver of light caught his attention. Through a gap in Bob’s blinds, the glow of a laptop screen illuminated the interior.

Through the narrow opening, Tom could see Bob seated at his desk. The older man had stripped off his polo shirt, revealing a broad chest covered in hair that trailed down his solid belly. Bob had his cargo shorts open and shoved down his thick thighs. His meaty hand moved up and down, up and down. Tom froze in place when he realized what he was witnessing.

“Jesus Christ,” Tom mouthed. His stomach churned with a nauseating mix of disgust and fascination.

In his hand, Bob gripped what had to be the most impressive cock Tom had ever seen. The thing had to be at least eight or nine inches, and Bob’s hand just barely encircled

its impressive girth. It looked heavy, with a pronounced upward curve designed to hit spots most men could only dream of. The huge mushroom head glistened with precum and his heavy, low-hanging balls completed the package, swaying with each stroke, promising copious loads.

Tom had seen his share of porn, but this was different. This was real, happening mere feet away. Tom knew he should look away, to preserve some semblance of normalcy in their landlord-tenant relationship, yet his feet remained glued to the spot, eyes fixed on the display in front of him.

The laptop screen reflected clearly in the window glass. Tom's pulse thundered in his ears as he recognized their poolside photos displayed on the screen. His wife, his beautiful Jessica Marshall, was captured in moments of unconscious sensuality. Bob scrolled the images slowly, zooming in on certain shots like her hardened nipples beneath the suit and the curve of her ass as she emerged from the water. Each image seemed to fuel Bob's arousal.

Tom thought of all the times he'd caught other men staring at Jess but this was different. This wasn't just a glance of appreciation from afar, this was carnal, animal lust. Bob was actively fantasizing about her, stroking himself to thoughts of her.

Bob's breathing grew heavier as his strokes became more purposeful. The mushroom head had grown even darker, veins pulsing along the shaft as he worked himself closer to release. Tom could see Bob's mouth moving, muttering to himself as he stared at photos of Jess's body on display.

Tom's mind screamed that he should feel outraged, violated even. He should storm in there, demand Bob delete the photos and evict him immediately. That's what any self-respecting husband would do.

Instead, his imagination betrayed him with vivid scenarios. He saw Jess on her knees, her delicate hands wrapped around its girth, her wedding ring glinting as she stretched her mouth obscenely wide to attempt taking that cock down her throat, so different from how easily she could swallow his average length.

"That's right," Bob growled. "Show me that perfect body, princess..."

The word 'princess' hit Tom like a slap to the face. Bob was already casually claiming ownership of Jess, even in fantasy.

Bob's broad chest started rising and falling as he worked himself towards the edge. Tom watched in stunned fascination as Bob shuddered and his cock began to pulse. The first rope of cum shot straight up before landing on his hairy chest. The second and third spurts painted his belly.

His loads decreased in intensity but remained impressive, a fourth load added to the mess on his torso. Bob's face was contorted in pleasure. "Fuck yeah, princess," he growled between harsh pants, his voice deep with satisfaction.

The fifth and final load oozed from his mushroom tip, dripping down his shaft as Bob slowly came down from his intense climax. His eyes were half-lidded now.

Tom had never seen anything like it. The sheer volume was staggering and made his own orgasms seem pitiful in comparison. This was something primal and animalistic, the kind of virile display that spoke to something deep in human nature that polite society pretended didn't exist.

There was also something intensely intimate about witnessing another man's moment of release, especially someone like Bob. The older man's usual gruff demeanor had dissolved into pure animal pleasure, leaving him exposed in a way that crossed boundaries that should never be breached. Yet Tom couldn't tear his eyes away from Bob's massive cock or the impressive evidence of his potency coating his torso.

The wrongness of it all twisted in Tom's gut. This was their tenant, a man who would live beneath them and share their pool. How could he ever look Bob in the eye again, knowing he'd watched him in such an intimate moment, knowing Bob had been fantasizing about his wife while bringing himself to such an intense climax?

Tom forced himself to move, disgusted with his voyeurism yet undeniably aroused. He grabbed the pitcher and glasses from the table with trembling hands, nearly dropping them. The ice clinked loudly, making him freeze in panic, but Bob seemed too engrossed in his activities to notice. Tom fled back upstairs, taking the steps two at a time.

Tom burst through their bedroom door while his heart hammered so hard he could almost feel it in his throat. The sight that greeted him nearly brought him to his knees.

Jess lay sprawled on their king-sized bed with her back arched to thrust her breasts upward. Her hands squeezed them through the delicate black lace. The babydoll barely contained her, riding up to expose the tiny matching thong beneath, while her golden hair fanned out across the white pillows. Her legs were slightly spread, one bent at the knee in an invitation that made her intentions crystal clear.

"Took you long enough," she purred, her voice carrying that teasing tone he loved. Her expression changed as she studied his face, catching something in his eyes that made her own narrow with curiosity. "Babe… is everything okay?"

"Everything's great," he managed, practically tearing off his shirt and swim trunks in his haste to get to her.

He descended on her with passionate kisses that held no restraint, devouring her mouth like a man starved. His hands roamed her body, roughly pushing the flimsy fabric up to expose more of her skin, not caring if the delicate material tore. Bob's words from moments ago echoed in his mind, fueling his desperate need. "Show me that perfect body, princess," he growled, using Bob's words.

The words felt foreign on his tongue, dirty somehow, knowing where he'd heard it. But the way Jess shivered beneath him told him she liked it, even if she didn't know its true source.

"Someone's eager," Jess gasped between kisses, responding to his intensity with matching passion. "What's gotten into you?"

Her question only seemed to drive him to greater intensity. "Just can't get enough of you," Tom replied, breathing heavy. "You have no idea what you do to men... to me..." The knowledge of Bob stroking himself to her photos made his words carry a deeper meaning that Jess couldn't possibly understand.

Her hands found his shoulders, manicured nails dragging lightly across his skin as she felt the tension radiating through his muscles. She could sense something different in his touch, something almost feral in his need to possess her.

Tom latched onto her exposed nipple, teeth grazing the sensitive peak before sucking hard enough to make her cry out. He alternated between gentle nibbles and rough suction, drawing whimpers from her throat. The slight pain sent lightning bolts of pleasure straight to her core.

"Someone's feeling wild tonight," she managed between moans. "Not that I'm complaining..." Her voice broke on a particularly sharp bite that made her whole body jerk.

All he could think about was what he saw downstairs. He opened his mouth but the confession stuck in his throat, heavy with implications. How could he admit that directly beneath them, their older tenant had stroked himself to orgasm staring at photos of Jess's wet body? And worse yet, he was as turned on as he'd ever been. The words died on his lips. Instead, his tongue invaded her mouth and his fingers traveled between her legs.

Through her panties, he felt arousal coating his fingers. "Fuck, you're soaked," he said, his voice desperate. His fingers traced her slit through the wet fabric, feeling her parted pussy lips.

Jess squirmed under him and her hands clawed at his back. Her hips rolled against his hand, trying to increase the sensation where she needed it most. "Please," she begged. "Fuck me, baby."

Tom's fingers hooked into her panties and practically tore them off her body. His fingers found her wet entrance, two digits plunging inside her roughly as his thumb circled her clit.

"So fucking wet… tell me how bad you want it," he demanded, curling his fingers to find that sensitive spot inside her that made her see stars.

"So bad," Jess moaned as her hips bucked against his hand. "Please, baby... I need you... need your cock..."

In one fluid motion, Tom flipped her onto her hands and knees. Jess immediately arched her back and pushed her magnificent ass up invitingly, already knowing the perfect angle.

From her very first fumbling sexual encounters, she'd loved being taken from behind in doggy. She loved the deep penetration and especially how submissive and vulnerable it made her feel. There was something intoxicating about presenting herself like an offering, surrendering completely to a man's desires.

"Please," she whimpered, wiggling her hips in a way that made her ass jiggle. Her movements were calculated yet natural, drawing on years of experience in teasing and tempting. "Fuck me... want to feel every inch of you..."

Tom gripped his shaft, rubbing the swollen head through her slick folds to coat himself in her arousal. When he finally pushed inside, her pussy parted easily. They both groaned at the exquisite feeling of him filling her.

Tom quickly established a punishing pace, each powerful thrust making her ass ripple from the impact. Jess pushed back to meet every stroke, taking him as deep as possible while her fingers clawed at the sheets beneath them.

"Harder!" Jess cried out, her voice breaking with need. "Oh god, fuck me harder!"

"Such a good girl, such a perfect princess" he panted, driving into her with intensity.

Jess's arms soon gave out under his assault and her face pressed into the mattress, ass still raised high as Tom continued to ruthlessly pound her.

The bed frame started to protest loudly beneath them, its rhythmic creaking accompanied by the headboard thumping against the wall. Sweat dripped down Tom's back as he maintained his pace. His thighs started burning from exertion.

"Tom, wait," Jess gasped, twisting to look back at him with concern in her eyes. "We need to slow down... Bob's right below us, he'll hear everythi-"

"Let him hear," Tom growled, gripping her hips tighter. "I want him to hear what I do to you."

“No, seriously,” Jess insisted. Her voice was firmer now as she pulled away. “He’s right below us.” Her cheeks flushed with genuine mortification at the thought of their tenant listening to their passionate coupling.

The momentary pause gave Tom a chance to catch his breath.

Jess turned around to face him, pushing him onto his back. “Here,” she whispered, “let me take care of you another way.” Her hand wrapped around his shaft, still slick with her juices. “This will be quieter.”

Jess’s mouth enveloped him and her tongue swirled around the head of his cock. She knew exactly how to use her tongue, how to vary pressure, when to focus on his sensitive head and when to take him deep.

As Jess bobbed her head, taking him deeper, Tom’s imagination betrayed him. He pictured Bob’s massive meat stretching Jess’s lips wide as he received the same treatment. Would she even be able to handle something that thick? The mental image sent electricity through his body. He imagined Bob’s gruff voice praising her efforts, calling her his ‘princess’.

Jess swirled her tongue around his sensitive head once again before swallowing him whole. One hand massaged his balls while the other stroked his shaft in time with her mouth’s movements. After a few minutes of her expert oral attention, Tom couldn’t take anymore. He needed to be inside her again. “Turn around,” he commanded hoarsely. “Wanna fuck you.”

Jess gave his cock one final lick from base to tip before turning and presenting her ass, ready to continue where they’d left off.

This time Tom tried to find a gentler rhythm that wouldn’t broadcast their activities so blatantly. “How’s this?” he asked through gritted teeth. Each careful thrust still made her moan softly, but at lease the bed had stopped its creaking.

“Better,” Jess sighed, pushing back to meet his controlled strokes. She reached down to circle her clit, chasing her own pleasure now that the fear of being overheard had diminished. “Just like that, baby... god, you feel so good inside me.”

Tom’s pace became its own exquisite torture. Each thrust allowed him to feel her around him. The bed remained quiet, but Jess’s soft moans grew more frequent as her fingers worked her clit with increasing urgency.

“So good,” he grunted, watching his cock drive in and out of her. He could sense she was getting closer, and she confirmed it just seconds later.

“I’m so close,” she moaned. Her movements became more desperate as she chased her release. “Don’t stop... right there... just like that... fuck, I’m gonna cum… I’m gonna cum on your cock!”

Her words pushed Tom dangerously close to the point of no return. The sight of his gorgeous wife working herself closer to orgasm while he maintained that torturously controlled pace was almost more than he could bear.

“Gonna cum,” Jess moaned as her fingers moved frantically against her clit. “Oh god, Tom... I’m gonna cum so hard!”

The flutter of her inner walls around his cock destroyed the last of his control. Tom’s hips snapped forward harder and harder, making Jess bite down on the pillow to muffle her cries.

The memory of Bob’s massive cock spurting those impressive loads fueled his frenzy, making him want to mark his territory, to prove his own virility even if his output would pale in comparison. Her pussy felt like heaven, gripping him perfectly, and the combination of physical pleasure with the forbidden images in his mind pushed him past the point of reason.

“Inside,” he demanded through gritted teeth as his own orgasm approached. “Want to fill this pussy up...”

“We shouldn’t,” Jess protested weakly, even as her body clenched around him. “Not safe...” But her actions contradicted her concerns as she pushed her ass back harder against him, taking him deeper.

The risk only heightened their shared pleasure as they orgasmed together. Jess’s pussy clamped down hard as she came, milking his cock as Tom exploded and pumped hot cum into his wife’s spasming pussy.

Tom’s hips continued to move with shallow, restrained thrusts savoring the aftershocks of their shared orgasm. His teeth clenched with the effort of maintaining control as pleasure rippled through him. He fought to prolong the final precious moments joined together, each gentle thrust sending shivers down his spine as her pussy continued to milk his sensitive cock.

They finally collapsed together onto the mattress, Tom’s weight pressing Jess into the sheets as they both struggled to catch their breath, sweaty and spent. His softening cock slipped from her well-fucked pussy, followed immediately by a thick glob of cum that leaked onto their sheets.

Their breathing gradually returned to normal as Tom rolled to his side, pulling Jess against his chest. He'd cum harder than he could ever remember, his whole body still tingling from the intensity of his release.

Yet even as satisfaction washed over him, an unwanted image flashed through his mind: Bob's massive cock erupting, painting his chest and belly in volume that made Tom's output seem pathetic in comparison. Where Tom had managed to leak a small puddle onto their sheets, Bob had covered himself like icing on a cake.

His eyes traced the cum running down Jess's inner thigh. What would it look like if it was Bob's load leaking from her instead? Would it flow like a river rather than this trickle? The thought filled him with a confusing mix of inadequacy and arousal.

"You really filled me up," Jess said, her tone playful but eyes wide. "Like, seriously filled me up. I can literally feel it swimming around in there." She moved her hand to her flat stomach, perhaps already imagining it swelling with their child.

Her words sent a wave of panic through Tom. "Shit, you're right," he replied, reality crashing back. "I'm sorry, I got carried away. I wasn't thinking straight." He wasn't just apologizing for the creampie anymore, he was apologizing for the forbidden thoughts that had driven him to such reckless abandon.

"We both did." She sat up carefully, causing more of his cum to drip down her thigh. The sight was both erotic and slightly alarming. "I should probably clean up. Maybe get Plan B tomorrow? Unless..." She bit her lip and contemplated their situation, their dreams, their future together. "Unless we want to risk it? I mean, we do want kids eventually..."

Tom stared at the wet spot darkening their sheets, evidence of his loss of control. He thought of the implications, considered their financial situation, their careers, the timing. "It's your choice," he said finally, reaching out to trace his fingers along her spine. "But maybe... maybe we let fate decide this one?"

She smiled, leaning to kiss him tenderly before carefully standing. "I'm going to clean up now." She gestured at the trails of cum marking her thighs. "But... maybe we skip the Plan B. What happens, happens?" Her words carried both excitement and nervous energy.

She made her way to their bathroom with care while his cum continued to leak from her pussy.

In the bedroom, Tom lay back against their pillows, processing everything that had happened. As his post-orgasmic haze began to fade, post-nut clarity came crashing as his rational mind reasserted control. What the fuck had he just done? He'd gotten so worked up watching their tenant cum to photos of his wife that he'd filled her

unprotected pussy with cum. He'd practically put on a show for Bob, letting their bed frame broadcast their activities while entertaining fantasies about his wife struggling to accommodate their tenant's impressive equipment.

The worst part? It felt so good. He felt simultaneously guilty and aroused, ashamed and satisfied. His body felt relaxed after of one of the most intense orgasms he'd ever experienced, yet his mind tortured him with questions about what kind of husband gets off on another man lusting after his wife.

But most of all, he felt closer to her than ever before. Their intimacy had reached new heights, driven by forces he was only beginning to understand. Laying there in the aftermath, listening to the soft sounds of her cleaning herself in the bathroom, Tom realized their relationship had shifted into uncharted territory. There would be no going back.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 03

Jess woke up Sunday morning nestled against Tom's frame. His arm lay heavy across her waist and his fingers splayed over her flat stomach where their potential child might already be growing. She lay still, cherishing the rare quiet. There were no buzzing text messages or calendar reminders, just birds chirping outside and the sound of Tom's deep breathing behind her.

When she shifted her hips to find a more comfortable position, she felt it, the unmistakable bump of Tom's morning wood pressing against her ass. A wicked smile curved her lips. Sunday mornings usually meant pancakes drizzled in maple syrup but today she craved a different breakfast.

Moving carefully to avoid waking him, Jess gently pushed Tom onto his back. She then hooked her fingers into the waistband of his boxers and tugged them down just enough to free his cock.

She then positioned herself between his thighs wearing nothing but the tiny black lace panties she'd put on last night. She stretched out on her elbows and stomach, feet crossed at the ankles and swaying playfully in the air. This was her domain, where she wielded absolute power with her lips and tongue and skill. Her hand wrapped around his cock, holding him steady as she leaned forward.

Starting at the seam just above his balls, she dragged her tongue up his entire length in one wet stroke. When she reached the tip, her tongue swirled around the ridge, collecting the first beads of precum. The familiar taste of him, salt and musk and something uniquely Tom, made her moan around him as she took him fully into her mouth.

Tom's fingers found her silky hair before his eyes fully opened. "Fuck, Jess," he groaned as Jess hollowed her cheeks and applied suction. "Keep doing that thing with your tongue..."

Jess happily obeyed, rubbing her tongue against his frenulum, the ultra-sensitive spot that often had him twitching and bucking his hips. She worked it with the flat of her tongue before taking him deeper, not stopping until her nose nestled in the coarse hair at his base. Through her lashes, she watched how his jaw clenched and brow furrowed, the vein in his temple pulsing.

"Holy fuck," he gasped as his fingers tightened in her hair.

She released him with a pop and offered a smile as her lips glistened with saliva. “Good morning, handsome,” she purred. Her tongue darted out to catch more precum leaking from his tip before eagerly swallowed him again.

Jess’ technique was flawless, refined through years of exploration and a natural talent for reading her partner’s responses. She alternated between sucking and slurping, varying pressure and speed with the expertise of a virtuoso. One hand cradled his balls while the other stroked his shaft in counterpoint to her bobbing head, creating pleasure that had his toes curling.

Tom watched Jess closely. The wet, obscene sounds of her mouth mixed with his ragged breathing filled their bedroom. His mind drifted, not to the sensation, but to the mystery that had always nagged at him: where had she learned to suck cock like this?

He’d never directly asked but he’d always wondered about the lucky bastards who’d helped her develop these skills. His mind drifted to what she’d told him about her past lovers.

Michael, her high school sweetheart, couldn’t have taught her this. Jess had described their innocent explorations, how they’d fumbled through sex together, neither really knowing what they were doing.

Then there was Nate, her first serious college boyfriend, the fitness freak who’d shaped Jess’s body consciousness. She’d kept the sexual details wrapped in vague descriptions. An “active sex life” was all she’d offered before adding the Valentine’s Day gut-punch of finding him balls-deep in another woman.

Then finally Marco, the basketball player, the “brief rebound” she’d mentioned with dismissive casualness. Tom’s gut told him there was more meat on those bones, stories untold, nights unaccounted for.

He imagined a younger Jess, still finding herself, still learning the tricks of her trade. He imagined her on her knees before some faceless man, being coached through suppressing her gag reflex, discovering the pressure of tongue, mastering the vacuum seal of lips that now transported him to another dimension.

His imagination went to the possibility of hidden experiences, of unnamed men and secret encounters that contributed to her expertise. Instead of jealousy, these thoughts only fueled his arousal.

Though he’d never admit it, part of him hated how easily she took his entire length, going balls deep without any strain. He fantasized about being thick enough to stretch those lips wide, long enough to make her gag and make her eyes water when she tried to swallow him whole.

He remembered last night, how Bob's massive cock flashed in his mind while she went down on him. The same thoughts continued to occupy his mind. How would she handle something that size? Would she struggle?

"Fuck, princess..." The word escaped before he could catch it.

Jess's throat tightened around him briefly before she pulled back, releasing his cock from her mouth.

"You said that yesterday too, and you don't usually call me that," she observed, her tone casual but eyes sharp.

"Just felt right. Uh… you don't like it?"

"No, I do," she said thoughtfully, her hand still stroking him. "It's just… different." She punctuated her words by swallowing him again in one smooth motion.

"Oh fuck, babe…"

Jess could feel him getting close from the way his breathing changed and the way his balls tightened in her hand. She doubled her efforts, bobbing her head faster while maintaining suction.

"Gonna cum," Tom warned. "So fucking close."

When his orgasm hit, it was with an intensity that had him arching off the mattress. Jess took everything he offered, swallowing eagerly as her hands milked his shaft and massaged his balls. Only when she was certain she'd extracted every drop did she release him with a final, loving kiss to his sensitive tip.

"Jesus," Tom panted, collapsing back against the pillows. "What brought that on?"

Jess slithered up his body and settled against his chest, her cheek pressed to his racing heart. "Just wanted to show my husband how much I appreciate him," she murmured "And maybe remind him what he's got waiting at home after work."

As their breathing steadied, Jess lazily traced the faint scar on Tom's shoulder, a remnant from a college intramural football injury. "I can't believe how amazing this weekend's been," she mused. "If we keep this up, I might need a wheelchair. My legs feel like jelly."

Tom's arms tightened around her. "Sorry if I was too rough," he said softly. "I just couldn't help myself."

"Don't apologize," she said smiling, trailing her fingers down his chest. "I loved every second of it. Just... maybe we take it a little easier for the next few days?" Her hand moved to her stomach. "Especially since we might have started something life changing last night."

Tom's hand covered hers, their fingers intertwining. "Any regrets? About not using protection?"

"No," Jess replied after a thoughtful pause. "I mean, we've been talking about starting a family. Maybe this is the universe telling us it's time." She bit her lip. "What about you? Second thoughts?"

"None," Tom assured her.

The tender moment shattered as Bob's power tools roared to life below them. Jess tensed. "He's certainly… enthusiastic about home improvement."

Tom scowled at the ceiling. "Probably rebuilding the entire fucking kitchen."

"Speaking of Bob," Jess propped herself up to look at Tom. "Those photos you two took yesterday... I looked professional, right? Not... too much?" Her voice carried a hint of uncertainty, as if seeking reassurance while simultaneously aware of how provocative the images had been.

Tom remembered exactly how revealing the wet fabric had been. If she only knew what Bob had done with those photos... "You looked incredible," he said instead. "Like a Victoria's Secret model… but better."

"You're hopelessly biased," she laughed, playfully swatting his chest. "But thank you. It felt good, actually. Reminded me of my modeling days. But I probably shouldn't have let things get quite so... provocative. Bob probably thinks we're crazy."

"I'm sure he was impressed," he managed, the understatement of the year given what he'd witnessed.

"We should probably get up," Jess murmured. "I want to get groceries done before it gets packed. We should probably hit the shower first."

"You're right. Shower sounds good." He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "Want company?"

Jess smiled as she moved. "Always," she replied, stretching as she stood. "But just washing," she added with a playful but firm tone. "I'm not kidding about being sore."

An hour after breakfast, Tom pushed their cart through Whole Foods following a few steps behind Jess, watching the sway of her hypnotic hips as she prowled the aisles. The heat had forced a practical wardrobe choice, a light-yellow sundress that danced around her thighs with each step and showcased her toned shoulders and the slope of her collarbone. She had her blonde hair pulled back in a careless bun that somehow made her more appealing than if she'd spent an hour styling it.

A pair of young moms pushing a stroller did a double take as Jess passed, their envious glances on her seemingly endless legs. Their matching athleisure outfits and fresh blowouts suddenly seemed inadequate next to Jess' natural radiance. Their synchronized head turn to watch her pass would have been comical if it wasn't so predictable.

Looking at his wife, a wave of gratitude washed over him. With her looks and charm, she could have easily chosen an easier path, any life she wanted. There were plenty of wealthy men who would have kept her dripping in luxury, pampered in penthouses with endless credit cards and daily spa treatments. Tech billionaires, hedge fund managers, and real estate moguls would have fought for the chance to shower her with diamonds and designer everything. She could have been sunbathing on some Mediterranean yacht right now instead of doing grocery runs in suburban Austin.

Or she could have capitalized on her looks in other ways. With her face and body, she could easily have been an Instagram influencer or OnlyFans model, raking in more monthly subscriber money than his annual salary.

Instead, she chose this life with him. She chose early morning alarms, client meetings, grocery shopping on the weekends, and building something together from the ground up. She chose love over luxury, partnership over pampering. Even after his cryptocurrency disaster, she stayed, working alongside him to rebuild their savings. The thought filled Tom with equal parts guilt and gratitude. He loved her to death.

Jess paused at the organic produce aisle, her manicured fingers hovering over a rainbow of bell peppers. "We need three for the stir fry," she mused. Her brow furrowed as she began inspecting each vegetable, testing for firmness, checking for blemishes.

"What do you think, babe?" Jess turned to Tom holding up two nearly identical specimens.

"Whatever makes you happy," he replied, earning that eye roll he secretly loved.

"You could at least pretend to care about what we eat," she teased, bagging the peppers.

"Oh, I care," he replied, stepping close to kiss her temple. "I care about how sexy you look when you're being all domestic."

"Such a shameless flatterer," she accused, smiling. "We need to hit the seafood counter before the lunch crowd."

They hadn't made it halfway there before some poor bastard pushing a stroller nearly took out an entire display of garbanzo beans, his neck craning like a cartoon character

as Jess passed. Tom couldn't blame him. He remembered that feeling of first seeing Jess across a crowded room six years ago.

At the seafood counter, Jess's presence commanded immediate attention. "Wild-caught Alaskan, please. No..." Her nose wrinkled at the offered fillet. "The deeper pink one there. Yes, that one. Thank you."

As they moved around the store, their cart filled steadily with organic food, grass fed this, and free range that. The snack aisle brought their playful conflict to the surface.

"Will this pass inspection?" Tom asked, placing jalapeño chips in their cart with feigned ignorance.

"Tom, no. Absolutely not." Jess plucked the jalapeño chips from their cart. "We've been over this. These have MSG and artificial coloring. They're basically poison in a bag."

"Delicious poison. Exactly why they're perfect for crunch time." Tom countered, already well aware he wasn't winning this.

Jess held up two options like a prosecutor with damning evidence. "Organic corn chips or quinoa puffs. Choose."

"They taste like cardboard."

"Then I'll make guac to dip them in. Extra garlic, just how you like."

Tom's resistance crumbled like always. This was their dance, her health crusades softened by acts of service. He grabbed the corn chips. "You fight dirty."

"Only because I love you," she replied, rising on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

Near checkout, Jess paused at a display of dark chocolate. Her fingers hovered over a bar with orange infusion, his favorite. Without comment, she added it to their haul. The gesture struck him. Other men saw the trophy wife, a former model with a gorgeous face and a body to die for. To Tom her beauty was the least interesting thing about her.

Their items told the story of their different approaches to food. Jess's selections were all organic, with minimal ingredients. Tom's contributions consisted mainly of snacks and prepared foods that made her roll her eyes affectionately.

"One of these days," she said, arranging their items on the belt, "I'll get you to care about what you put in your body."

"You care enough for both of us," he replied, wrapping an arm around her waist.

As they were loading the paper bags into the trunk, Tom caught another shopper openly staring at his wife. The man quickly looked away when Tom met his gaze but the appreciation in his eyes had been unmistakable.

The drive home was quiet and comfortable in the way only long-term couples know. Jess hummed softly to whatever was playing on the Tesla's sound system while Tom's mind wandered to the parade of admirers they'd encountered. It was always like this with her. She rarely ever tried to be alluring. That was the maddening part. It was effortless. Wherever they went, eyes followed Jess.

It used to drive him crazy, that constant male attention. Back in their early days, every bar and night club felt like a battlefield. Men would materialize from everywhere, armed with cheesy pickup lines and overpriced drinks. "Haven't we met before?" "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" The words didn't matter. Their hands did, always testing boundaries, finding reasons to brush her arm, to touch the small of her back, to settle on her hips. Some would even try to squeeze between them on the dance floor as if Tom was just some inconvenient obstacle rather than her boyfriend.

But now, four years into marriage, he found himself imagining scenarios that would have made his younger self throw punches. What if Jess didn't deflect advances? What if she let a man buy her a drink? What if, just once, she let a man leave his hand on her waist?

The fantasies grew bolder each time he revisited them. He could see it clearly: some nameless man, good-looking but not too good-looking, confident in that easy way that Tom had never mastered. The stranger's hands would find Jess's waist in a crowded club, and instead of moving away, she would stay.

Tom would be across the room, watching. Not intervening, just observing as those hands drifted lower, cupping the perfect ass that Tom believed belonged only to him. His mouth would go dry. His heart would hammer against his ribcage like it wanted out.

His cock, the traitor that it was, stirred at the thought, hardening against his zipper as the fantasy unfurled further in his mind. What if she turned in the stranger's arms? What if she pressed herself against him, breast to chest? What if her lips parted, and the stranger lowered his head, and they…

"I think working from home Tuesday and Thursday makes sense," Jess's voice cut through his thoughts. "The office gets chaotic. Hard to focus with all the noise."

Tom shifted in his seat, willing his erection to subside. "Yeah, good idea," he managed. "I've got meetings most of the week anyway."

They pulled into their driveway to find Bob working on his truck, the hood up and tools spread across a neat workspace he'd created. He wore a grease-stained white tank top that revealed thick forearms.

"Afternoon," Bob called out as they parked, wiping his hands on a shop rag. His eyes moved naturally to Jess as she emerged from the car, though his attention appeared casual. "Good timing. Was planning to look at your unit today, if that works."

"That would be great," Jess replied, smoothing her dress. "Just need to get the groceries inside first."

"Take your time," Bob rumbled. "Got about twenty minutes left here anyway."

Tom watched Bob's eyes follow Jess as she grabbed bags from the trunk. The older man's gaze was subtle but unmistakable, and Tom felt that familiar confusing mix of jealousy and arousal surge through him once again.

Inside their kitchen, Jess turned to Tom. "Babe… I can't stop thinking about Bob…" She bit her lower lip, a nervous habit she'd never quite outgrown. The same concern had nagged at her since waking up, the one she'd mentioned as they lay tangled in sheets after her morning performance. "Do you think he feels weird… I mean with the photos and everything?"

"He seems fine," Tom replied. "Why? Are you worried about it?"

"A little," Jess admitted, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "Maybe we should ask him to delete them?"

Tom's pulse quickened. "Do you want me to ask him?"

Jess considered for a moment, then shook her head. "No," she decided. "On second thought, let's just forget about it. Bringing it up would probably make it more awkward."

"If you're sure," Tom said, relieved.

"I'm sure," Jess nodded. "Let's just focus on getting these groceries put away."

After putting away the groceries, Jess settled onto one of the leather barstools at the kitchen island. Her fingers danced across her iPad's screen as she scrolled through design photos. Tom leaned against the granite countertop watching her face light up.

"Oh, look at this backsplash!" Jess exclaimed, tilting the iPad towards Tom. "Wouldn't that tile pattern look amazing behind the stove? It would completely transform the whole kitchen!"

Tom peered at the mosaic of vibrant blues and whites forming intricate geometric shapes. “It’s beautiful,” he agreed. “But babe, we need to be realistic here. Bob’s coming to fix things, not give us a makeover.”

Jess sighed, her shoulders sagging slightly as she set the iPad down, her earlier enthusiasm deflating. “I know, I know. It’s just... when I see all these beautiful renovations, I can’t help but dream a little. Remember when we first bought this place? We had so many plans.”

Tom rounded the island, wrapping his arms around Jess from behind. He rested his chin on her shoulder and breathed in her floral scented shampoo. “And that’s exactly why I hide the sledgehammer,” he teased, pressing a light kiss to her neck. “Come on, let’s make a realistic list before Bob gets here.”

Jess nodded, straightening her spine, slipping into what Tom affectionately called her ‘interior designer mode’, focused, professional, and authoritative in a way that aroused him slightly. Her fingers, tipped with pink polish, began counting off points. “Okay, let’s see. One: the leaky shower faucet in the master bath. It’s driving me absolutely insane. Two: That squeaky floorboard right by-”

“Our bed,” Tom finished, grinning. “But I kind of like the warning system when you try to sneak out of bed for your midnight snacks.”

Jess gasped, snatching up a nearby dish towel and swinging it at him. “I do not!”

Tom dodged, laughing. “I’ve seen the empty Ben & Jerry’s in the trash, babe. You’re not as stealthy as you think.”

“Fine,” Jess conceded with a laugh. “But that’s not why we need it fixed. It’s just... annoying.”

“Sure, sure,” Tom said. “What’s number three?”

“Three: Some of the cabinets won’t stay shut properly. And four: replacing the kitchen and bathroom faucets.”

Tom nodded. “Good list. Maybe we should just ask for his general recommendations too? He might spot things we’ve missed.”

“Definitely,” Jess agreed. “He seems to have a good eye for these things.”

Tom glanced around their kitchen, taking in the few dirty dishes in the sink and the pile of mail on the counter. “Now, speaking of Bob...”

Jess’s gaze followed his, understanding blooming in her expression. “Right. We should probably clean up a bit. Especially the bedroom and bathroom.”

They shared a look, both aware of the more intimate items that needed to be tucked away before inviting their tenant into their private spaces.

"I'll handle the dishes," Tom offered. "You take the rooms?"

Jess nodded, sliding off the barstool, already moving. "Deal."

They parted ways, each tackling their assigned space, and then reconvened in the living room.

"All clear on my end," Tom reported.

"Same here," Jess confirmed, smoothing down her sundress. "I think we're as ready as we'll ever be."

As if on cue, the doorbell chimed.

"Here we go," Tom murmured, moving towards the front door with Jess close behind.

He opened the door to reveal Bob standing on their porch, notebook and pen in hand.

"Ready to get started?"

"Absolutely," Jess replied, her voice warm and welcoming despite the flutter of nerves in her stomach. She gestured toward their home's interior, suddenly very aware of inviting this strange man into their private space. "Please, come in."

The wooden stairs creaked beneath their feet as they led Bob up to their private sanctuary. When they entered the kitchen, Jess's eyes moved to the wedding picture displayed on their fridge, capturing the moment they fed each other cake, both laughing hard. She felt vulnerable seeing Bob's eyes pass over it, this glimpse into one of their most precious memories.

It was odd and profoundly intimate having a virtual stranger in their space, allowing them to see these little pieces of their life that were reserved for close friends and family. Their kitchen was where they danced while cooking dinner, where Tom made her with coffee in the mornings, where they'd had sex just a couple nights ago. Now this sanctuary was being invaded, examined, categorized.

Just as he had with the downstairs unit, Bob immediately started his methodical inspection. He tested every hinge, every drawer's slide, and opened every cabinet door. He crouched down to examine the plumbing under the sink, checked the caulking, and inspected the faucet connections. He seemed to miss nothing and occasionally jotted down notes in neat handwriting.

"Good bones," he muttered. "But definitely room for improvement."

As Bob continued, Jess smoothed out nonexistent wrinkles and fidgeted with the hem of her sundress. The previous day's photo shoot remained in her mind, making her hyperaware of his presence in their space.

Tom stood slightly behind Jess, his hand resting on the small of her back. He found himself studying Bob's face for any hint of recognition, any suggestion that he was thinking about those provocative pool photos, but Bob's expression remained neutral. His eyes remained focused on the task at hand, his comments purely technical.

When Bob asked for their specific concerns, Jess stepped forward eagerly. "Well, first there's the leaky shower faucet in our master bath."

"Probably just needs new washers," Bob muttered, making another note. "What else?"

"There's this squeaky floorboard right by our bed," Jess continued. "And like you've noticed, some of the kitchen cabinets won't stay shut properly."

"And the faucets," Tom added. "Both kitchen and bathroom could use updating."

Bob nodded. "All good catches. Simple fixes." He ran his fingers along one of the cabinet doors. "These just need their hinges adjusted and maybe some new hardware. As for the faucets..." He turned on the kitchen tap, listening intently. "Yeah, definitely time for an upgrade there."

"We know it's a lot," Jess said quickly. "We don't expect everything at once-"

Bob waved off her concern. "Tell you what, I've got plenty of time on my hands these days. Labor's free."

"Oh… no, we couldn't-" Jess protested.

"I insist," Bob cut in. "Keep me from going stir crazy. Plus, I've got connections with suppliers. Can probably get you 80, maybe 90 percent off retail."

"Ninety percent?" Jess repeated, shocked to hear those words.

"Sometimes more," Bob confirmed, clearly enjoying her reaction. "Depends on the item and supplier, but I know where to find the deals." He flipped to a new page in his notepad. "Let's talk about what you'd really like to do here. Not just fixes. Improvements."

Jess's professional composure crumbled as possibilities flooded her mind. Her words came out faster and her gestures became more animated. "Well, I've been thinking about updating the backsplash, and maybe adding some under-cabinet lighting. Oh! And there's this beautiful sink I saw that would completely transform the space..."

Tom watched as Jess described her vision, her obvious passion animating her features. Bob listened attentively, making notes and asking clarifying questions. That revealed genuine understanding of design principles.

"All doable," Bob assured her. "And with my connections, probably for less than you'd pay for just the basic repairs."

"This is... incredible," Jess breathed, looking around the kitchen with new eyes. Every surface now held possibility rather than limitation.

"Let's check out those other issues?" asked Bob.

In the guest bathroom, Bob identified several minor issues they hadn't even noticed.

Approaching their bedroom, Jess hesitated slightly before opening the door. Bob maintained a careful distance as they moved through the spaces, but the master closet's narrow confines forced them closer together. Jess pressed herself against the doorframe as Bob made his inspections.

Bob quickly found the squeaky floorboard himself. "Easy fix," he declared, crouching to examine it more closely. "But we might need to pull up a section of flooring to do it right."

In the master bathroom, Jess unconsciously crossed her arms over her chest as Bob leaned into their shower, his broad frame filling the glass enclosure where she'd been naked just hours ago. Tom's hand found her back again, his touch protective and possessive.

Bob examined the faucet, tested water pressure, and took more notes, his expression revealing nothing of his thoughts.

"Well," Bob said finally, closing his notepad. "Think I've seen everything. I'll draw up a proper list, price out materials. We can tackle these projects one at a time, do it right."

"Thank you so much," Jess gushed. "This is more than we could have ever hoped for."

At the front door, Bob paused. "I'll get you that list by tomorrow evening," he said, his voice carrying a natural authority Tom was starting to recognize. "Might be able to start on some of the smaller fixes by mid-week."

"No rush," Tom replied. "We really appreciate this."

Bob nodded, stepping outside into the afternoon sun. "Happy to help," he said simply before heading toward his unit.

After Bob left, Jess turned to Tom. "Can you believe it? With those discounts, we'll be able to do some real upgrades!"

"It's definitely an opportunity," he said carefully. "But maybe we should start small, see how it goes?"

"Of course," Jess agreed readily. "We'll be smart about it. But Tom, do you know what contractors charge hourly these days? And those material discounts! This will save us thousands!"

Jess practically danced around, already envisioning improvements. Tom wanted to share her excitement, but he felt uneasy. Bob's generosity was too perfect, too convenient. The sensation nagged at him like a splinter just beneath skin.

"We're so lucky he moved in," Jess continued. "I mean, what are the chances we'd get a tenant who's not only a skilled contractor but willing to help us like this?"

"Pretty lucky," Tom agreed, forcing a smile. He pulled her close. "But let's not get carried away, okay?"

Jess nodded. "Of course." She stretched upward, pressing her lips to his cheek.

Back in the kitchen, Tom and Jess fell into their culinary dance. Tom handled the chicken while Jess chopped the vegetables. The tap-tap-tap of her knife against the cutting board mixed with the sizzle of chicken hitting the hot pan. Steam rose, carrying the scent of garlic and herbs.

"Remember when we couldn't find the pots?" Jess asked, sweeping diced vegetables into a bowl.

Tom flipped a chicken breast, checking for the golden-brown sear. "Now look at us," he said. "All grown up and meal prepping."

"Grown-ups who had sex like teenagers all weekend," Jess teased, playfully bumping him with her hip.

Their hands kept finding each other as they worked. Fingers brushed while passing seasonings, shoulders pressed together reaching for spoons. Each contact was brief but electric.

Tom carefully weighted the rice, vegetables, and chicken before placing them into the waiting glass containers while Jess snapped the lids shut.

"Done!" Jess declared, snapping the final lid into place. "Now we just need to clean up and get ready for tonight."

Tom pulled her close. "Or we could leave the cleanup for later..."

“Don’t you dare,” she laughed, pushing him away with open palms. “I need time to get ready properly. This is a celebration, remember?”

They moved through the cleanup routine, loading the dishwasher, wiping counters, storing containers in the fridge.

“I’m going to make myself beautiful,” Jess announced, heading for the bedroom.

“You already are,” Tom called after her.

The kitchen felt different once she left. It was quieter, emptier somehow. It felt like she took some of the light with her. Tom finished wiping down the counters, his mind already racing ahead to dinner, to the week ahead, to all the changes Bob’s arrival had sparked.

He made his way to his office, knowing he needed to clear some work before they went out. His fingers flew across his laptop keyboard, racing against time to handle the flood of urgent emails. Every few minutes, his mind would drift to Jess preparing for their celebration dinner. The thought of her getting ready, of smooth skin being revealed and covered again made focusing on work nearly impossible.

In their bathroom, Jess stood wrapped in a plush towel, studying her reflection in the mirror. Her skin glowed from her thorough beauty routine. The ritual grounded her even as excitement fluttered in her stomach. This wasn’t just dinner, this was a celebration of everything falling into place.

She opened the frosted glass door at the back of the closet, revealing her carefully curated lingerie collection, and selected a matching set in pale pink, the one Tom always said was “so fucking irresistible”. The lace barely covered anything, which was exactly the point. The bra pushed her breasts up and together while the tiny thong disappeared between her cheeks. Looking at herself in the mirror, she smiled. Tom wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off her later.

A burgundy dress slid over her body, hugging her tight while maintaining an air of sophistication. The neckline showed just enough cleavage to be enticing, and the hemline hit mid-thigh, perfect for both the restaurant and whatever would come after.

When she finally appeared from the bedroom, she found Tom already dressed in his tailored charcoal suit, the one she always said made him look like he belonged on a GQ cover. Their eyes met across the room.

“Jesus Christ,” he breathed. “You look incredible.”

Jess did a slow turn, giving him the full effect. “You clean up pretty nice yourself, handsome.”

The drive to the restaurant was charged with sexual tension. Tom's hand found her thigh, his fingers tracing patterns on her skin just below the hem of her dress.

"We might not make it to dinner," she warned.

"Would that be so terrible?" His fingers inched higher.

"Behave yourself," she laughed, crossing her legs to trap his wandering hand. "We're celebrating, remember?"

The valet's eyes widened when Jess stepped out of Tom's Lexus, her dress riding up to reveal a dangerous flash of toned thigh. The boy couldn't have been older than twenty, and he fumbled with the keys as he handed Tom the claim ticket, his eyes on Jess a heartbeat too long.

Tom's hand rested possessively at the small of Jess's back as they followed the maître d' through the dining room. She felt eyes on her as they'd entered, but she was used to that kind of attention, had been since puberty hit and transformed her from awkward teen to head-turning beauty.

The restaurant oozed with elegance. Crystal chandeliers cast intimate pools of light across white tablecloths. The silverware gleamed, the wine glasses sparkled, and classical music played softly in the background.

Tom pulled out her chair, his fingertips brushing the nape of her neck as she sat. The touch sent a current down her spine, a private reminder of last night.

"Good evening." Their waiter materialized beside them, dressed in crisp black and white, with perfect posture. "My name is David, and I'll be taking care of you tonight. May I start you with something from the bar?"

Tom ordered a glass of wine, but Jess hesitated. "Just sparkling water with lime for now, please."

Tom's eyebrow rose slightly at her choice. They shared a look loaded with possibility. Could she already be pregnant?

"So," Tom began once David had left with their drink orders. "Tell me more about the Skyline presentation. I want to hear everything."

Jess leaned forward, describing the presentation. "God, you should have seen Chris Webb's face when we showed him the renderings. His jaw practically hit the floor. And Margaret... she looked ready to burst with pride. You know how she never shows emotion? She actually smiled, Tom. Twice."

"I wish I could have been there," Tom said softly. "But this Meridian implementation is kicking my ass."

“Hey.” Jess reached across the table to squeeze his hand. “You’re going to nail it. Senior Consultant is practically yours already.”

Tom turned her hand over, his thumb tracing slow circles on her palm. “The travel, though. Week-long trips sometimes. I don’t want to leave you alone that much.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Jess assured him with easy confidence. “Besides, maybe by then we’ll have something else to keep me busy.” Her free hand drifted to her flat stomach.

Their eyes met across the candlelight, both remembering Friday night’s passion. Their weekend had been a rediscovery of each other, proof that their connection was stronger than ever.

David returned with their drinks, the stem of Tom’s wine glass pinched precisely between his fingers. “Tonight, Chef has prepared a magnificent Dover sole,” he began. “It’s served with a lemon beurre blanc and seasonal vegetables harvested from local farms this morning.” Jess found herself only half listening, distracted by Tom’s foot finding hers under the table.

“That sounds perfect,” Jess said, not bothering to open her menu.

“Make that two,” Tom added, his eyes never leaving his wife’s face.

Once David left, their conversation turned to more personal matters. “Mom called earlier,” she said. “She’s asking when we’re coming to visit. I think we should tell them about... you know?”

“The maybe-baby?” Tom’s voice dropped lower. “Your mom will have the nursery designed before we hang up…. you don’t think it’s too soon?”

“Maybe,” Jess admitted. “But I’m excited.”

Their fingers remained intertwined on the table as the conversation shifted, touching on Jess’s sister’s new boyfriend and Bob’s surprising offer to help with home renovations.

“Oh, and Hannah called earlier,” Jess said. “Apparently the new boyfriend drives a Porsche and has some tech startup that’s about to revolutionize something or other.”

Tom chuckled. “Your sister does have a type. What happened to the accountant?”

“Dumped him last month.” Jess rolled her eyes with affectionate exasperation. “Something about him being too safe and boring. She’s twenty-two. Everything seems boring to her. But Mom says this new guy, Trevor, seems different. More mature.”

“Let me guess, he’s at least thirty-five?”

"Thirty-six," Jess confirmed with a alight shake of her head. "Han swears the age gap doesn't matter, that he understands her in ways guys her age can't."

"Classic," Tom chuckled. "But fourteen years is really pushing it. Your dad must be thrilled."

"Oh, he's furious," Jess laughed. "But you know Han, telling her not to do something just makes her want it more."

Their entrees arrived, perfectly plated and steaming. David arranged their dishes while describing each component. The Dover sole glistened under the intimate lighting, but Tom barely noticed the food. His attention remained fixed on Jess, on the way candlelight played across her features, on how her tongue darted out to wet her lips.

"Everything looks wonderful," Jess told David. "Thank you."

Once they were alone again, Tom leaned forward. "Have I told you how absolutely stunning you look tonight?"

"Only about twenty times," Jess laughed. "But I don't mind hearing it again."

They fell into comfortable silence as they enjoyed their meals, exchanging glances between bites. Tom's foot continued its teasing journey up her calf while Jess retaliated by letting soft little moans escape as she savored particularly delicious bites.

"That's not fair," Tom chuckled quietly after a particularly breathy sound of appreciation.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Jess replied innocently.

Their conversation drifted to the upcoming work party on Friday. "You'll actually make it this time?" Jess asked. "No last-minute emergencies?"

"Promise," Tom assured her.

As they finished their entrees, David appeared to clear their plates. "Can I interest you in our dessert menu?"

Tom and Jess shared a look. "Just the check, please," Tom replied.

While they waited for the check, Jess excused herself to the ladies' room. Tom watched her walk away, noting how other diners' eyes followed her progress across the restaurant. Men's gazes lingered on the sway of her hips while women studied her with that blend of admiration and resentment reserved for beautiful women who made it look effortless.

When Jess returned, there was something different about her, a slight flush coloring her cheeks, a secretive smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She slid back into her seat and under cover of the tablecloth, pressed something into his palm. The delicate fabric was still warm from her body, still carrying her scent.

Tom's brain short-circuited as he realized what he was holding. Her thong. Lacy, tiny, and unmistakably just removed.

"A preview of home," she whispered.

Tom nearly choked on his remaining wine. "Jesus, Jess..."

Tom's fingers clenched around it, his cock hardening instantly knowing that she was sitting across from him completely bare beneath her dress, in the middle of one of Austin's most upscale restaurants, surrounded by other diners who had no idea of the delicious secret they shared. He discreetly slipped the thong into his suit pocket, though his hand kept returning to touch it.

David returned with the leather check presenter, placing it by Tom. "I hope everything was to your satisfaction this evening," he said.

"It was perfect," Tom managed. He barely registered the total as he slipped his credit card inside, his mind consumed by the lacy evidence in his pocket and the knowledge of what waited beneath Jess's dress.

The woman across from him looked so composed yet was anything but. Jess sipped her sparkling water, the picture of innocence, save for the wicked glint in her eyes. Her tongue darted out to capture a droplet from her lip, the simple gesture transformed into something obscene by the context of what she'd just done.

The drive home was torture. Jess's dress had ridden up, revealing bare thigh that Tom couldn't stop staring at whenever they hit red lights. His hand found her leg again, sliding higher until he encountered flesh where lace should have been.

"Fuck," he groaned when his fingers found her slick.

"Eyes on the road, baby," Jess teased. "Almost home."

Tom hardly remembered to put the car in park before yanking the keys from the ignition. They stumbled up the walkway together, Jess's laughter bright in the night air as Tom fumbled with the front door key.

They barely made it through their front door before Tom had Jess pressed against the wall, his mouth devouring hers with desperate hunger. His hands roamed her body, squeezing her ass beneath her hiked-up dress. Her arms snaked around his neck as she pulled herself up, wrapping those long legs around his waist.

“At least take me upstairs,” Jess laughed breathlessly against his mouth, though the way her body arched against his suggested she wouldn’t actually mind being taken right there in the entryway.

Tom gripped her thighs as he carried her up the stairs. Her dress had bunched around her waist, leaving her completely exposed from the waist down, a fact that registered in Tom’s brain as the hottest thing he’d ever seen.

Once inside their bedroom, he kicked their bedroom door shut behind them, the sound echoing through the quiet house. Jess’s breathless laugh turned into a startled gasp as he tossed her onto their king-sized bed. She bounced once, her hair fanning out across the pillows.

Tom stood at the foot of the bed, loosening his tie with one hand while the other reached into his pocket to withdraw her thong. It still carried a hint of her scent that made his mouth water.

“You,” he said, dangling the scrap of lace between them, “are going to be the death of me.”

Jess smiled up at him. She shifted her position, slowly spreading her thighs. She watched his eyes track the movement. “But what a way to go,” she purred.

Tom tossed the thong aside and reached for the hem of her dress. The silk rubbed against her skin, creating a sensory trail that made goosebumps rise as he slowly pulled it upwards. When he reached her breasts, Jess arched her back, silently begging him to continue. He complied, sliding the dress higher until it bunched beneath her arms.

“Lift up,” he instructed.

Jess raised her arms above her head and Tom dragged the dress over it. When her face emerged, her hair was tousled, her cheeks flushed, her eyes heavy.

Tom tossed the dress aside without a second glance, letting it fall forgotten to the floor. His gaze raked over her body, drinking in the sight of her sprawled across their bed wearing nothing but the pale pink lace bra.

“Gorgeous,” he breathed. “Absolutely fucking gorgeous.”

Jess reached for his belt. “Your turn. Too many clothes.”

Tom caught her wrists with one swift movement, pinning them above her head with one hand. His other hand traced the lace edge of her bra. “I’ve been thinking about this all night,” he confessed.

His mouth found her neck, trailing hot kisses down to her collarbone. When he reached her breasts, he released her wrists to unhook her bra. The lace fell away, revealing hardened nipples begging for attention.

“Baby,” Jess whimpered as his mouth closed around one peak. Her fingers gripped his hair, holding him against her as he teased and sucked. Her back arched off the bed, pressing more of herself into his hungry mouth.

“Tom,” she gasped. “I need you so bad, baby...”

Their hands collided as they both reached for his remaining clothing, fumbling with buttons and zippers. His suit jacket hit the floor, followed by his dress shirt. Jess’s fingers traced the lean muscles of his chest, appreciating how his regular running had kept him fit. His pants, boxers, and socks were the last to go, kicked off the bed to join the growing pile of discarded clothing on the floor.

Tom sat back against the headboard, his cock standing proudly, the tip already glistening with pre-cum. He reached for Jess, pulling her into his lap so she straddled him. Cowgirl was one of their favorite positions because it allowed them to kiss deeply while maintaining full body contact. It let her control the depth and pace while still allowing him to thrust upward.

Their mouths met in a passionate kiss. Tom’s hands roamed her back, tracing her spine, cupping her ass, pulling her closer, her hardened nipples rubbing against him.

Tom’s hand slid between their bodies and found her core, fingers sliding through her slickness. “Already so wet for me,” he groaned against her mouth, two fingers circling her entrance.

“Yeah,” she admitted, rolling her hips against his hand, trying to guide his fingers where she needed them most. “Couldn’t stop thinking about this... about you... about your cock filling me up...”

“Lay back,” Tom commanded softly, his hands already guiding her movement. “Let me taste you.”

Jess fell back against the pillows, spreading her legs in invitation. Her hands reached down to part her folds, giving him an unobstructed view. Tom settled between her thighs, his shoulders creating space for himself as he pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses to her inner thighs. His breath ghosted over her, making her shiver with anticipation.

The first broad stroke of his tongue had her gasping, hips bucking up instinctively to increase the contact. Just as she knew exactly how to suck his cock, he knew precisely how to eat her pussy. Years of intimate knowledge guided his movements as his

tongue licked a path between her folds before circling her swollen clit. His hands gripped her thighs, holding her open for his feast.

"Right there," she moaned when he hit a particularly sensitive spot, her fingers tangling in his hair to hold him in place. "Don't stop..."

Tom doubled his efforts, alternating between broad strokes of his tongue and focused attention on her clit. When he slid two fingers inside her, curling them upward to find that sensitive spot, Jess's thighs began to tremble uncontrollably on either side of his head.

"Oh god," she gasped, her internal muscles clenching around his fingers. "Tom... I'm gonna..."

Her words dissolved into a sharp cry of pleasure as orgasm crashed through her. Tom didn't let up, working her through each pulse of pleasure until she was gasping and oversensitive, her hands now pushing weakly at his shoulders.

When he finally pulled back, his chin glistening with evidence of her pleasure, Jess grabbed his shoulders and pulled him up for a deep kiss. She could taste herself on his tongue, the flavor making her moan into his mouth.

"Need you inside me," she begged between kisses, her hands reaching between them to find his hardness. She stroked him firmly, feeling him pulse in her grip. "Please..."

Tom aligned himself at her entrance, the broad head of his cock sliding against the folds of her pussy, coating himself in her arousal. Her thighs trembled with anticipation as she felt him positioning himself. "Ready for me?" he asked, though he knew the answer.

"Yes," she breathed, tilting her hips to make his entry easier. "Fill me up, baby..."

Tom entered her with agonizing slowness, savoring the sensation of her body yielding to his. He watched her face contort with pleasure as he filled her inch by inch, her inner walls stretching to accommodate his thickness, gripping him. When he finally bottomed out, their pelvic bones pressed together, they both groaned at the sensation of being fully joined.

"Fuck," Tom breathed, his forehead pressed against hers, their breaths mingling in the small space between them. "You feel so fucking good. So tight. So perfect."

Jess's legs wrapped around his waist, her ankles locking behind his back, pulling him even deeper inside her. Her heels dug into the muscles of his ass, urging him to move. Their mouths met in a desperate kiss, tongues mimicking the intimate joining of their bodies as Tom began thrusting.

Jess raked her nails down his back. “Harder,” she begged, her voice breaking on the word. “Need to feel you... all of you...”

Tom’s hips snapped forward with renewed urgency, the sound of skin meeting skin filling their bedroom. The headboard thumped rhythmically against the wall with each thrust, but neither of them thought about whether Bob might hear from the apartment below. In this moment, nothing existed outside of their joining.

“Yes,” Jess cried out. “Just like that... don’t stop... right there...”

Her inner walls began to flutter around him as another orgasm approached. Tom could feel his own release building, pressure gathering. He was so close. The sight of Jess writhing beneath him, taking everything he had to give, pushed him rapidly toward the edge.

“Gonna cum,” he warned, his rhythm becoming erratic as control slipped away. “Want to fill you up...”

“Please,” Jess moaned, her hips rising to meet each thrust, her inner muscles clamping down on him. “Want to feel you cum inside me... want to feel you pump me full...”

Her words pushed Tom over the edge. With a final thrust, he buried himself completely inside her and exploded just as Jess’s own orgasm hit, her pussy greedily milking him for every drop.

They stayed joined as the aftershocks subsided. Neither wanted to break their connection just yet, to return to the world outside their bed. But finally, Tom rolled to his side, bringing Jess with him so they remained face to face. She curled into his chest, their legs still tangled together, his softening cock still nestled inside her. His cum leaked from her well-fucked pussy when he finally slipped out, marking their sheets with the evidence of their passion.

The knowledge that he’d now pumped two loads inside her unprotected womb within 24 hours sent electricity through his spent body. After years of responsible birth control, they’d thrown caution to the wind twice in two days. The reckless abandon of it all only heightened the intimacy of the moment.

“I love you,” he murmured, pressing his lips to her forehead. “So fucking much.”

“Love you too,” she replied softly. “Always have, always will.”

“Two loads,” he murmured. “Definitely improving our chances.”

“It feels right,” she whispered.

They exchanged gentle kisses as their heartbeats gradually returned to normal. Then sleep began to claim them. Before drifting off completely, Tom pulled the sheets over them, covering them in warmth.

The next morning, Tom sat at his desk buried in the Meridian implementation that seemed to grow more complex by the hour. His monitor glowed with endless spreadsheets, transforming what had once seemed like a promising opportunity into a demanding beast that consumed every available moment. His coffee had gone cold hours ago, forgotten between urgent emails and crisis calls.

A notification pinged. Another fire to extinguish. Another reason to miss dinner. Another brick in the wall between his professional ambitions and his marriage.

His eyes drifted to the framed photo on his desk of Jess from their anniversary dinner last year. Her head was thrown back in laughter, blonde hair over bare shoulders, the kind of candid moment that made people tun and look. Miles had commented on it. "Man, your wife gets hotter every time I see her. You sure won the lottery there, buddy."

Tom had smiled and said nothing. The old him would have bristled, changed the subject, maybe even turned the photo away. The new him just nodded, letting the compliment sink in like a drug, riding the strange high of another man's desire for what was his.

His phone buzzed with a text from Jess: "Missing you already. Can't stop thinking about last night."

The memory flooded back, making him shift in his ergonomic chair. He adjusted himself beneath his desk, paranoid someone might walk by and catch him with a hard-on like some teenage intern.

"Miss you too," he typed back. "But I need to focus."

"I understand. Just know I'm thinking about you. Have a productive day!"

He set the phone face-down, trying to redirect his attention to the crisis at hand. His inbox showed thirty-seven unread emails.

An hour later, his phone vibrated.

"Had the most productive morning. Just finished the Skyline mock-ups. Margaret loved them. Heading to lunch meeting with potential client. Will send pics of the food to make you jealous of my expense account."

He smiled. "Show-off. I'm stuck with vending machine pretzels."

"Poor baby. I'll feed you properly tonight."

The innuendo wasn't lost on him.

The afternoon crawled by slowly. Crisis calls came one after another. Email chains multiplied like cancer cells. Beneath it all pulsed the persistent throb of arousal whenever his mind wandered to the weekend's events. Every time he closed his eyes, he heard Jess' desperate moans from their passionate nights. He saw her lips wrapped around Bob's massive cock in fantasies he couldn't control.

During a lull between calls, Tom found himself opening Instagram on his phone, muscle memory taking him to Jess's account. It was private now. She'd locked it down shortly after they started dating, deleting the provocative modeling shots that used to pull hundreds of desperate comments and DMs. Tom sometimes wondered if she missed that attention, that power.

He imagined her account public again, visible to the world. He imagined the avalanche of notifications, the fire emojis, the thirsty messages from strangers detailing exactly what they'd do to his wife given half a chance.

His phone lit up again: "Heading to yoga now! Don't work too late. I'm making that chicken you love."

Tom glanced at the time: 3:00 PM. His afternoon calendar still showed three more meetings and dozens of unread emails. There was no way he'd be leaving on time.

"Can't wait to see you," he typed back.

He set his phone down and rubbed his eyes, trying to focus on the spreadsheet in front of him. But his mind refused to cooperate, drifting instead to Jess in her yoga class. She'd be wearing those skintight leggings that seemed painted on. She'd be bending and stretching, her perfect ass in the air, her breasts straining against her sports bra as she moved through poses. Other men in the class would be watching, inevitably. Perhaps one of them would approach her after class, compliment her form, suggest they grab a smoothie...

Tom shook his head. What the fuck was wrong with him? His beautiful, talented wife was excelling at her career, maintaining her health, and planning to cook him dinner, and here he sat spinning sexual fantasies about her with strangers.

At 4:30, his phone buzzed again.

"Just finished yoga. SO sweaty. Instructor was brutal today. This new guy, Derek, doesn't believe in child's pose apparently. My thighs are screaming. Heading home now to shower and start dinner."

Tom's fingers hovered over the keyboard. "New guy? What happened to Amber?"

"On maternity leave. Derek's just filling in. He's good though. Really pushes everyone."

Tom's mind immediately constructed an image of this Derek: tall, lean, probably sporting a man-bun and tribal tattoos. Probably mid-thirties with perfect abs and a tantric sex certification. Probably watched Jess the entire class, offered hands-on "adjustments" to her poses.

"Is he cute?" Tom typed, then immediately deleted it. What the fuck was he doing? Instead, he wrote: "Looking forward to dinner. Should be home by 7."

Eventually, the clock showed 6 PM. One more hour, he promised himself. Just one more hour to get ahead of tomorrow's demands. He lost himself in logistics workflows and implementation schedules, time slipping through his fingers until his phone vibrated against the desk. It was an actual call this time.

"Hey handsome," Jess's voice carried a familiar note of disappointment beneath the warmth. "Still at the office?"

"Just wrapping up," he lied, looking at his endless to-do list. "Give me an hour?"

Jess's sigh was soft but pointed, years of similar conversations compressed into a single exhale. "Dinner will be in the fridge then. I miss you."

"Miss you too," he replied.

Finally, at 7:30 PM, he admitted defeat. The work would still be there tomorrow, multiplying in the dark. He packed his briefcase and rode the elevator down past floors of other corporate warriors fighting their own battles.

Their house glowed warmly as he pulled into the driveway where Jess' Tesla and Bob's truck sat in their designated spaces. Tom grabbed his briefcase, feeling the weight of responsibility and neglect, and headed inside to whatever remained of his evening with Jess.

The scent hit him first: garlic, rosemary, lemon, her signature roast chicken that always made their house feel like an actual home. Tom found Jess in the kitchen, plating his dinner. The sight of her like this, casual in yoga pants and one of his old college t-shirts, her blonde hair piled messily atop her head, made his heart ache.

"Hey stranger," she said, turning to face him. Her smile was genuine despite everything. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten where we live."

Guilt surged through him. "I'm sorry," he replied, setting his briefcase down. "The Meridian implementation is-"

“I know, I know.” She cut him off, crossing the space to press a gentle kiss to his lips. “Your dinner’s ready. Go shower first. You’ll feel better.”

The hot water provided temporary relief for muscles knotted from hunching over keyboards and smartphones. But his mind refused the same cleansing, drifting instead to reckless creampies and potential pregnancy.

The doorbell’s unexpected chime cut through the house just as Tom finished dressing. He glanced at his watch. 8:15 PM, not exactly neighborly calling hours. A flicker of irritation passed through him as he descended the stairs.

Bob stood in their entryway, renovation plans clutched in his hand.

“Evening,” Bob rumbled, nodding toward Tom when he opened the door. “Got that list worked up. Thought we could go over it while it’s fresh.”

“Come on up,” Tom offered, stepping aside to let the older man pass.

Bob’s heavy footsteps followed Tom up the stairs. In the kitchen, Jess was bent over the dishwasher, yoga pants leaving exactly nothing to the imagination. The top rode up just enough to show a strip of tanned skin above her waistband.

She straightened when they entered, and Tom watched Bob’s eyes track the movement, though his expression remained professionally neutral.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt your evening,” Bob said.

“Not at all,” Jess replied, her voice carrying that warmth she reserved for people she wanted to impress. “Can I get you something to drink? Water? Beer?”

“Water’s fine,” Bob answered, settling onto one of the barstools, spreading his papers across the granite countertop. The pages were filled with neat handwriting, diagrams sketched with unexpected artistry, and columns of numbers that promised salvation for their home improvement dreams.

“Broken down by priority and cost savings,” he explained, thick index finger trailing down the columns. “Starting with that shower faucet that’s been driving you crazy.”

Jess handed Bob a glass of ice water before leaning in to study the plans. Tom watched how her blonde hair fell forward, how she tucked it behind her ear.

For the next half hour, Bob laid out his renovation strategy. Every suggestion was backed by decades of hands-on experience, every cost reduction explained through references to “connections” that seemed to materialize from thin air.

“Got a guy in South Austin. Imports direct from Italy. Owes me for fixing a mess another contractor left him with.” Bob’s expression remained neutral, but something

in his tone suggested these weren't simple business relationships but debts of honor, obligations that ran deeper than money.

"That would be amazing," Jess breathed. Her eyes had taken on that gleam Tom recognized from when she was working on her design projects, the look of a creative mind seeing possibilities unfold. But something twisted in Tom's gut watching her enthusiasm, a confusing mix of gratitude for Bob's help but also discomfort at how easily the older man had captured her attention, how naturally he'd inserted himself into their home. Had it only been three days since Bob moved in?

"Question is," Bob continued, leaning back slightly, "how you want to handle access? Some of these jobs take time. Might need to be here when you're not."

"Weekends," Tom said, perhaps too quickly. The thought of Bob moving through their home while they were at work made him uncomfortable. "We'll start there."

Bob nodded, gathering his papers with those thick fingers. "Your call. Just means a longer timeline." He checked his watch. "Getting late. Should let you folks get some rest."

As they walked Bob to the door, he paused at the entrance to the garage. His head tilted slightly. "Your garage door's making some noise. Heard it earlier today. Mind if I take a look while I'm here?"

Without waiting for an answer, Bob moved toward the garage door with that confident stride of a man who'd never been told no. Tom and Jess exchanged glances before following him.

Ten minutes later, the door raised and lowered in near silence, the previous grinding and squeaking having vanished like they'd never existed. Bob's hands were streaked with grease as he wiped them on a shop rag he'd pulled from his back pocket.

"There you go," he announced. "Should last another few years now."

The ease with which he fixed things that had frustrated Tom for months was both impressive and somehow emasculating. It was a reminder of practical competence that corporate success couldn't replace.

"You're amazing," Jess exclaimed, genuine appreciation lighting her features. "How much do we owe you?"

Bob waved off her question. "Good landlords and tenants look out for each other."

After Bob left, Tom finally sat down to the dinner Jess had kept warm. He devoured the roast chicken, his body catching up to the fact that he'd barely eaten all day. Jess

watched him from across the island, sipping her water, pleased to see him enjoy her cooking despite the late hour.

"This is incredible," he managed between bites. "Sorry I missed it fresh."

"At least you're eating it," she replied.

When his plate was clean, Tom retreated to his laptop at the dining table while Jess curled up on the couch to watch the latest episode of her favorite show.

Jess tried to focus on her show, but her mind kept drifting. The weekend had been passionate, connected, almost like their early days together. They'd rediscovered each other, remembered what had drawn them together in the first place.

Yet here they were, Monday night, and the magic was already fading. Tom buried in work, her watching TV alone, the distance between them growing with each passing hour. The status quo reasserted itself.

When her eyes grew heavy, she moved to where Tom sat, still typing, and pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

"Don't stay up too late," she murmured.

He caught her hand, squeezed it briefly. "Just need to finish this section. I'll be done soon."

They both knew it was likely a lie.

In bed, Jess stared at the ceiling, listening to the faint sounds of Tom working. She drifted off to sleep alone, wondering how something that had felt so promising could slip away so quickly.

The next morning, Jess settled into her home office chair, bare feet tucked beneath her as she opened her laptop. The silk robe she wore was pure indulgence, but working from home had its perks.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Tom: "Missing my sexy wife. These meetings are torture."

She smiled, fingers dancing across the screen: "Poor baby. Focus on work, Mr. Marshall. I'll reward you properly when you get home."

"Promise?"

"If you're home at a decent hour this time."

She hesitated, then softened. "I miss you."

"I miss you too."

From downstairs came the muffled sound of Bob working on something. The knowledge of his presence below added an odd tension to her morning routine. She found herself moving more quietly, hyperaware of every sound she made, every creak of the floorboards beneath her feet.

Her laptop chimed with a new email from Chris Webb about the Skyline project. She forced her mind back to work, pulling up the design files she'd been refining. The penthouse layouts demanded her full attention, each detail crucial for their wealthy clients.

The morning slipped away in CAD files and client emails. Around noon, restlessness crept in. After a quick lunch, she abandoned her desk for the balcony, seeking fresh air. The Texas sun beat down mercilessly, but the slight breeze made it bearable.

The sight below stopped her. Bob was in the backyard, his tank top dark with sweat as he worked on their ancient sprinkler system.

"Afternoon," Bob called up, noticing her presence. "Sprinklers needed attention. Previous owners let them go too long."

"We didn't even know they were broken," Jess admitted, leaning against the railing.

"Most folks don't, till it's too late." Bob straightened, wiping sweat from his brow. "While I'm at it, thinking about that kitchen backsplash. Got some samples coming Thursday. Natural stone, high-end stuff."

"That's... wow, thank you." The renovation plans thrilled and unsettled her simultaneously. "You really don't have to do all this."

"Like keeping busy," Bob shrugged. "Besides, this place deserves proper care."

The afternoon crawled until mercifully, she finally justified ending work early. She slipped into a white sundress and heeled boots, then checked the mirror. The woman staring back seemed different somehow, more alive. Maybe it was the weekend's passion or maybe it was the possibility of new life growing inside her.

"Going shopping with Madi," she texted Tom.

Tom's message appeared quickly: "Sounds good. You're amazing. Love you."

"Love you too, workaholic. Don't stay too late."

Madi stood outside their favorite boutique, wearing a black dress that probably cost more than most people's monthly rent, her energy crackling like electricity. The

moment she spotted Jess, her face lit up with that smile that promised juicy conversation.

"There she is!" Madi pulled Jess into a tight hug. Pulling back, she studied Jess' face with the intensity of someone who'd known her through breakups, makeups, and everything in between. Madi's eyes narrowed. "You're practically glowing!"

Inside, surrounded by racks of designer clothes, the interrogation began. "Okay, spill everything." Madi demanded. "And I mean everything. You've been holding out on me."

"Let me try these on first," Jess deflected, gathering an armful of dresses. "It was... an interesting weekend."

In the fitting room, Jess stripped down to her underwear while Madi settled into the plush waiting chair outside. "So remember how I told you things had gotten pretty bad?" Jess asked through the curtain. "Tom was always working late and we barely touched each other? Well, everything changed this weekend."

Jess emerged from behind the curtain in a tight navy-blue dress. "God, you were so right about sending those pictures. Tom couldn't keep his hands off me. We didn't even make it to the bedroom."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Madi leaned forward, elbows on knees. "Details. All of them."

"Well," Jess disappeared behind the curtain again, her voice carrying a mix of embarrassment and pride, "let's just say the kitchen counter will never be the same."

"That good, huh?" Madi handed another dress over. "Is that all?"

Jess slipped into the purple dress, adjusting it. "Remember our new tenant moved in Saturday? Bob?"

"Yeah. The older guy? The divorced contractor?" Madi's voice carried equal parts intrigue and concern.

"That's him." Jess turned to examine herself in the mirror. "We were all hanging out by the pool on Saturday... and Tom suggested taking photos of me. Things got... interesting."

As Jess detailed the photoshoot, Madi's expression shifted from surprise to intrigue. The dress was nice but Madi was already reaching for another hanger.

"Holy shit," Madi breathed. "That's hot. Like, actually hot. How'd that make you feel?"

Back behind the curtain, Jess wiggled into a black dress. "Terrified? Confused? Excited?"

"And then what happened?"

Jess came out and looked at the mirror. "Bob made us dinner. These amazing steaks. And..."

"And?" Madi practically vibrated with anticipation.

"Tom couldn't keep his hands off me." Jess blushed at the memory. "And... we didn't use protection."

"Jessica fucking Marshall!" Madi's shriek earned them curious looks from nearby shoppers. She lowered her voice. "You mean you might be..."

"Maybe? It's too soon to tell. But we did it again the next day. No protection again." Jess disappeared behind the curtain again. "It felt right, you know? Like everything aligned."

"This is huge!"

"Oh my god, wait until you hear about dinner," Jess gushed. "Sunday night we went to Vincenzo's. I wore that pale pink lingerie set Tom gave me for our anniversary. The really expensive La Perla one? But after we finished, while we were waiting for the check… I… God, this is so unlike me..."

"What did you do?" Madi leaned forward eagerly.

"I took my panties off in the bathroom," Jess confessed in a rush. "Then I put them in Tom's hand under the table."

"You didn't!" Madi's delighted laugh filled the fitting room. "Jessica Marshall, you absolute minx! What did he do?"

"Nearly choked on his wine," Jess giggled. "You should have seen his face. I've never seen him want to leave somewhere so fast."

"I bet! Please tell me you fucked in the car..."

"No! We actually made it home. But barely. The whole drive, his hand kept sliding up my thigh... the dress didn't stay on very long once we got inside."

"Details! I need details!"

Jess bit her lip, remembering. "Hmm… let's just say the headboard might need reinforcing."

Madi's smile was wicked. "Sounds like someone's marriage just got a serious spark rekindled."

"God, Madi, he was so different. More... primal? The way he looked at me, touched me... it's like he couldn't get enough." Jess's smile faltered slightly. "Of course, then yesterday he came home late again. After all that connection over the weekend, he still got stuck at work."

"Typical," Madi rolled her eyes. "Men always revert to form."

"It's not entirely his fault," Jess sighed. "This project is huge for his career."

"Wait, back up." Madi said, changing the subject. "Tom got turned on from Bob watching you pose?"

"Not just that. Remember how I told you about Brandon at the gym?"

"My Brandon? Mr. nine inches of pure pleasure Brandon?"

"Madi!" Jess laughed. "Yes, that Brandon. When I told Tom about him flirting with me... let's just say it had an effect."

Their laughter filled the fitting room, the kind of joy only possible between friends who'd seen each other through everything.

"He's discovering his kinky side," Madi grinned. "And Bob? How does he act around you now?"

"Professional. Like nothing happened." Jess stepped out in a crimson dress. "This one?"

"Stunning," Madi declared. "But back to Bob. Does he make you uncomfortable?"

"No," Jess admitted, studying her reflection. "He's just... intense. He's already fixing things around the house. He's planning all these renovations, offering amazing discounts through his 'connections'..."

"How convenient," Madi observed.

Their conversation paused as Jess spotted it, an emerald green dress that seemed to glow under the boutique's lighting.

"Oh my god," Madi breathed. "That's the one. That's absolutely the one."

Jess slipped the dress over her head. When she emerged, Madi's sharp intake of breath confirmed what the mirror showed. The dress was perfect.

"Tom won't know what hit him," Madi declared. "And speaking of hitting... turn around." She whistled when Jess complied. "Girl, your ass looks incredible."

Jess studied her reflection. The dress made her feel powerful, sexy, like the model she used to be. “You don’t think it’s too much?”

“There’s no such thing as too much when you look like that,” Madi insisted. “Besides, with everything you told me about this weekend...”

The price tag made Jess wince, but as she changed back into her clothes, she knew she’d regret leaving without it. Some dresses weren’t just clothes, they were weapons of mass distraction.

At the register, Madi grinned. “I can’t wait to hear about Tom’s face when he sees you in that. Hell, I can’t wait to hear about everyone’s faces at the party.”

They moved to the café next door, shopping bag in hand, settling into a quiet corner. “Oh god, I almost forgot to tell you about Sunday morning,” Jess whispered, leaning forward. She described how she’d woken Tom, her voice dropping even lower. “I just couldn’t resist him lying there all vulnerable...”

“Damn girl!” Madi grinned. “Look who’s embracing her inner vixen!” She wrapped her hands around her cappuccino. “Okay, let me get this straight,” she began. “First you send your workaholic husband some naughty office pictures that get him so worked up he fucks you senseless. Then Mr. nice inches himself eye fucks you at the gym, you tell hubby about it, and the next thing you know, you’re doing a swimsuit photo shoot for your new tenant? Which apparently unleashes your husband’s inner caveman so hard he fills you up raw?”

“When you put it that way...” Jess fidgeted with her coffee cup.

“Oh honey, I’m just getting started,” Madi’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “And then, because apparently that wasn’t enough, you wake him up with that talented mouth of yours and then at night you pull that panty stunt, which by the way, I’m incredibly proud of, and then he breeds you again! Now there might be a baby Marshall in the works?” She took a sip of her cappuccino. “Girl, who are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

“It sounds crazy when you list it all out like that.”

“Oh honey, it is crazy. The good kind.” Madi’s grin turned wicked. “Speaking of crazy good... Brandon was over last night.”

“Again?” Jess raised an eyebrow.

Madi smiled. “My thighs are still trembling. That man knows exactly what he’s doing.”

“Madi!” Jess glanced around, but their corner was private enough.

"What? Like you haven't wondered." Madi leaned closer. "He wonders about you too, you know. Talks about you sometimes..."

"Stop it," Jess protested, but her voice lacked conviction.

"Actually," Madi continued, "he told me all about your little gym encounter. Said you looked, and I quote, 'absolutely fucking edible.' Had me bent over not twenty minutes later, describing exactly what he'd do to you."

"Oh god," Jess groaned, remembering how Brandon's eyes had practically undressed her. "He's impossible."

"You know, he's been obsessed with you since the day he met you?"

Jess nearly choked on her coffee. "What? No he hasn't."

"Oh please. The way he looks at you? The constant flirting? He always jokes that pushing Tom towards you at that party was his biggest mistake. Says he should have saved you for himself."

Jess rolled her eyes, though a faint blush colored her cheeks. "I know, he always tells me that. And I always thank him for introducing me to my husband."

"Yeah, well, the way he looks at you? Trust me, if you weren't married..."

"Can we please change the subject?"

"Fine, fine." Madi raised her hands in surrender though her smile remained. "You know, sometimes I think moving to Austin was the best decision we ever made. Remember how scared we were? You and Tom following his job, me following you because I couldn't stand the thought of losing my best friend..."

"God, those first few months were terrifying," Jess agreed. "If Brandon hadn't already been here, showing Tom around, convincing him Austin was perfect..."

"Now look at us. You're killing it with your design career, I've got my event planning business, the boys are successful..." Madi paused. "But I miss having more friends around sometimes. Don't get me wrong, I love our Austin crew, but it's not the same as growing up with people."

"I know what you mean. All our closest friends are back home..."

"Speaking of," Madi brightened. "We haven't all done anything together in forever. We should plan something! Double date maybe?"

"With you and Brandon?" Jess laughed. "That's asking for trouble."

"Why? Because Brandon can't keep his eyes off you? Because Tom gets all possessive when Brandon flirts?" Madi smiled. "After what you just told me about this weekend, aren't you curious about how Tom would react?"

"It's not... I mean..." Jess stumbled over her words.

"No? Then why are you blushing?" Madi squeezed her hand. "I'm not suggesting anything wild. Just dinner, drinks, dancing. Like old times, before everyone got so busy."

"I'll think about it," she promised.

"That's my girl." Madi sat back, satisfied, victory written in her face.

When she got home, Jess hung the dress in their walk-in closet. She'd splurged, yes, but after this weekend's passion, after everything shifting between them, it felt right. Besides, Tom's promotion would soon make these kinds of purchases easier.

7:30 PM arrived with the sound of Tom's key in the lock. Something in his footsteps, heavier than usual, made Jess's hand pause as she stirred the sauce. When he appeared in the kitchen doorway, his suit wrinkled and tie loosened, she knew immediately. Whatever was coming, she wouldn't like it.

"Hey beautiful," he said, but his smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Rough day?" Jess kept her voice light, buying time before whatever bomb he was about to drop.

Tom's briefcase hit the floor with a soft thud. He loosened his tie further, like it was choking him. "Davis called me in this afternoon. The Meridian implementation... there are problems. Critical ones."

Jess's wooden spoon scraped the bottom of the pot. "How critical?"

"They need someone on-site in San Diego. Tomorrow morning." The words landed between them like stones in still water, ripples of implications spreading outward. "I'll be back Saturday morning."

The sauce bubbled. "Tomorrow morning," Jess repeated, her voice carefully neutral. "As in, you're missing the party Friday night."

"The flight's already booked," Tom said, running a hand through his hair. "Davis made the arrangements himself. This is huge, Jess. If I can fix this, the promotion's practically guaranteed."

The wooden spoon clattered against the stovetop as Jess set it down. She gripped the counter's edge. "When were you planning to tell me? Or did you think I wouldn't notice you were gone?"

"I'm telling you now," Tom replied, a defensive edge creeping into his voice.

"And you couldn't text? Call?" Jess turned to face him fully. "I was shopping with Madi, picking out..." She stopped herself, the dress hanging in their closet now feeling like a joke at her expense. "Never mind."

Tom stepped closer, reaching for her, but Jess moved away. The movement was subtle but devastating. "Babe, you know how important this is. After the crypto thing, we need this promotion. The extra income, the stability..." His hand gestured vaguely toward her stomach.

Low blow, Jess thought, her hand unconsciously moving to her flat belly. Using their dreams of starting a family to justify another broken promise. But wasn't that exactly what he'd been doing all along? Working late, missing events, always with the excuse about their future?

"What time's your flight?" she asked instead of voicing her thoughts.

"6 AM," Tom replied, relief evident in his voice as she shifted to practical matters. "I need to leave here by 4:30."

"I'll drive you," Jess said, turning back to the stove. The sauce had started to stick to the bottom of the pot, burning slightly.

"You don't have to-"

"I said I'll drive you." Her tone left no room for argument.

Tom hovered uncertainly before moving to the fridge, probably searching for a beer.

"You should eat," Jess said, her voice softer now. "Then we need to pack."

Tom's arms slid around her waist from behind, his chest pressing against her back. "I'm sorry," he murmured against her hair. "I know this isn't what we planned."

Jess didn't lean back against him but remembered how different his touch had felt this weekend, how desperate and demanding he'd been, like a man starving for her. Now his embrace felt like an apology, and she was tired of accepting those.

"The pasta's ready," she said, pulling away. "I'll go get your suitcase while you eat."

In their walk-in closet, Jess selected shirts and slacks while Tom ate alone in the kitchen. The dress watched her like an accusation, its perfect drape now useless. She fought the urge to stuff it in the back of the closet, to hide this evidence of her naivety.

Her fingers moved across Tom's clothes, selecting pieces with careful consideration despite her hurt. The blue shirt that brought out his eyes. The gray slacks fit him perfectly. Even now, hurt and disappointed, she couldn't help but take care of him.

A text from Madi lit up her phone: "Did you show him the dress yet???"

Jess stared at the message, throat tight. How could she explain that within mere hours, everything had shifted again, that the weekend's passion already felt like a fading dream? She left the text unanswered and focused on packing.

The suitcase lay open on their bed as Jess folded another shirt. The sound of Tom eating drifted from the kitchen, fork against plate, ice clicking in his glass. Such ordinary sounds for such an extraordinary disappointment.

Minutes later, Tom appeared in the doorway, plate in hand. "I can do that."

"Almost done," Jess replied, not looking up. "Did you check your email for the flight details?"

"Yeah, everything's confirmed." He set his plate on the dresser, moved closer. "Babe, talk to me. I know you're upset."

Jess continued folding. "I'm not upset. I understand. The project needs you. The promotion's important."

"But?"

"But nothing." She zipped the suitcase with more force than necessary. "We both know how this works. Something comes up, plans change, life goes on. I'm used to it."

"That's not fair," Tom protested, but his voice carried a hint of guilt. "This isn't just another late night at the office. This is different."

"Is it?" Jess finally turned to face him. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks exactly the same. You making decisions that affect us both without even a phone call. Me rearranging my life to accommodate your career. Again."

"After this weekend, after everything..." Tom ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "I thought you understood how important this is for our future."

"I do understand. That's the problem." Jess moved past him toward the bathroom. "I always understand. I'm the understanding wife who stays home while you chase promotions. Who smiles and says it's fine when you miss events."

The bathroom counter became her new fortress as she began her nighttime routine.

Tom leaned against the doorframe. “You know that’s not true. Babe, this promotion means everything. Better pay, more stability. We could start our family sooner...”

“Don’t.” Jess’s hand tightened around her moisturizer. “Don’t use our future baby to justify this. Not when I might already be...” She couldn’t finish the sentence, couldn’t voice the possibility that had seemed so exciting just hours ago. “I need to shower,” Jess said finally. “Early morning tomorrow.”

Tom hesitated, clearly wanting to say more, to fix this somehow. But what could he say? The flight was booked. The decision made.

“I’ll set the alarm,” he said finally.

Under the hot water, Jess let tears mix with the water, the invisible evidence of her disappointment washing down the drain. She pressed her forehead against the cool tile, allowing herself this private moment of weakness.

She thought about the dress, about Madi’s excitement, her own excitement. The Skyline launch wasn’t just another corporate event. It was her moment, the public unveiling of the project that could cement her reputation in the company. Chris Webb would be there with his investors. Margaret had already hinted that several other potential clients were attending specifically to meet the designers.

How many mind-numbing company dinners had she attended, smiling through Tom’s colleagues’ boring stories? How many times had she rearranged her schedule for his work events, nodding politely while corporate wives discussed recipes and vacation homes? She’d worn uncomfortable heels and laughed at unfunny jokes, all to support his career. And now, when she finally had something worth celebrating, something that was entirely hers, he was flying to San Diego.

When she slipped into bed, she maintained careful distance between their bodies. The same bed where they’d made love so passionately just two nights ago now felt vast and cold.

“Goodnight,” Tom murmured into the darkness.

“Goodnight,” Jess replied, staring at the ceiling.

The alarm hadn’t gone off yet when Jess opened her eyes. 4:00 AM glowed red on the bedside clock. She’d barely slept while Tom’s breathing remained deep and even beside her. She slipped from beneath the covers, careful not to wake him for these last precious minutes of rest.

The hardwood was cold beneath her bare feet as she padded to the bathroom. In the mirror, she splashed cold water on her face, the shock helping to ground her in this surreal hour where night bled into morning.

The kitchen felt foreign in pre-dawn darkness. Jess moved through familiar motions, measuring coffee, cracking eggs, buttering toast. The coffee maker's gentle gurgle filled the silence.

She was plating eggs when Tom appeared, suit jacket draped over his arm. He looked polished and professional, every inch the rising star consultant. Only the shadows under his eyes showed any hint of their tension.

"You didn't have to cook," he said softly.

Jess kept her eyes on the plates. "You need to eat before the flight."

They settled at the kitchen island, the granite cold beneath her forearms. Tom's fork scraped against ceramic. Neither spoke. The silence felt heavy with all the things they weren't saying, with the ghost of their weekend's passion, with the reality of his imminent departure.

"The big meeting's at ten," Tom said finally. "I should be done by four their time, if you want to FaceTime..."

"I have client meetings," Jess replied.

More silence. More coffee growing cold. More pretending this was just another morning, just another business trip, just another necessary sacrifice for their future.

"We should go soon," Jess said, glancing at the clock. "Traffic might be bad."

Tom nodded, standing to rinse his mostly full plate. The sound of running water seemed obscenely loud in their quiet kitchen. Jess watched his back, remembering the scratches she'd left there during their passionate reunion. Now the marks were hidden beneath crisp cotton and silk tie, like their weekend never happened.

The suitcase waited by the door. Tom grabbed it while Jess collected her keys and phone. The pre-dawn air hit them as they stepped outside, carrying the promise of another scorching Austin day. But for now, everything was shadow and silence.

Movement caught Jess's eye. Bob's kitchen light was on, his broad silhouette visible through the blinds as he moved around his space.

They drove through empty streets, traffic lights cycling for phantom cars. Tom's hand rested on the center console, palm up in silent invitation, but Jess kept both hands firmly on the steering wheel.

“I really am sorry,” Tom said as they merged onto the highway. “About the party, about everything.”

Jess kept her eyes forward. “I know.”

“When I get back Sat-”

“Let’s just focus on getting you to the airport,” Jess cut him off.

The airport approached too quickly. Jess pulled into short-term parking rather than the departure drop-off. Some masochistic part of her needed to see this through properly, to walk him to security like a dutiful wife should.

Tom’s hand found the small of her back as they walked through sliding doors into fluorescent brightness. Jess allowed it, even as her spine remained rigid beneath his palm.

The check-in counter was nearly empty. They stood in silence as Tom’s bag disappeared down the conveyor belt. All around them, other travelers moved with purpose, business people clutching briefcases, families corralling sleepy children, couples sharing early morning kisses goodbye. Jess felt disconnected from all of it, like she was watching a movie about someone else’s life.

“Security’s not too bad,” Tom observed, gesturing at the short line. “I should probably...”

“Yeah,” Jess agreed quickly. “You don’t want to miss your flight.”

Tom turned to face her fully, his hands finding her shoulders. “I love you,” he said softly. “You know that, right?”

Jess nodded, not trusting her voice.

“I’ll call when I land,” he promised.

“Okay.”

He hesitated, clearly wanting more, a real kiss, a proper goodbye, some acknowledgment of their connection. But Jess remained still, arms crossed over her chest. Finally, Tom pressed a quick kiss to her forehead and stepped back.

“Drive safe,” he said.

Jess watched him join the security line. He turned back once, raising his hand in farewell. She managed a small wave before turning away, her composure finally cracking.

She made it halfway to the parking garage before the tears started.

The Tesla's interior still held Tom's scent, his cologne mixing with the leather seats. Jess sat in the parking garage, hands gripping the steering wheel as tears blurred her vision.

Her phone buzzed: "Made it through security. Love you."

The screen blurred as fresh tears fell. She didn't reply. What could she say? That she missed him already? That she might be carrying their child while he chased promotions across the country?

The sun was rising by the time she pulled into their driveway. The house looked different somehow, as if Tom's absence had already changed its character.

Inside, their bedroom still held evidence of their morning rush. The sheets were tangled, her pajamas discarded on the floor. Tom's side of the bed remained slightly indented. Jess stripped the sheets.

She was loading the washer when she heard muffled sounds in Bob's apartment. The sound made her intensely aware of her state, wearing only Tom's t-shirt, legs bare, eyes probably red from crying. She exited the room and closed the door quietly, not wanting him to know she was there.

Back in their bedroom, Jess stood in front of the closet mirror. The emerald green dress caught her eye, still hanging where she'd placed it yesterday. She touched the fabric, remembering her excitement while shopping with Madi. Such a stupid, naive purchase. When would she even wear it now? The office party was Friday, but without Tom there...

Her phone buzzed again: "Boarding soon. Gate's packed. Wish you were here."

She replied: "Have a safe flight."

Simple. Practical. Nothing about how their bed felt too big or how the house seemed to echo with his absence. Nothing about the possibility growing inside her or the way their passionate weekend already felt like a fading dream.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 04

Jess lay across the couch, bare feet propped on the armrest as the TV droned on in the background. The clock on the wall ticked away, each second stretching into eternity. 7:07 PM in Texas. 5:07 PM in California. Tom would still be trapped in meetings for at least another hour, probably more.

She thumbed through her phone, scanning their most recent text exchange:

Tom: “This project is a mess. I miss you.”

Jess: “Miss you too. How’s the hotel?”

Tom: “Decent. Room service sucks though.

Jess: “Want me to FedEx you some real food?”

Tom: “God I wish. I’d give anything to be home with you right now.”

Jess: “Even your promotion?”

Tom: “Ouch.”

Jess: “Sorry. That wasn’t fair.”

Tom: “No, you’re right. I’m so sorry about missing your party. I’ll make it up to you, I swear.”

Jess: “I know. Go save the day.”

She tossed the phone aside, frustration bubbling beneath her skin. She should work on the Skyline designs, but motivation eluded her. Instead, her mind drifted to Friday’s party, to the emerald dress hanging in their closet, to the career milestone she’d be celebrating alone.

The resentment simmered fresh in her chest, refusing to dull. Jess still hadn’t fully forgiven Tom for dropping the San Diego work crisis on her with no notice, right after she’d come home glowing from dress shopping, ready to show him the emerald green knockout she’d splurged on.

She’d spent weeks looking forward to celebrating together, picturing him beaming at her at the Skyline party. Instead, all that anticipation had soured into an empty house and a calendar marked by his absence. She knew the promotion was important. She knew their future depended on it. But knowledge didn’t blunt the sting of feeling like an afterthought, again.

Her phone buzzed. Madi’s name flashed on the screen.

Madi: “I need DETAILS. How’d Tom lose his shit over that dress? I bet he couldn’t keep his hands off you!”

Jess’s fingers hovered over the keys. She didn’t want to deal with Madi’s reaction, but lying felt worse.

Jess: “He’s in San Diego. Some work emergency. He won’t be back till Saturday.”

The response was instantaneous:

Madi: “WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?”

Madi: “Please tell me you’re joking.”

Madi: “He’s seriously missing your party? For work???”

Jess: “It’s a big deal. This project could mean his promotion.”

Madi: “This is YOUR moment. He should be here supporting you.”

Madi: “I swear to god, I’m going to text that workaholic husband of yours and give him a piece of my mind.”

Jess sat up straighter, panic flaring.

Jess: “Madi don’t. Please. He already feels terrible about it.”

Madi: “He SHOULD feel terrible. This is fucked up, Jess.”

Jess: “I know. But it’s complicated. Just leave it alone, okay?”

There was a long pause before Madi replied:

Madi: “Fine. But only because you asked. You’re still wearing that dress to the party right?”

Jess glanced toward the bedroom.

Jess: “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll wear that black sheath dress? New one feels too fancy without Tom.”

Madi: “Don’t you dare. You are wearing that dress.”

Jess: “I don’t know.”

Madi: “Jessica Marshall. You are wearing that dress if I have to come over there and put you into it myself. Tom’s absence does NOT diminish your accomplishment. You’re going to that party, you’re going to look smoking hot, and you’re going to network your ass off. Got it?”

Despite herself, Jess smiled. Madi's fierce loyalty was both touching and slightly terrifying.

Jess: "Okay. You win. I'll wear the dress."

Madi: "Damn straight. Now tell me you're not just moping around the house."

Jess glanced guiltily at the TV.

Jess: "I might be."

Madi: "Go for a run or something. Get those endorphins flowing. You can't just sit there feeling sorry for yourself."

Jess: "You're right."

Madi: "Good. Do something other than stare at your phone. Love you!"

"Love you too," Jess typed back, then tossed her phone aside.

With a groan, she hauled herself off the couch. Staying still was driving her crazy. She moved to the kitchen, opening cabinets, reorganizing spices that didn't need reorganizing. Anything to keep her hands busy, to quiet the restless energy thrumming through her veins.

Her mind again drifted to the Skyline project she'd poured her heart and soul into. She remembered the way Chris Webb's eyes had lit up when she'd unveiled the designs.

This was her moment, dammit. She'd earned it, but now, at the moment of her triumph, she'd be attending alone. No Tom to squeeze her hand reassuringly. No Tom to charm the investors with his easy smile and quick wit. No Tom to celebrate with afterward, to peel that gorgeous emerald green dress off her body and make her feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

She slammed a cabinet door harder than necessary, the sound echoing through the empty house.

She took a deep breath. Madi was right. As much as Tom's absence hurt, it did not diminish her accomplishment. She was more than just Tom Marshall's wife. She was Jessica Marshall, up-and-coming interior designer.

With renewed determination, she marched to the bedroom. The dress beckoned, its fabric shimmering under the soft lighting in the closet. She ran her fingers over the material.

She was going to wear this dress, and she was going to own that party. Let them see her confidence, her talent, her undeniable presence. Let them remember her name.

Her phone buzzed again. She expected another text from Madi, but Tom's name flashed on the screen instead.

Tom: "You free to talk?"

Jess stared at the screen. She wanted to deny him, to flip her phone over and let him wonder, let him stew in silence. But her body betrayed her. Her heart leapt at his name, her skin prickled with that raw, stupid longing. She needed to hear his voice.

Jess: "Yeah. Call me."

Seconds later, her phone rang. She answered on the second ring.

"Hey," Tom's voice was warm, if slightly hesitant.

"Hi," Jess replied, settling onto the bed. "Long day?"

Tom groaned. "You have no idea. This whole system is held together with duct tape and prayer. I swear, every time we fix one thing, three more problems pop up."

"Sounds rough," Jess said, trying to keep the edge out of her voice. She didn't want to hear about his work troubles. Not when those same troubles were keeping him from her.

"Yeah, it's... wait. Are you doing okay?"

Jess sighed. Even hundreds of miles away, he could read her too well. "I'm fine. Just... lonely, I guess. The house feels big without you here." She paused. "And I'm nervous about Friday."

"I know, baby. I'm so sorry. I hate this. I should be there with you."

"You should," Jess agreed, unable to keep the bitterness from seeping into her tone.

Tom was quiet for a brief moment. When he spoke again, his voice was heavy with regret. "I know. Believe me, I know. I've been beating myself up about it all day. You deserve better than this."

"I'm not trying to make you feel guilty," Jess said, though part of her was glad he understood what he was missing. "I just... I wish you were here."

"Me too," Tom replied softly. "Guess who texted me."

Jess's brow furrowed. "Who?"

"Madi. I swear, that woman's a bloodhound when she's on a mission."

Jess couldn't help but snort. "Oh God, what did she say?"

Tom grinned, voice warming. “Just the classics. ‘Don’t you dare let Jess down. She’s got this big moment Friday and she deserves someone cheering her on.’ Stuff like that. She said I should send flowers, or better yet, fly back for the party.”

Jess chuckled softly. “I told her not to text you.”

“It wasn’t that bad. Hell, for Madi, I got off easy. She didn’t even threaten to drop spiders in my bed or superglue my car doors shut.”

Jess smiled. “That was probably her toned down version. You should’ve seen the earlier texts she sent me. She was ready to storm into your office and drag you home.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it. I’m just glad she didn’t go full scorched earth.”

Jess shook her head, letting her grin steal the heaviness from her mood. “I swear, she’s more invested in our marriage than we are.”

“She’s just protective of you.” Tom softened toward her laugh. “Can’t say I blame her.”

“She means well,” Jess said. “I’ll admit, though, her outrage was kind of comforting. She always has my back.”

“I’m glad she does… you deserve that, Jess. People who always have your back. You’ve got her… and me.”

“Thank you, Tom.” Jess let the words rest there. Before she could push further, her thoughts jarred by a knock at the door.

“Someone’s at the door,” Jess said. She glanced at the clock. 7:38 PM. Who would be knocking this late?

“Probably just a delivery or something,” Tom said. “You should get it though. I need to hop in the shower anyway. Early meeting tomorrow.”

Jess nodded. “Okay. Call me tomorrow?”

“First chance I get,” Tom promised. “I love you, Jess. More than anything.”

“I love you too,” she replied.

The call ended, leaving Jess alone once more. The knock came again.

“Coming!” she called out, scrambling off the bed. She gave herself a quick once-over in the mirror. The t-shirt hung to mid-thigh, preserving her modesty. Barely. But it would have to do.

She padded down the stairs, her bare feet silent against the hardwood. The porch light illuminated a broad silhouette through the frosted glass of their front door. She knew that build anywhere. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door.

Bob Caldwell stood in his kitchen nursing a beer while he unpacked the delivery that had arrived that afternoon. The chrome faucets, one for the kitchen and one for the bathroom, represented more than just plumbing fixtures. They were his ticket upstairs. His means of access.

He set his beer down and ran his fingers over the smooth curves of the kitchen faucet. High end shit. Barely cost him anything thanks to his connections, but worth every fucking cent he would have paid retail. The manufacturer owed him a favor after Bob had smoothed over some issues with faulty installations a few years back. Now those favors were paying off in ways Bob could never have imagined.

As he admired the quality, his mind drifted back to Saturday night, to the shadowy figure he'd glimpsed outside his window while pleasuring himself to Jessica Marshall's photos. He'd taken a huge risk, stroking his cock right there in plain view of the window. The silhouette had been unmistakably masculine, too tall and broad shouldered to be Jess. It had to have been Tom.

The next day, Bob had braced for some kind of confrontation. A bang on the door, an awkward conversation, maybe even threats of eviction. But instead, both Tom and Jess acted as if nothing had happened. Not a word, not even a sideways glance. Just complicit, knowing silence. The pieces fit together like a twisted puzzle.

Tom, that spineless fuck, had seen everything and chosen to stay silent. Whether out of fear, shame, or some twisted desire, he'd decided to let it slide. And that silence spoke volumes.

"A fucking cuckold," Bob muttered, nearly laughing. It was the only explanation that made sense. Tom's silent witnessing was tantamount to permission, an acknowledgment of the power dynamic already forming between them.

This changed things. Bob's strategy had initially centered on stealth and manipulation, gradually worming his way into Jess' life through a combination of calculated kindness and strategic home improvements. He'd planned to become indispensable, the reliable handyman always ready with a solution, slowly building trust over time.

But now? He saw a more direct path, a shortcut to his ultimate goal. Tom's perverse desires could be weaponized, used to gain legitimate access to Jess with her husband's

blessing. He could potentially engineer scenarios where Tom would willingly step aside, perhaps even encourage Jess toward Bob's waiting arms.

If he was right about Tom, this game would evolve to something far more interesting, something where Tom would eventually hand over the keys to his kingdom, believing it was his idea all along.

Bob's mind raced with the possibilities this revelation opened up. He'd always known that his most reliable weapon hung between his legs, that magnificent cock that rarely disappointed. It was the kind of equipment that made women's eyes widen in shock before they inevitably became addicted to the fullness. Now Tom Marshall had witnessed exactly what his wife would be up against.

And at this very moment, that wife was up there all alone. Tom's Lexus might be in the driveway, but Bob knew better. He'd seen the man leave with a suitcase before dawn, had watched from behind his blinds as Jess drove him somewhere. Airport, most likely.

Bob's cock stirred at the thought of Jess' gorgeous fucking body, a masterpiece of femininity that deserved to be worshipped. She was the kind of woman men would have started wars over in the old days. A modern-day Helen of Troy, with those endless legs and perky tits that made his mouth water.

Bob sneered, imagining Tom's pathetic attempts to satisfy a woman like Jess. That pretty boy probably fumbled around like a virgin, too afraid to really give it to her the way she needed. Jess deserved a man who could handle her, not some limp dicked corporate drone who probably came in his pants just looking at her. She was a Ferrari being driven by someone who couldn't handle more than a Prius.

Bob had caught Jess looking at him a few times. Nothing in those looks remotely suggested attraction. More like assessment. Wariness, maybe. The way you might look at a strange dog, wondering if it bites. She was polite but there was always that careful distance. The way she'd angle her body slightly away from him during conversations, the way she'd maintain that extra foot of space between them. It was clear she didn't trust him yet, didn't see him as anything more than the old man living downstairs.

This realization tempered Bob's excitement somewhat. As much as he wanted to charge full steam ahead with his new, more aggressive strategy, he knew he needed to tread carefully. The revelation about Tom's voyeuristic tendencies opened up new possibilities, but it didn't change the fundamental fact that Jess was still wary of him. Rushing things now could backfire spectacularly, potentially ruining everything.

No, Bob realized, he needed to stick to his original plan, at least for now. He needed to build trust first, to become a fixture in their lives, to make himself truly

indispensable. The faucets were a good start, a way to show his value, to get his foot in the door. But it would take time and patience to fully ingratiate himself into their world.

This didn't mean he had to be entirely passive, though. While he worked on gaining Jess's trust, he could still find other ways to satisfy his needs. Hidden cameras, for instance. Small, wireless, easy to hide. One for the bedroom, one for the bathroom. Positioned just right, they'd give him everything he wanted. The possibilities were endless. Bob grinned, imagining the hours of footage he'd collect, a front-row seat to Jess's most private moments.

And sometimes, in his own darkest moments, he wondered what would happen if he just took what he wanted and forced himself inside her. She was strong for her size, probably. He'd seen her in those yoga pants, knew she worked out, but he had close to two hundred pounds on her. She wouldn't stand a chance.

But no. Too risky, too messy. He wasn't stupid and he didn't want to spend time inside a prison cell. He'd worked too hard, come too far to throw it all away on one moment of brutal satisfaction. Besides, he was playing a longer game here.

Bob looked at his watch. Just past seven-thirty. Not too late to knock on their door, especially if he had a legitimate reason. He picked up the faucets and their accompanying parts, arranging them carefully in his toolbox.

A minute later, he stood at their front door, knocking firmly.

When Jess opened the door, Bob had to force his expression to remain neutral. She stood there in an oversized t-shirt that barely reached mid thigh, leaving those long, tanned legs exposed. Her blonde hair was slightly mussed, her face free of makeup. Even like this, especially like this, she was absolutely stunning.

"Bob," she said, surprise evident in her voice. Her hand moved instinctively to the hem of the shirt, tugging it down slightly. "Is everything okay?"

"Evening, Jess," he replied, keeping his eyes firmly on her face despite every instinct screaming at him to look lower. "Sorry to bother you so late. Those faucets we talked about finally arrived." He hefted his toolbox slightly. "Thought maybe I could get a head start on installing them. Shouldn't take more than an hour each."

Jess hesitated, one hand still gripping the doorframe. "Oh, I don't know if tonight is-"

"No pressure," Bob said quickly, adopting his most harmless expression. "Just figured since I had the time now... but if it's not convenient, I can come back another day."

He watched the conflict play out across her face. The polite hostess warring with the cautious woman home alone. In the end, politeness won out.

"I guess it would be good to get them installed. Tom's away on a business trip, so it's just me."

Just as he suspected.

"Oh?" Bob feigned surprise. "I saw his car in the driveway."

"He flew to San Diego this morning," Jess explained, stepping back to let him in. "I drove him to the airport. He won't be back until Saturday."

"Ah, that explains it." Bob stepped inside, careful to maintain a respectful distance as he followed her up the stairs. "Business trips can be a real pain. Sarah used to hate when I had to be away for work."

"It's not ideal," Jess agreed. "So, where do you want to start?" Jess asked when they reached the top of the stairs. "Kitchen or bathroom?"

"Might as well tackle the kitchen first. That way, if we run into any issues, you'll still have water for your morning shower."

Jess smiled, and Bob felt a surge of satisfaction. He was good at this, at putting people at ease. It was a skill he'd honed over decades of manipulating clients, ex-wives, and now, unsuspecting landlords.

"Let me just change quickly," Jess said, acutely aware of her state of undress. "Make yourself comfortable in the kitchen. I'll be right back."

Bob watched her move to the bedroom, his eyes fixed on the sway of her hips beneath the thin cotton. The t-shirt rode up slightly as she walked, giving him a tantalizing glimpse of the curve where thigh met ass.

In the kitchen, Bob set down his toolbox and began arranging his tools.

When Jess returned a few minutes later, she'd put on yoga pants. Still hot as hell, but less immediately provocative than before.

"Can I get you something to drink before you start? Water? Beer?" she asked.

"Water's fine," Bob replied. "Don't want to be operating tools after a cold one, you know?"

Jess laughed, a light, musical sound that sent shivers down Bob's spine. His mind drifted to his past as he watched Jess bend over to grab a bottle from the bottom of the fridge. When he'd met Sarah all those years ago, he'd thought he'd hit the goddamn

jackpot. She was blonde, pretty, with a decent body, the kind of girl who turned heads at the local bar. But Jess was on a whole other fucking level.

Where Sarah had been attractive, Jess was breathtaking. It was almost hard to believe a woman like her existed outside of runways and magazine covers, let alone lived a normal life with some pencil pushing husband. Bob had been around a few beautiful women in his day, but he'd never encountered anything close to Jess. She was a rare breed, checking every single box physically while radiating an aura of effortless sensuality. Just being in her presence felt intoxicating, like huffing pure pheromones. Bob knew with absolute certainty that he'd never get another chance at a woman like this. Jess was a once in a lifetime prize and he was determined to claim her by any means necessary.

"Here you go," Jess said, handing him the water. Bob accepted it with a nod of thanks, careful to keep his expression neutral despite the raging hard on hidden beneath his pants.

"Mind if I get started?" he asked, gesturing toward the sink.

"Of course not," Jess replied. "Do you need me to do anything?"

Bob considered for a moment. Having her close would be torture, but it was too tempting to pass up. "Actually, if you could hand me tools as I need them, it'd speed things up quite a bit."

Jess nodded. "Sure thing. Just tell me what you need."

For the next forty-five minutes, Bob worked efficiently, occasionally asking Jess to hand him a wrench or hold a flashlight. He kept up a steady stream of conversation. She responded readily, clearly warming to his friendly demeanor.

"So, what's on the agenda while Tom's away?" he asked, his voice slightly muffled from his position under the sink. "Taking advantage of having the house to yourself?"

Jess leaned against the counter, just visible from his vantage point. "Not really. Mostly work. I have a big company party on Friday night to celebrate a new project. My team designed the penthouse interiors. The client loved our presentation, so the firm's hosting this launch party with potential investors."

"Impressive," Bob said, meaning it. "You must be excited."

"I was more excited when Tom was going to be there," she admitted. "But yes, it's a big deal for my career."

Bob emerged from under the sink, wiping his hands on a rag. "He's missing your big night? That's a shame."

"It couldn't be helped," Jess said quickly. "The project in San Diego is important too. It could mean a promotion."

"Still," Bob said, shaking his head sympathetically. "Must be disappointing."

Jess didn't respond, but her silence spoke volumes. Bob suppressed a smile as he returned to work.

Possible cracks in the marriage. Excellent.

As Bob finished installing the kitchen faucet, he guided Jess through testing it. "Go ahead, turn it on," he instructed. "Let's make sure there are no leaks."

Jess stepped closer, reaching past him to turn the handle.

"Looks good," he said as water flowed smoothly from the new fixture. "No leaks. Want to try the spray function?"

Jess pressed the button, and the water stream changed to a powerful spray. "Oh!" she exclaimed, genuinely pleased. "That's so much better than the old one."

"Quality makes a difference," Bob nodded. "Bathroom next?"

"Sure," she said. "This way."

"Hey, Jess," Bob said as they made their way to the master bathroom. "Quick question for you. That spare room downstairs, what did you folks use it for before I moved in?"

Jess shrugged. "Honestly? Not much. It was mostly just storage. We never really spent time down there. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," he said casually. "Been thinking about how to make better use of the space. Maybe set up a small workshop or something." He paused, then added with a chuckle, "Though I gotta admit, it's a bit creepy down there at night. Thought I saw a shadow moving outside the window Saturday night. Wondered if maybe one of you come back down to the yard."

Jess' brow furrowed. "That's odd." She paused, then added, "Oh, wait. Tom did go out to the backyard that night after dinner. I asked him to grab the stuff we'd left outside. Maybe that's what you saw?"

"Probably nothing," Bob shrugged. "Just my imagination. Getting old makes you paranoid, I guess."

Inwardly, Bob felt a surge of satisfaction. Jess had just confirmed what he'd already suspected.

In the master bathroom, Bob's excitement intensified. This was their most private space, where Jess showered, where she stood naked before the mirror.

“So, tell me more about this party,” Bob said as he worked beneath the sink.

Jess’ face lit up. “The project is huge, and there’ll be so many important people there. Potential clients, investors...”

Bob wiped sweat from his brow. “You nervous?”

Jess bit her lip. “A little,” she admitted. “I mean, I know my work is good. It’s just... I’ve never had to network like this on my own before. Tom’s always been there, you know? He’s so good at working a room.”

Bob nodded sympathetically. “I get it. But hey, from what I’ve seen of your work downstairs, you’ve got nothing to worry about. You’re talented as hell, Jess. And if you don’t mind me saying, you’re not exactly hard on the eyes either. Those suits won’t know what hit ‘em.”

Jess blushed. “Bob! You’re terrible.”

“Just stating facts,” Bob said with a chuckle. “Now, hand me that wrench, would you?”

As he worked, Bob surveyed the bathroom, mentally noting potential camera locations. His cock throbbed at the thoughts. He shifted, trying to conceal his arousal.

“Everything okay?” Jess asked, noticing his movement.

“Fine,” Bob grunted. “Just trying to get a better angle on this connector.”

The bathroom faucet took a bit longer, but eventually Bob had it installed and functioning. He guided Jess through testing it, standing behind her as she turned the handles.

“Smooth,” she commented, running her fingers under the water stream. “And it matches the fixtures better than the old one.”

“Good eye,” Bob nodded. “Not everyone notices those details.”

“Interior designer,” Jess reminded him with a small smile. “Details are my job.”

As they made their way back to the kitchen, Bob kept the conversation flowing, asking about the challenges of the Skyline project. Jess responded with animation, clearly passionate about her work. This was how he’d gain her trust, by showing genuine interest, by listening, by positioning himself as a safe, supportive presence in her life.

“Well, that should do it,” Bob announced, packing his tools back into his box. “Two new faucets, all installed and functioning.”

“Thank you so much,” Jess said, genuinely grateful. “They look fantastic. How much do we owe you for them?”

Bob waved her off. “My connections, remember? These were practically free.”

“Still,” Jess insisted, “at least let me pay you for your time.”

“Nonsense,” Bob smiled. “That’s what neighbors are for. Besides, gives me something to do besides sitting around watching TV.”

Downstairs, Bob paused, turning to Jess. “Listen, if you need anything while Tom’s away, help around the house, someone to check in, don’t hesitate to knock. I’m right here.”

“I appreciate that,” Jess said politely. “But I’ll be fine.”

“Course you will,” Bob nodded. “But the offer’s there. Goodnight, Jess.”

“Goodnight, Bob. And thanks again for the faucets.”

He glanced toward the main exit, then back at the connecting laundry room. A split-second decision formed in his mind. He needed to establish this route as normal, to make his presence in this part of the house unremarkable.

“Oh, Jess?” he said. “Mind if I cut through the laundry room? Save me a trip around the house.”

Jess hesitated for a moment, her eyes flicking between Bob and the laundry room door. “Sure,” she said finally. “Go ahead. You know the way.”

Bob smiled to himself as he pushed open the laundry room door. His eyes swept the room, and there, in the corner, sat a laundry basket. Full. Bob glanced toward the door leading back to the main house, listening carefully. Jess was back upstairs. He could hear her faint movements.

Moving quickly, Bob rifled through the basket. Mostly Tom’s work shirts, a few towels, some of Jess’ casual clothes. And then, jackpot. A pair of black lace panties. Without hesitation, Bob shoved them into his pocket, his heart racing at the transgression.

Back in his unit, Bob locked the door behind him and leaned against it. He withdrew the stolen panties from his pocket, holding them up to the light. They were even sexier than he’d imagined. Sheer black lace with a tiny bow at the front.

He pressed the panties to his face, inhaling deeply, letting Jess’ scent flood his senses. His nostrils flared as he breathed in again, more urgently this time, desperate to capture every nuance.

Bob then made a beeline to his desk, booting up his laptop. He navigated to a series of specialized forums. Here, in the darker corners of the internet, he could find what

he needed without raising suspicion. Tiny cameras, virtually undetectable, capable of transmitting clear video and audio directly to his devices.

He logged in under his usual username: ShadowWatcher69. The irony wasn't lost on him.

As he scrolled through the latest posts, Bob slipped Jess' panties into his mouth. The flavor exploded across his palate; tangy, slightly salty, with an underlying sweetness that made his head spin. He sucked greedily at the fabric, imagining it was her swollen clit between his lips instead. His cock throbbed as he imagined burying his face between her thighs, tasting her directly from the source.

He opened a bookmarked thread titled: "Best Hidden Cams: Ultimate Guide"

The post was comprehensive, detailing various models, their strengths and weaknesses, optimal placement strategies. He took mental notes, already picturing where each camera would go.

He opened another tab, navigating to a specialized electronics site. He selected his arsenal: a tiny pinhole camera designed to fit into bathroom vents, and a smoke detector with a built-in HD camera, perfect for full coverage of the bed. He added a high-capacity external hard drive to his cart, knowing he'd need ample storage for the treasure trove of footage he'd soon possess.

He imagined the footage he'd collect. Jess in the shower, water dripping down her naked body, soap suds sliding between her breasts and down her flat stomach. Tom's pathetic attempts to satisfy her, his wife's face a mask of fake pleasure. And the holy grail, Jess alone, fingers buried in her cunt, pleasuring herself to fantasies Bob could only imagine.

Bob's finger hovered over the "Confirm Order" button, his cock already throbbing against his zipper. The estimated delivery time made his jaw clench. 3-5 business days. Too fucking long. He slammed his fist against the desk, cursing under his breath. The thought of Jess moving through her home above him unobserved, made him ache with frustration. But that forced patience would make his eventual victory that much sweeter. Soon enough, he'd have eyes and ears in their most intimate spaces. Jessica wouldn't be able to piss without him watching, wouldn't be able to whisper a word without him hearing it.

He confirmed the order and abandoned his desk, stumbling to his bedroom. Unable to contain himself any longer, he stripped completely, tossing his clothes in a heap. He then then sprawled on his bed, fully exposed to the empty room. His cock stood like a solid monument to his obsession, throbbing with every beat of his heart. "Fuck, Jess," he groaned, stroking himself.

He imagined her wearing these exact panties, imagined sliding them down those long legs, imagined burying his face between her thighs. His strokes quickened, the delicate fabric adding an exquisite texture to his self-pleasure.

It didn't take long. With a grunt, Bob came hard, his seed spurting onto the black lace, soaking through it. He continued stroking until he was completely spent, the panties now ruined with his emission.

As his breathing slowed, Bob stared at the ceiling, satisfied. For a moment, he allowed himself to bask in the afterglow, imagining a future where Jess would willingly spread her legs for him and beg for his cock.

But reality began to seep back in. Bob's post-orgasmic haze dissipated quickly. He stared at the cum soaked panties in his hand. "Fuck," he muttered, sitting up. He'd gotten carried away, let his dick do the thinking. Rookie mistake.

He stumbled to the bathroom, panties clutched in his fist like evidence of a crime, which, he supposed, it was. Theft, maybe some kind of sexual offense. He wasn't about to go down for a pair of fucking panties, no matter how intoxicating they were.

The bathroom light made him wince as he flicked the switch. Bob's reflection stared back at him. He stood naked, his thick, barrel chest rising and falling with each breath, the sweat from his earlier exertions glistening across his skin. His broad shoulders, once pure muscle from years of physical labor, now sloped slightly under the weight of time, but still carried hints of the raw power that once defined them. His belly protruded, solid and rounded, no longer the flat plane of his youth but a testament to hearty meals and cold beers accumulated over decades.

Sparse, wiry hairs flecked his chest and trailed downward, merging into the forest of his groin where his thick cock hung heavily, still partially hard. His legs, tree trunks of muscle and fat, stood planted firmly beneath him, calves still defined from years of bracing ladders and hauling weight most men would shy away from.

And deep-set eyes peered out from beneath bushy brows, a predator's gaze in a body past its prime. He looked every bit the dirty old man he'd become, standing there with stolen panties in hand. He sneered at himself. "Pull it together, you fuck."

He turned on the faucet, letting the water run until it was hot. He then began washing the panties, working it between his thick fingers. The lace was so fragile, so unlike the utilitarian cotton his ex-wives had favored.

Once he was satisfied, Bob reached for his hairdryer. He'd bought it on a whim years ago, thinking he'd use it to style what little hair he had left. Now it served a far more clandestine purpose.

The dryer's warm air fluffed the fabric as Bob worked. He couldn't risk leaving even a hint of dampness. Any sign that these panties had been tampered with could bring his entire plan crashing down before it even began.

Finally satisfied that the panties were completely dry, Bob held them up to the light, inspecting his handiwork. They looked pristine, as if they'd never left the laundry basket. He allowed himself a small smile of triumph. Crisis averted.

He put on his robe, cinching it tightly around his broad frame, ensuring he was modestly covered before slipping back into the laundry room.

The door creaked slightly as he eased it open. Bob froze, ears straining for any sign of movement from upstairs. Nothing.

He buried the panties deep within the pile. His fingers lingered on the lace for just a moment, a farewell caress.

As he snuck back to his apartment, Bob's mind was already planning his next move. He'd build his collection, piece by piece, until he had enough of her to satisfy his cravings. And eventually, he'd have everything.

Jessica Marshall was worth waiting for. Worth planning for. Worth obsessing over. And Bob Caldwell was nothing if not patient.

The next morning, Thursday, Jess sat at her desk, fingers flying across the keyboard as she updated budget projections in Excel. The Skyline designs required tracking materials, labor, and contractor fees, all organized in rows and columns.

As she implemented a formula, she smiled, thinking to herself that Tom would likely be doing the exact same thing today.

Her mind drifted back to years ago, when Tom had patiently taught her the basics of Excel. They'd been trying to establish their first joint budget, sitting on their second-hand sofa. She'd been overwhelmed by the grid of empty cells staring back at her.

"It's not as complicated as it looks," Tom had promised. "Here, let me show you the basics."

He'd guided her through formulas, starting with simple addition. "Just type equals, then sum, then put the cells you want to add in the brackets," he'd explained. "Then hit enter."

When the numbers had automatically calculated, she'd looked up at him with a grin and declared, "You're a wizard!"

Tom laughed. "It's not that complicated, babe."

"Well, this feels like magic."

Tom's laughter subsided into a warm chuckle. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. "Just wait till I show you VLOOKUP," he said, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

What she'd loved most about those moments wasn't learning new skills, it was how Tom had taught her. He had a way of explaining concepts without condescension. He'd broken things down step by step, celebrating her small victories with genuine enthusiasm.

Jess leaned back in her chair, remembering when she'd asked him about the stock market. She'd been reading news about a market crash and felt embarrassed by her limited understanding.

"Can you explain how the stock market works?" she'd asked tentatively. "I know it's probably really basic, but I never really learned."

Tom had lit up like she'd offered him the most fascinating conversation topic in the world. He'd set aside his book immediately, turning to face her fully.

He'd gone on to explain how companies use stock to raise money, how investors make decisions based on performance and future prospects, and how crashes happen when panic selling creates a downward spiral. No childish metaphors, no oversimplification, he'd treated her like an intelligent adult capable of understanding.

"Does that make sense?" he'd asked when he finished.

"Yeah… I guess," she'd replied, still confused, but touched by his eagerness to share his knowledge. It was as if he'd wanted to prove himself to her, to show that he could be valuable beyond just being fun to be around. Those teaching moments had become one of the foundations of their relationship.

A cramp tightened low in her abdomen, subtle but unmistakable. Jess shifted in her chair, pressing her palm against her lower belly as the sensation peaked and then subsided. She opened her desk drawer and retrieved the bottle of ibuprofen she kept there, swallowing two pills with a sip of coffee.

Her phone sat beside her keyboard, the period tracking app still open from when she'd checked it that morning. The red circle around today's date confirmed what her body was already telling her. Her cycle was right on schedule, crushing the hope she'd been nurturing since their passionate weekend. Jess closed the app, not wanting the visual reminder.

They'd talked about children for years, first in the language of someday: casual pillow talk, lazy Sunday fantasies over coffee, one of those whispered maybes that made sex

feel alive but not yet urgent. Back then, the idea of a crib in the guest room, of Jess's belly rounding out, had been as far-off and fuzzy as a retirement account, a distant promise of adulthood that could be postponed for another day.

But reality kept pushing the dream into the distance. There had always been practical hurdles. Student loans, the mortgage, Tom's career, the waiting game of "after we're settled" or "after we've saved enough." Each goal achieved simply shifted the marker one step further away.

Worse yet, Tom's crypto disaster scorched their ambitions. She'd never forgotten the night he admitted how much he'd lost. She still loved him deeply, couldn't help it, but some part of her remained raw and irritated, like a bruise pressed too often.

This was supposed to be the perfect window. She was young enough to bounce back from pregnancy, established enough in her career to take maternity leave, mature enough to handle the responsibility. Everything about her life screamed readiness except their bank account.

Her phone buzzed. Tom's name appeared on the screen, and her heart lifted.

"Good morning, beautiful. How'd you sleep?" his text read.

Jess smiled. "Good. Miss you though," she typed back.

"Miss you too. Early start here. Meetings all day, but I'll try to call between."

"Don't forget to eat and drink water," she reminded him, imagining him rushing out of his hotel room with nothing but coffee in his system.

"Yes, babe. Love you."

"Love you too," she replied, setting the phone back down.

Jess stared at the screen, at Tom's final "Love you." Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, tempted to type more. Should she tell him?

She composed the message in her head: "Just so you know, got my period. Not pregnant after all." But the words felt too clinical, too detached. How do you convey disappointment over text about something that was only ever a possibility, never a certainty?

If the test had been positive, she'd have waited until he was home, planned some special way to tell him. She'd have reveled in watching his face transform with joy and wonder. Instead, there was just this, the quiet acknowledgment of another month gone by.

Jess deleted the draft message. This wasn't news to share while Tom was in crisis mode states away. It would only distract him, maybe even make him feel guilty for

not being here. Besides, what was there really to say? That her body had continued its reliable cycle as it had for the past fifteen years? That was hardly breaking news.

Jess forced her attention back to the spreadsheet, determined to be productive. The Skyline project deserved her full focus, regardless of her personal distractions.

As she worked, she occasionally glanced at her phone, hoping for another message from Tom. Each time she found the screen dark, disappointment settled a little deeper in her chest.

The cramps that had started as subtle twinges that morning had evolved throughout the day, settling into a dull, persistent ache that radiated from her lower abdomen into her back. Jess pressed her palm against her belly, applying counter-pressure that provided momentary relief. Her body was sending unmistakable signals.

In the bathroom, Jess splashed cold water on her face and studied her reflection. Her skin looked slightly different, a certain paleness beneath her usual glow. She opened her makeup bag and found the small bottle of ibuprofen she kept for emergencies, swallowing two more pills to combat the building discomfort.

Jess glanced at her watch. 4:45 PM. Her usual Thursday yoga class started at 5:30. For a moment, she considered skipping it. The cramps and fatigue made the thought of the couch and a heating pad far more appealing than an hour of physical exertion. But another evening alone in the empty house with nothing but her thoughts and disappointment seemed worse.

Jess shut down her laptop and headed to the bedroom to change. She pulled on her favorite black Lululemon leggings, a gray sports bra, and a loose tank top before heading to her car, determined to sweat out the restlessness that had plagued her all day.

Jess arrived at Lotus Flow Yoga Studio ten minutes before class with her mat rolled under one arm and a water bottle clutched in the opposite hand. She'd been coming to this studio regularly for nearly four years, long enough that the front desk attendant Elaine greeted her by name without checking the system.

Her usual Thursday class with Amber had become sacred territory over the years, a necessary reset for her body and mind. Today, she needed it more than ever.

"Jess!" called Elaine from behind the desk. "How'd you like Derek's class on Monday?"

"Mmm... different," Jess replied. "Intense."

“He’s been a hit,” Elaine confided, leaning forward. “Amber might have trouble getting her class back when she returns from maternity leave.”

“Is that right?” Jess paused at the desk, curious. “What are people saying about him?”

Elaine’s eyes lit up, clearly delighted to share the gossip. “Two women actually got into an argument yesterday about who arrived first.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Between us, I think it has less to do with his teaching style and more to do with those abs.”

Jess laughed, shaking her head. “Can’t say I didn’t notice.”

“Girl, everyone notices,” Elaine winked. “You doing okay though? You look a little...” she gestured vaguely, “...tired today.”

“Just work stress,” Jess offered with a shrug. “Nothing an hour of yoga can’t fix.”

“Well, he’s doing the extended session afterward again,” Elaine said, shuffling some papers. “You should stay if you have time! Best cure for stress I know.”

Jess hesitated, then smiled. “I might. Depends how much energy I’ve got left after class.”

In the locker room, Jess removed her light jacket, folded it neatly, and stowed it alongside her bag in a locker.

The studio itself was cooler than the locker room. It was dimly lit with soft lights that created pools of warmth on the hardwood floor. Only a few mats were already laid out, their owners in various states of preparation. Jess unrolled her mat in her usual spot.

She settled onto her back, arms stretched overhead, allowing her spine to lengthen against the mat. Her eyes drifted closed as she focused on her breath. In for four counts, hold for seven, out for eight. Tom had taught her the 4-7-8 breathing technique years ago. He’d picked up from a wellness podcast, something Dr. Andrew Weil had pioneered for stress management and sleep.

Tom. Always Tom, even in her moments of solitude.

Her body felt heavy against the mat. The hormonal flux preceding her period always amplified everything, emotions, sensations, tensions. Her breasts felt tender against the constraint of her sports bra, her skin sensitive where the mat pressed against her shoulder blades.

“Finding our center before we begin. Very wise.”

The deep voice jolted Jess from her meditative state. She hadn't heard anyone approach, but there he stood, Derek, at the front of the room, arranging his own mat. Unlike Monday, when he'd worn a tank top, today he wore nothing but black shorts.

Derek was unmistakable. Tall, easily 6'3", with dark brown, almost black skin, built like a man who'd never spent time with dumbbells or protein shakes. Unlike Brandon's gym-built physique, Derek's lean physique came from endless pushups, handstands, and yoga flows that demanded control. Every inch of him looked tight, athletic, hard earned. His abs were defined, but not blocky. Instead, his whole torso seemed carved from stone, the lines running smooth down to a narrow waist.

Everything about him was motion and control: the way he balanced on the balls of his feet, his posture always loose but alert, like he could drop into a split or a headstand without even thinking. His legs were long and powerful, calves and thighs corded but lean, with years of squats and jumps etched into every line. When he bent low to roll out his mat, his muscles flexed.

Other students quickly filed into the room, filling the spaces between already placed mats. Familiar faces nodded in her direction: the retired accountant who always set up to her left, the college student who always arrived breathless and last-minute. The studio filled with the sounds of shifting bodies and deep breaths, creating a quiet symphony of anticipation.

Derek took his place at the front, settling into a cross-legged position, his spine straight. "Let's begin by closing our eyes," he instructed. "Bring awareness to your breath, to the sensation of air filling your lungs, to the rise and fall of your chest."

Jess obeyed, allowing her eyelids to flutter shut. The darkness behind them was soothing, a brief respite from visual stimulation.

"Now bring your attention to your body," Derek continued. "Notice any areas of tension, any places that feel constricted or uncomfortable. Acknowledge them without judgment. Your body speaks to you constantly. Today, we practice listening."

Something in his phrasing cut through Jess's usual yoga class detachment. Unlike Amber's more technical instructions, Derek's guidance felt almost intimate, as though he were speaking directly to her.

"We honor our bodies' wisdom," he continued. "Each of you arrives with different needs today. Some seek strength, others flexibility. Some need challenge, others restoration. Whatever you seek, approach your practice with intention."

The class progressed through a series of poses that felt both familiar and fresh. Derek's sequencing differed from Amber's, placing greater emphasis on core engagement and

spinal flexibility. The movements demanded complete attention, leaving no room for distraction or rumination.

Halfway through, they moved into Warrior II. Jess extended her arms parallel to the floor, front knee bent, back leg straight. Her gaze focused over her front fingertips, her breath steady despite the burn building in her thigh muscles.

"Beautiful alignment," Derek's voice came from directly behind her, closer than she expected. "May I make an adjustment?"

Jess nodded. His fingers were warm against her hips, gently rotating them to square with the front of the room.

"Great form," he murmured. His thumbs pressed lightly into the dimples at the base of her spine. "Now sink deeper, if you can."

Jess obeyed, lowering her front thigh until it paralleled the floor. The burn intensified.

Derek moved on to assist other students, but Jess remained acutely conscious of his movements around the room.

By the time they reached the final resting pose, Jess's muscles buzzed with pleasant fatigue. She lay flat on her back, arms at her sides, palms facing upward in surrender. Her skin glistened with sweat, her chest rising and falling with each deep breath.

"Allow yourself to melt into the mat. Release any remaining tension, any thoughts that no longer serve you. For these final moments, you are nowhere but here, nothing but breath and sensation."

Jess felt herself sinking deeper, her body heavy yet somehow weightless. The prickling irritation that had followed her into class had dissolved, replaced by a floating tranquility. Even the subtle cramping had receded, temporarily forgotten.

Derek closed the session with a gentle "Namaste," the ending bringing Jess reluctantly back to full awareness. As students began rolling up mats and gathering belongings, he moved to the front of the room.

"For those interested, I'll be conducting an extended session focusing on inversions and balancing postures," he announced. "It's optional, of course, but a wonderful way to deepen your practice."

Jess had never stayed for the extended sessions Amber occasionally offered. There was always something else demanding her attention. Work deadlines, dinner preparations, social obligations. But today, with Tom away and nothing but an empty house awaiting her, the idea held unexpected appeal.

She hesitated, mat half-rolled in her hands. Most students were already filing out, eager to return to their lives beyond these walls. Only three others lingered uncertainly, the college student and an older couple Jess recognized from previous classes.

"I'd like to stay," she heard herself say.

Derek's smile was warm, revealing perfect white teeth against his dark skin. "Excellent. We'll begin again in five minutes. Feel free to hydrate and rest until then."

The extended session proved more intimate than the regular class, with Derek dividing his attention among just four students. They worked primarily on headstands and handstands, positions requiring strength and balance.

"The key to inversions isn't just physical strength," Derek explained as he demonstrated a perfect handstand, not a single muscle trembling with effort. "It's about finding your center of gravity and trusting yourself to maintain it."

When it came time for Jess to attempt a handstand against the wall, Derek positioned himself beside her. "I'll spot you," he offered. "Just in case."

Jess planted her palms firmly on the mat, fingers spread wide. She kicked up, feeling her body momentarily weightless before her feet found the wall behind her. Derek's hands hovered near her waist, not touching but ready to catch her if necessary.

"Engage your core," he instructed.

Jess attempted the movement, but her balance wavered. Instantly, Derek's hands were there, one at her waist, the other steadying her ankle.

"Trust yourself," he murmured. "Your body knows what to do."

Something in his tone, in the steady pressure of his hands, allowed Jess to find the necessary alignment. For three breathtaking seconds, she held the pose unassisted before carefully lowering back down.

"Beautiful," Derek said.

By the time the extended session concluded, the college student and the older couple had already left, leaving Jess alone with Derek. She wiped down her mat, acutely aware of his presence as he adjusted the thermostat and dimmed the lights further.

"You have excellent body awareness," he commented, approaching as she rolled her mat. "Not everyone connects so intuitively with their physicality."

"Thank you," Jess replied, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "It's been years of practice."

“It shows,” Derek continued, his dark eyes still on her. “Yoga isn’t just about strength or flexibility. It’s about alignment between the body, the breath, and the mind. When the three work in harmony, it’s like unlocking the full energy grid within yourself.”

Jess tilted her head. “Energy grid?” she repeated.

“Yes,” Derek said warmly, clearly confident in his explanation. “Think of your body as a map, your postures as key points on that map, and your breath as the force that connects them. Everything flows through those points. Physical balance, emotional well-being, even spiritual clarity. When they’re aligned, everything feels... effortless.”

Jess nodded slowly, considering his words. “So that’s the secret to the perfect handstand?”

“Not just the handstand,” he said. “It’s the secret to everything. You’d be surprised how often imbalance in the body reflects imbalance in the mind. If you hold tension somewhere, a hip, a shoulder, it’s often tied to deeper patterns you might not even be aware of.”

“How do you become aware of those patterns?”

“Listening,” Derek replied simply. “Breath is your first teacher. It’s always there, always speaking to you. Most people just don’t take the time to hear it. Yoga helps slow things down enough to notice. Even the smallest adjustments can ripple through everything. A slight rotation of the hip, a deeper inhale, those tiny shifts echo through the body and beyond.”

“Sounds almost mystical.”

“Maybe it is,” Derek admitted, laughing lightly. “But there’s science behind it too, if that’s what you’re after. Neural pathways, muscle memory, and energy flow. They all intersect. Eastern traditions knew it long before modern medicine caught up.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “I guess I’ve always focused more on the physical side of yoga.”

“That’s part of it,” Derek agreed. “But yoga’s true power lies in what you can’t see. It’s about breaking patterns, rewiring the pathways that keep you stuck physically, emotionally, spiritually. You’d be surprised how much insight lies beneath the surface.”

Jess shifted the mat strap over her shoulder. “So yoga is... therapy?”

“Yes, therapy for the body and the mind,” Derek continued, his posture fluid as he folded his arms loosely across his lean chest. His tone remained measured but filled

with conviction. “Think about it. Your breath, your postures, your alignment. They’re all tools to reset. To create space, not just physically, but emotionally.”

Jess adjusted her grip on the mat strap, intrigued despite herself. “Yeah?”

He smiled slightly, pulling his own mat upright and tucking it under one arm. “You’ve heard of fascia?”

Jess furrowed her brow, shaking her head slightly.

“It’s connective tissue,” he explained. “Runs throughout your body. Holds muscles, bones, everything, together. But here’s the thing: it changes. It responds to how you live, how you move. It adapts to stress, to tension, even to trauma. And the opposite is true as well: movement heals. Breath heals. Yoga isn’t just stretching. It’s reprogramming your baseline.”

Jess tilted her head. “So, every breath, is like... reprogramming?”

“Yes,” Derek said, leaning slightly closer. “We’re constantly recalibrating, like tuning an instrument. When you put your body in proper alignment, when you breathe deeply enough to shift yourself from fight-or-flight into rest-and-digest, you’re rewiring your nervous system, calming your mind, metabolizing emotions that you didn’t even realize needed processing.”

“I guess I’ve always stayed in yoga’s shallow end,” Jess admitted. “The physical benefits. Flexibility, strength, all of that. I never thought of it as... reprogramming my nervous system. Sounds... kind of a lot.”

“Only at first,” Derek reassured her. “Think about it like this: you’re already moving through life, carrying stress patterns, emotional habits. Yoga’s not adding pressure, it’s revealing it. Once you see it, you can shift. First in the body, then the mind.”

Jess found herself nodding, intrigued by his perspective. “That’s... a lot to think about.”

He smiled again, softer this time. “It doesn’t have to be complicated,” he said lightly. “You don’t need to understand every system in the body. Just start where you are.”

Jess exhaled a faint laugh. “Start where I am,” she repeated. “I’ll try to remember that.”

Derek shifted slightly, giving her room to move toward the door. “And if you want to explore the deeper side of yoga, the emotional, the energetic, there’s no rush. The practice meets you where you’re ready.”

Jess adjusted the mat strap across her chest. “This was... really interesting,” she admitted, warmth lighting her voice. “Thank you for sharing.”

“You’re welcome,” Derek said, his tone grounded and sincere. “See you Monday?”

“Definitely,” Jess replied, stepping into the hallway and leaving the room behind.

After dinner, Jess stood at the sink, water streaming over her plate. The house was silent around her. She finished rinsing and set the plate in the rack. The kitchen clock ticked, soft, incessant, counting out the seconds of another evening alone.

Her phone vibrated on the counter. Tom’s name. Not a video call, just a regular ring. She didn’t say hello, didn’t ask if he missed her.

“You ever get that leak in the hotel bathroom fixed?” she said instead, leaning her hip against the counter, letting a smile curve her mouth that only she could see.

Tom snorted, a familiar sound. “It’s still dripping. I think the hotel’s maintenance guy’s older than Bob. Probably learned plumbing from the Romans.”

She laughed, the sound echoing in the empty kitchen as she curled onto a stool, tucking her knees up. “Should’ve brought him along, huh? He’d have the whole place fixed for a case of beer.”

“Don’t tempt me, babe. I’m desperate enough to consider it.” His voice carried the weight of the day. “But honestly, it’s been all the same issues here. You know how it is. No one listens until something breaks, then everyone wants me to pull off miracles for minimum wage.”

“If they gave you minimum wage, we’d be even more fucked than we are now,” she said, glancing around at their beautiful kitchen. “But I guess we’d finally qualify for food stamps.”

He hummed, tired but present. “Had dinner?”

“I made pasta. Nothing fancy.”

“You eat anything green at all or just carbs and cheese tonight?” His tone was light, playful.

“Broccoli. Roasted. I took a picture, want proof?” Jess smiled. “I even put that new spice mix on it.”

“I trust you, babe.” His voice dropped. “Sometimes.”

“By the way, Bob stopped by last night.”

Tom’s voice was suddenly sharp. “Why?”

Jess felt herself stiffen, defensive without meaning to be. “He had the new faucets for the kitchen and bathroom. Wanted to install them.”

"And you let him in? Alone?"

"Tom. He was already carrying like thirty pounds of metal. I wasn't gonna send him away. And he finished in less than two hours. He was…" She stopped herself. 'Harmless' felt too dismissive, too naive. "Professional," she finished.

"That's not the point, Jess. He's still practically a stranger. You shouldn't be letting some guy we barely know in the house when I'm not there. I get that he's fixing things, but… did he go in our bedroom?"

"Yes, Tom, to install the bathroom faucet," she said, fighting the urge to roll her eyes. "He didn't rifle through my underwear drawer if that's what you're asking. He looked at pipes and talked about water pressure."

She braced an elbow on the counter. "Seriously Tom, he was fine. I had my phone on me the whole time. He's lonely, not dangerous. He mostly asked about my design work."

"You don't know that he's not dangerous. People are good at hiding things. Hell, we barely know what he did before moving in." Tom's breath came faster. "I don't like the idea of some guy we met a week ago having free access to you while I'm not there."

The edge crept back into her voice as she stood up, pacing the kitchen. "You vetted him. Ran background. He's twice divorced, drinks cheap beer, and seems to know every hardware supplier in Texas. If he's secretly running a cartel out of his toolbox, he's got me fooled."

Tom's sigh crackled through the line, resignation mixing with frustration. "Just… be careful, okay? I know you can take care of yourself. But it freaks me out thinking about you there alone with some guy we don't really know." There was a pause, then, quieter: "I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

She didn't say, 'I've been dealing with men staring, wanting, prowling, since I was a young teenager'. She didn't say, 'you love me for being beautiful, but you're scared of everything that comes with it'.

Instead, she said "I get it. I'll be careful," her voice softening. "He's just an old man who likes to fix things, Tom. And honestly, the faucets look amazing. The water pressure actually works now."

Tom made a noncommittal noise, then cleared his throat. "Look, I'm not trying to be controlling, but can you promise me something? Just... don't let him in the house when you're alone again. At least until I'm back."

"Seriously, Tom?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous," Tom admitted. "But it would make me feel better."

Jess sighed, twisting a strand of hair around her finger. "Fine. I promise I won't let the big scary handyman in the house alone until you're back. Happy?"

"Thank you," Tom said, relief evident in his voice. "And the faucets really look that good?"

"Night and day difference," Jess confirmed, glad to move past the subject. "You'll see when you get home."

She heard rustling on his end, like he was settling into a more comfortable position. After a moment, his voice returned with casualness. "So what did you do today? Anything exciting?" The forced lightness in his tone was obvious, but she appreciated the effort.

Jess moved onto the couch, tucking her feet underneath her. "Yoga was different tonight," she said.

"Yeah?" His voice perked up, interest replacing the tension. "That new guy again? What was his name?"

"Derek," she said. "He's... intense. Not like Brandon or your gym bros who just want to show off how much they can bench. Derek's all about alignment and breath." She paused, searching for the right words. "It's hard to explain. He talks about energy grids and recalibrating your nervous system. Makes you think about your body differently."

"Energy grids?" Tom's voice dripped with playful sarcasm. "Sounds like the kind of bullshit guys use when they're trying to get women out of their yoga pants. 'Oh baby, let me realign your chakras with my special technique.'" He paused, then added, "So what did the enlightened Derek have to say about your... alignment?"

"Not everyone is trying to get into my pants, Tom."

"Just ninety-nine percent of the male population," Tom countered. "And probably ninety percent of the female population too."

"He's a professional," Jess insisted. "And he's actually really knowledgeable. He was talking about how emotional tension manifests physically. How the body stores stress and trauma."

"Uh-huh," Tom's skepticism radiated through the phone. "And I'm sure he offered to help release all that tension? Maybe some private sessions?"

"God, you're impossible," Jess laughed, stretching her legs out on the couch. "Actually, I did stay for his extended session after class. Only four of us did."

There was a brief silence on the line. “Extended session?” Tom’s voice had lost its playful edge. “That’s new.”

Jess shifted, suddenly aware of the subtle shift in his tone. “It was just more advanced poses. Headstands, handstands, that kind of thing.” She paused before adding, “He had to spot me for the handstand.”

“Spot you?” Tom’s voice tightened further. “As in, hands on?”

Something in his tone made her pause. Was it jealousy? Or something else entirely? “Just to make sure I didn’t fall,” Jess explained, remembering Derek’s hands at her waist and his calm instruction to trust herself. “It’s completely normal in yoga.”

“I bet it is,” Tom said. “So what was it like? Was he holding you while you were upside down in those tight yoga pants?”

Jess sat up straighter, surprised by the directness of his question. “It wasn’t like that, Tom. It was professional.”

“Professional,” Tom repeated. “And how exactly does the professional Derek look? Just so I can picture this properly.”

Jess hesitated for a moment. “Tall, lean. He does yoga for a living, so obviously he’s fit.”

“Fit how?” Tom pressed.

“Not bulky. More... I don’t know, streamlined? It’s all functional muscle. And he’s...” She paused.

“He’s what?” Tom’s voice had dropped lower.

“He’s black,” Jess finished, immediately regretting the unnecessary detail. “Not that it matters.”

“Is he handsome?” Tom pressed.

Jess hesitated. “Objectively? Yeah, I guess he is. The front desk girl at the studio was telling me two women actually got into an argument yesterday about who arrived to his class first.”

“And what about you? You fighting for front row spots too?”

“Tom!” Jess laughed. “I’m not sixteen. I can recognize when someone’s attractive without developing a schoolgirl crush.”

“So you do find him attractive.”

"That's not-" Jess started, then sighed. "Fine. Yes, he's attractive. He's also my yoga instructor, and I'm very much happily married."

"Doesn't mean you can't look," Tom said. "Or think about it."

"Are you seriously asking if I fantasize about my yoga instructor?" Jess asked incredulously.

"Do you?"

"No, I do not fantasize about Derek," Jess said firmly.

"So you've got this tall, lean, handsome, black yoga teacher putting his hands on my wife while she's in compromising positions," Tom summarized. "And you stayed specifically for this extended session."

"It wasn't like that," Jess repeated, frustration creeping into her voice. "Why are you being weird about this? It's just yoga."

"I'm not being weird," Tom countered. "I'm just trying to understand why my wife, who never stays for extended sessions with Amber, suddenly decides to do one with Mr. Energy Grid."

Jess sighed. "I stayed because I didn't want to come home to an empty house, okay? Because I'm lonely and sad and..." She trailed off, biting her lip.

"And?" Tom asked, his tone softening.

"And I got my period today," she admitted quietly. "So I'm not pregnant. Again."

The line went silent for a beat.

"Oh," Tom finally said. "Jess, I'm sorry. I know we both hoped..."

"Yeah," she cut in, not wanting to dwell on it. "It is what it is. Anyway, that's why I stayed. I just needed the distraction."

Tom's sigh carried through the phone. "I'm sorry I'm not there," he said. "And I'm sorry about being weird about the yoga thing. I guess I just... miss you," Tom admitted. "Being here alone in this hotel room, thinking about you back home... it gets to me. And hearing about some attractive yoga instructor with his hands on you..." He let out a frustrated breath. "I know it's irrational. I just wish those were my hands on you instead."

Jess felt a flutter in her stomach at his words, that familiar warmth spreading through her body despite her cramps. "I miss you too," she said softly. "The bed feels too big. I keep reaching for you in my sleep."

Tom's exhale was heavy through the phone. "Same here. Hotel beds are already depressing enough without missing your gorgeous wife."

A comfortable silence settled between them for a moment.

"So what's on your agenda tomorrow?" Tom asked.

Jess shifted on the couch. "I'm only working till noon so I can get ready for the party properly."

"Smart woman," Tom agreed. "It's going to be amazing, Jess. You're going to blow them all away."

"What about you? How's tomorrow looking?"

Tom's groan carried through the phone with clarity. "Brutal. Today was supposed to be the big push to fix everything, but we hit another wall. Tomorrow's going to be my busiest day yet. Meetings from 8 AM straight through till probably 6 PM." The frustration in his voice was palpable. "The CEO's breathing down everyone's necks. If we don't get this fixed by tomorrow night..."

"You will," Jess assured him, conviction in her voice. "You always do. That's why Davis sent you."

"Yeah, well..." Tom sighed. "I just wish I could be in two places at once. I should be there with you tomorrow."

"I know," Jess said softly. She hesitated, then made a sudden decision. "Wait, I want to show you something. Can we switch to video?"

"Now?" Tom sounded surprised but intrigued. "Sure."

The call disconnected briefly before reconnecting with video. Tom's face appeared on her screen, tired eyes and stubbled jaw, his hotel room's bland beige walls visible behind him. He was sitting on the bed, tie loosened, top button undone.

"Hey beautiful," he said, his smile genuine despite his exhaustion.

"Give me a minute," Jess replied, propping her phone against the lamp on the end table. "Don't go anywhere."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Tom assured her.

Jess disappeared from frame, hurrying to their bedroom. She opened the closet door and reached for the emerald dress, still hanging exactly where she'd left it. Her heart raced slightly as she stripped off her lounge clothes and carefully slipped the dress over her head, adjusting it. She didn't bother with shoes or jewelry. This wasn't about

the full effect. This was about connection, about sharing something she'd meant to show him days ago.

When she returned to the living room, she positioned herself a few feet back from the phone so Tom could see the full dress. "So," she said. "What do you think?"

Tom's eyes widened visibly even through the small screen. "Holy shit, Jess," he breathed. "You look... wow."

Jess did a slow turn, letting him see how the dress hugged her body. "I bought it when I went shopping with Madi on Tuesday," she explained. "I was going to surprise you with it, but then..." She trailed off, not wanting to rehash the disappointment.

"It's incredible," Tom said. "That color against your skin... Jesus, Jess." He leaned closer to his screen.

Jess smiled, feeling a flush of pleasure at his reaction. "You really like it?"

"Like is way too mild a word," Tom said. "I'm sitting here trying to figure out if I can catch a red eye back just to see you in that dress in person." His expression shifted, becoming more serious. "I'm so sorry I'm missing this, Jess. I really should be there."

"It's okay," she said, though they both knew it wasn't entirely. "I'll take plenty of pictures."

"You better," Tom warned. "And maybe you could model it for me again when I get back? Just for me?"

"I think that could be arranged," she replied, matching his tone. "Though I can't promise the dress will stay on very long."

"You're killing me, Jess. I'm hundreds of miles away in a hotel room with the world's most uncomfortable mattress, and you're standing there looking like that."

Jess laughed, feeling lighter than she had all day. "Consider it motivation to finish your project quickly."

"Trust me," Tom said, his eyes still roaming her form through the screen, "I've never been more motivated to get back home in my life."

She settled back onto the couch, adjusting the phone so he could still see her in the dress.

They talked about nothing important for a while, office gossip, a funny story about the hotel staff. The dress and the distance between them created a strange intimacy, a shared secret across the miles.

When Tom's yawn finally betrayed his exhaustion, Jess smiled gently. "You should sleep. Big day tomorrow, remember?"

"Yeah," he agreed reluctantly. "I want to hear that Chris Webb is falling over himself to hire you for every project from now till retirement."

"I'll do my best," she promised. "Call me tomorrow?"

"First chance I get," Tom assured her. "I love you, Jess. More than anything."

"I love you too," she replied softly. "Goodnight, Tom."

"Goodnight, beautiful."

The call ended, leaving Jess alone in the silent house once more. But something had shifted, some of the heaviness lifted.

Jess stared at herself in the bathroom mirror, considering her reflection. Today was her moment, her professional triumph, even if Tom wouldn't be by her side to witness it.

Her phone chimed with a text.

Tom: "Morning beautiful. Just heading into first meeting. Wanted to say I love you and I'm so proud of you. You're going to own that room tonight."

Jess smiled. She typed back quickly.

Jess: "Thanks babe. Nervous but excited. How's it looking there?"

Tom: "Brutal. CEO breathing down our necks. Might be offline most of day. Will try to call before your party."

Jess: "Don't stress about calling. Focus on your work. I'll send pics."

Tom: "That dress is going to destroy them. Send ALL the pics."

Jess: "Will do. Miss you."

Tom: "Miss you more. Gotta run. Love you."

Jess: "Love you too."

She set her phone down and turned back to her reflection, noting the subtle shadows beneath her eyes. Nothing a good concealer couldn't fix, but evidence of restless sleep nonetheless.

The morning passed in a blur of last-minute work emails and touch-ups to the Skyline presentation materials. Around noon, Jess closed her laptop and stretched, feeling the

tension that had built up in her shoulders from hunching over her keyboard. She made herself a light lunch, just a small salad with grilled chicken, knowing she'd need something in her stomach before the evening's festivities but not wanting to feel bloated in her dress. As she ate, she mentally rehearsed potential conversations with investors and clients, planning how to highlight the key features of her Skyline designs. The nervous energy building inside her couldn't be ignored, but she channeled it into productive preparation, reviewing her portfolio one final time before setting it aside for Madi's arrival.

At precisely 2 PM, the doorbell rang. Jess opened it to find Madi standing there with a leather makeup case in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other.

"Let the transformation begin!" Madi announced, sweeping past Jess into the house. "I've brought reinforcements." She held up the champagne triumphantly.

"It's barely afternoon," Jess protested weakly.

"It's party day," Madi replied, already heading to the kitchen for glasses. "Besides, a glass or two to take the edge off won't hurt."

Despite her objections, Jess accepted the flute of bubbly champagne Madi pressed into her hand. The first sip fizzed pleasantly down her throat, warming her from the inside.

"First things first," Madi said, eyeing Jess critically. "You need a proper shower before we even think about makeup. Go on, full treatment."

Jess nodded and headed to the master bathroom where she stripped down and stepped under the hot spray. She methodically shaved everything, her legs, underarms, and the sensitive skin of her bikini line, removing every last trace of hair until she was completely bare. The razor glided over her slick skin as steam filled the shower stall. Afterward, she toweled off and slathered her entire body with her expensive moisturizer, working it into every inch of her freshly shaved skin until she felt silky smooth.

"Now," Madi said, setting down her glass and opening her makeup case with dramatic flair when Jess returned wrapped in her robe. "Let's make you even more gorgeous than usual. By the time I'm done, every man in that room will be questioning his marriage vows, and every woman will be contemplating a sexual identity crisis."

Jess laughed, her nerves easing. "You're ridiculous."

"I prefer visionary," replied Madi, guiding Jess to sit facing the natural light from the window. "Now hold still while I work my magic."

For the next hour, Jess surrendered to Madi's expertise. They chatted about office gossip and client drama as Madi applied make up.

“So,” Madi said, “any more developments with the tenant situation?”

“He installed new faucets Wednesday night.”

“Oh?” Madi’s perfectly sculpted eyebrow arched. “And Tom was okay with that? Mr. Protective Husband let another man into his castle while he was away?”

Jess sighed, closing her eyes as Madi continued. “He wasn’t thrilled when I told him about it. Actually made me promise not to let Bob in the house again until he’s back.”

“Hmm,” Madi hummed thoughtfully. “Men get so territorial about their space. Like some kind of primal instinct to protect their cave from other cavemen.”

“I don’t know. Tom’s all worried because ‘we barely know him’ and ‘he could be dangerous’,” Jess said, adding air quotes with her fingers. “But come on, he’s just a harmless old man who likes fixing things. You should see him with his toolbox, all organized. It’s actually kind of endearing.”

“Endearing?” Madi paused. “That’s an interesting word choice for your tenant.”

“You know what I mean,” Jess said, waving dismissively. “He reminds me of my grandpa, always puttering around with projects. I think Tom’s being overprotective. I mean, Bob’s what, fifty-five? And he’s been nothing but respectful. Even when I answered the door in just a t-shirt the other night, he kept his eyes firmly on my face.”

“Wait, you answered the door in just a t-shirt?” Madi’s eyes widened.

“It wasn’t planned! I didn’t know he was coming over,” Jess defended herself. “I actually feel bad for him sometimes. Can you imagine being twice divorced and having to rent out someone else’s basement in your fifties? He must be so lonely down there.”

“Careful with that sympathy,” Madi warned. “That’s how horror movies start. The sweet, lonely older man who just needs a friend...”

“Oh stop,” Jess laughed. “Not everyone has ulterior motives. Bob’s just... I don’t know, sad. When he talks about his ex-wives, you can tell there’s still pain there. And his apartment is so sparse. He barely has any personal items, just tools.”

“So what, you want to adopt him now?” Madi asked. “Invite him upstairs for family dinners and movie nights?”

“No,” Jess said. “I just think Tom’s being paranoid. What does he think Bob’s going to do? He’s not some predator waiting to pounce the second Tom leaves town. He was all professional Wednesday night.”

Madi gave her a knowing look. “Honey, men don’t see other men the way we do. Tom sees a potential threat, a guy with access to his gorgeous wife. You see a harmless grandpa who needs compassion.”

“Because that’s what he is,” Jess insisted. “If you met him, you’d understand. He’s just... trying to rebuild his life. And he’s been so helpful with the house. Did I tell you he fixed our garage door too? It used to make this horrible grinding noise, and now it’s silent.”

“My god,” Madi said, stepping back to examine her work. “You really are naive sometimes. It’s adorable but concerning.”

“I’m not naive,” Jess protested. “I’m just not automatically suspicious of everyone. Besides, Bob’s like twice my age.”

“As if that matters to men,” Madi scoffed. “Look, I’m not saying Bob’s dangerous, but maybe Tom’s instincts aren’t completely off base. Just... be careful, okay? Not everyone is who they seem to be.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll maintain appropriate tenant landlord boundaries. No more answering the door in my underwear.”

“That would be a start,” Madi said.

“Tom seemed genuinely concerned about him being around me. But then last night...” Jess trailed off.

Madi paused. “Last night what? Spill it.”

“We were talking on the phone, and I mentioned my yoga teacher, Derek.”

“The hot one you told me about?” Madi interjected, returning to her work.

“Yes, him,” Jess confirmed, rolling her eyes. “And Tom got so... weird about it. He wanted details. What Derek looks like, how he touched me during poses. He even asked if I found him attractive.”

Madi’s eyes widened with interest. “And do you?”

“That’s not the point,” Jess deflected. “The point is, Tom seemed almost... turned on by the idea of Derek spotting me during handstands.”

“Look up,” Madi instructed, continuing to apply make up. “So let me get this straight. Tom gets jealous and protective about Bob, but excited about Brandon and Derek?”

“I don’t know…” Jess admitted. “He also asked if I fantasize about Derek.”

“And do you?” Madi asked bluntly.

“No!” Jess exclaimed, then flinched as Madi steadied her face.

“Stay still unless you want to look like a raccoon,” Madi warned. “And honey, there’s nothing wrong with a little fantasy.”

“But I don’t fantasize about Derek,” Jess insisted. “Or Brandon, before you ask.”

“Your loss,” Madi shrugged, a sly smile playing on her lips.

“You’ve told me enough already,” Jess replied.

“So Tom’s turned on by the idea of other men wanting you. That’s... actually pretty hot.”

“I don’t even know if that’s it… but it’s confusing is what it is,” Jess replied.

“Maybe it comes down to control,” Madi suggested, stepping back to assess her work. “Bob’s an unknown factor, living downstairs, with access to your home. There’s no control there. But Brandon’s his friend, someone he trusts, and Derek’s just a yoga instructor you see a few times a week in public.”

Jess considered Madi’s theory. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s about attractiveness? Bob’s older, not conventionally handsome. Brandon and Derek are both... you know.”

“Hot as fucking hell?” Madi supplied helpfully.

“Something like that,” Jess laughed.

“Or,” Madi said, her tone becoming more serious as she began work on Jess’s lips, “maybe Tom’s exploring something about himself that he’s not fully ready to acknowledge. Some men get turned on by the idea of other men wanting their partners. It’s not that uncommon.”

“You think Tom’s wants me to date other men?” Jess asked.

“I’m not saying that,” Madi clarified. “I’m saying he might be discovering he likes the idea of you being desired. It’s a power thing for some guys, a way of validating their choice. Like, ‘look at my hot wife, everyone wants her, but she’s mine.’”

Jess fell silent, considering. The night Tom had watched her pose by the pool for Bob’s camera came to mind. He’d been so turned on afterward, taking her with an urgency she hadn’t experienced in months.

“Maybe,” she conceded finally. “But it’s not exactly something we’ve discussed.”

“You should,” Madi encouraged, pausing her makeup application to meet Jess’s eyes in the mirror. “You know, you should actually talk to him about this when he gets back. Not accusingly, but openly, like you’re discovering something exciting together.”

She resumed applying the make up. “Men are terrible at communicating their desires, especially the complicated ones. Half the time they don’t even understand what turns them on or why.”

“I wouldn’t even know how to start that conversation,” Jess admitted.

“Simple. Wait until after sex when he’s all blissed out and vulnerable,” Madi suggested. “Then ask him what it was about Brandon flirting with you that seemed to turn him on. And then ask him what it was about that photo shoot that turned him on too. Was it knowing Bob was watching you? Men get surprisingly honest when they’re in that post orgasm haze.”

Jess bit her lip. “What if he denies it?”

“Then you know he’s not ready to admit it to himself yet,” Madi shrugged. “But I bet he won’t deny it. I bet he’ll tell you exactly what he liked about it.” She leaned closer, lowering her voice. “And that’s when you suggest exploring it further. Could spice things up. God knows Brandon wouldn’t mind playing along.”

“Madi!” Jess exclaimed but couldn’t help laughing. “That’s not happening… but speaking of Brandon, how’s your ‘arrangement’ going these days? Still working out?”

Madi smiled wide. “Better than ever. You know how it is. Neither of us wants the drama of a real relationship.”

“And yet you keep ending up in his bed,” Jess teased.

Madi resumed her work, carefully coating Jess’s lashes. “Can you blame me? We’ve got the perfect situation. Amazing sex without the headache of commitment.”

“I still don’t know how you two manage it so well,” Jess mused. “Every time one of you starts dating someone else, you just hit pause, no drama.”

“That’s why it works,” Madi shrugged elegantly. “Remember when I was with Michael last year? Brandon and I were strictly platonic for those four months. The day after we broke up...”

“He showed up with takeout and tequila,” Jess finished, having heard the story before. “And you didn’t get to the food until morning.”

“Exactly,” Madi laughed. “That’s the beauty of our system. When we’re both single, we have each other. No questions, no jealousy, no complications.”

“And he’s still seeing other people when you’re... on pause?” Jess asked, though she already knew the answer.

"Of course he is. Brandon's never going to be a one woman man," Madi said matter-of-factly. "But that's part of why it works so well for us. I don't want him all to myself. I just want access to that magnificent body whenever I'm in the mood."

"That's still frighteningly practical of you both," Jess said, shaking her head with a smile. "Though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised after all these years."

"Not everyone can handle the husband-and-wife thing like you and Tom," Madi replied. "Some of us prefer our freedom... with occasional benefits."

By 5 PM, the transformation was complete. Jess stood before the full-length mirror in their bedroom. The emerald dress fit her perfectly. Madi had created a subtle smoky eye that added drama without looking overdone, and her lips were painted a muted rose that complemented rather than competed with the dress.

"Holy shit," Madi breathed, standing behind her. "I've outdone myself. You look absolutely fucking incredible."

Jess turned sideways, admiring how the dress emphasized the curve of her waist and hips. "It's pretty amazing," she admitted.

"Pretty amazing?" Madi scoffed. "Jessica Marshall, you are a goddamn knockout. If Tom could see you right now, he'd be booking the next flight home."

As if summoned by his name, Jess's phone rang. Tom's face appeared on the screen.

"Speaking of the devil," Madi said. "I'll give you some privacy." She squeezed Jess's shoulder before slipping out of the bedroom.

Jess answered the call, switching immediately to video. "Hey," she said, a genuine smile spreading across her face.

Tom's tired expression transformed into one of awe as he took in her appearance. "Jesus Christ, Jess," he breathed. "You look... there aren't even words."

She did a slow turn for him, the camera capturing the full effect. "Madi worked her magic," she said.

"Remind me to send her a thank you gift," Tom replied, his voice tight with what sounded like both appreciation and regret. "I can't believe I'm missing seeing you in that dress in person."

"Me neither," Jess admitted. "But I'll take lots of pictures."

"You better." Tom's eyes never left her image. "I'm sorry the call's so short. We're in a ten-minute break between meetings. The CEO's on the warpath, and we're still having issues with the implementation."

“It’s okay,” Jess assured him. “I should finish getting ready anyway.”

At just about 7 PM, the Uber pulled up to the entrance of the Fairmont Austin. Jess smoothed the emerald dress over her thighs, heart pounding with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. This was her moment, and she was facing it alone.

The doorman nodded appreciatively as he held the heavy glass door open. “Good evening, ma’am.”

Jess offered a smile and stepped into the lobby, noticing the quiet luxury: marble floors, soaring ceilings, and tasteful lighting that made everyone look more attractive than they actually were. She followed the discreet signage directing guests to the “Skyline Austin Launch” in the grand ballroom.

Outside the ballroom entrance, a sleek sign displayed the Skyline Austin logo beside architectural renderings of the Skyline building, which included the penthouse interiors. Her team’s designs, their vision, their work, splashed across huge panels for everyone to see. Jess paused, taking a deep breath before pushing through the doors.

Inside, the grand ballroom had been transformed for the Skyline launch. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over the space while floor-to-ceiling windows offered spectacular views of Austin’s skyline, a fitting backdrop for tonight’s celebration. A string quartet played in one corner, their music providing an elegant soundtrack without overwhelming conversation. Waiters circulated with trays of champagne and hors d’oeuvres.

One of the waiters passing with a tray of champagne flutes caught sight of her. “Champagne, ma’am?” he offered, extending the tray.

“Thank you,” Jess replied, taking a flute and scanning the room.

As Jess sipped her champagne, she spotted Annie Davis near one of the design displays, explaining something to an older couple who nodded with interest. Annie’s normally understated appearance had been transformed for the evening. Her auburn hair swept into an elegant updo, her navy cocktail dress a perfect complement to her fair skin.

“There you are!” Annie exclaimed when she caught sight of Jess. “I was beginning to think you’d chickened out.” She excused herself from the couple and moved to Jess’s side, lowering her voice. “Holy shit, that dress is incredible. You’re making the rest of us look like we shopped at Target.”

Jess laughed, grateful for Annie’s familiar presence. “Please. You look amazing. Who are your new friends?”

"Potential buyers," Annie replied. "Retired couple from Chicago looking for a winter home. I've been talking their ears off about the southern exposure in unit 3801." She glanced around the room. "Have you seen Michael from accounting? He's actually wearing something other than those awful khakis. And I swear he got a haircut specifically for tonight."

"The world truly is full of wonders," Jess quipped. "Is he still doing that fantasy football thing he won't shut up about?"

"Worse," Annie groaned. "Now it's NFTs."

They were joined by Sam, who approached with the nervous energy of someone about to perform. "There you both are! I've been looking everywhere. We should go over the presentation points one more time, don't you think?"

Annie rolled her eyes. "Sam, we've rehearsed it a dozen times. We could do this presentation in our sleep."

"I know, I know," Sam fidgeted with his cuff links. "But Chris Webb just cornered me in the bathroom, not literally, thank god, but he mentioned the investors are interested in the sustainable materials angle, so I thought…"

"Sam," Jess interrupted gently, placing a reassuring hand on his arm. "We've got this. Your section is perfect. Annie's smart home integration is perfect. We're prepared."

"Easy for you to say," Sam muttered. "You could stand up there and recite the phone book and they'd still be captivated."

"It's the dress," Annie stage-whispered, making them all laugh.

"Speaking of captivated audiences," Jess nodded toward a group nearby, "isn't that David from HR with Sophia from Marketing? I thought they hated each other after the Christmas party incident."

Sam snorted. "Apparently the hate's evolved into something else. I caught them making out by the elevators last week."

"No!" Annie gasped. "But she's married!"

"Separated," Sam corrected. "As of last month. David's been waiting in the wings for years, poor guy."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Greg Robinson, the firm's senior architect who rarely socialized with the design team. His typical seriousness was softened by what appeared to be his third or fourth drink of the evening.

"The golden trio," he announced, clinking his glass against Jess's. "Our stars of the hour. The designs look spectacular, by the way. I've had three different developers ask if you might be available for consultations."

"Really?" Annie perked up.

"Don't sound so surprised," Greg chuckled. "Your work speaks for itself." He turned to Jess. "Marshall, when you have a moment, Margaret wants to introduce you to some people."

"Thanks, Greg," Jess replied. "I'll find her shortly."

As Greg wandered off toward the bar, Sam exhaled slowly. "I still can't believe we're actually here, that people are actually seeing our work, that Chris Webb is about to introduce us to half of Austin's millionaires."

"Multi multi millionaires," Annie corrected with a grin. "This isn't amateur hour."

Jess took another sip of champagne. Despite Tom's absence, she felt strangely centered, ready for whatever the evening might bring. "We should probably circulate," she suggested. "Make the most of this opportunity."

"Agreed," Sam nodded.

They parted ways, each heading in different directions. Jess began making her way through the crowd, exchanging pleasantries with colleagues and clients, acutely aware of the appreciative glances following her progress.

Across the room, she spotted Margaret DeVore engaged in conversation with Chris Webb and two men in expensive suits. Likely investors. Margaret looked polished as always in a tailored black pantsuit, her silver hair styled in its signature bob. Chris Webb stood beside her, gesturing animatedly as he spoke, his enthusiasm clear even from a distance.

As Jess approached the small group, Margaret caught sight of her first. The older woman's professional mask slipped momentarily, revealing genuine pleasure.

"Jessica," Margaret called, extending a manicured hand. "Perfect timing. Chris was just discussing the penthouse layouts."

Chris Webb turned, his face lighting up with recognition. His custom suit probably cost more than her monthly mortgage payment.

"There she is," Chris proclaimed, reaching for her hand. His grip was firm, his smile genuine. "The visionary behind our penthouses. Jessica Marshall, I was just singing your praises."

Jess felt a flush of pride but maintained her professional composure. “It was a team effort,” she replied modestly. “Sam and Annie contributed significantly to the final designs.”

“But you led the charge,” Chris insisted before turning to the two men beside him. “Gentlemen, this is Jessica Marshall, the interior designer I was telling you about. Jessica, meet Richard Harrington and James Chen.”

Richard, the older of the two, appeared to be in his sixties with silver hair and the deep tan of someone who spent more time on golf courses than in offices. James was younger, perhaps early forties, with sharp features and alert eyes that seemed to calculate the value of everything they observed.

“A pleasure,” Richard said, taking her hand. “Chris tells us you’ve worked magic with the penthouse spaces.”

“I wouldn’t call it magic,” Jess replied with a smile. “Just thoughtful design.”

“The renderings are remarkable,” James added, his gaze moving between Jess and the display panels across the room. “Particularly the integration of smart home features with traditional luxury elements. Very forward-thinking.”

Jess nodded, warming to the subject. “We wanted to create spaces that felt timeless yet thoroughly modern. Technology that serves the resident without dominating the environment.”

“Jessica has a gift for understanding how people actually live in spaces,” Margaret interjected. “Not just how they think they’ll live in them.”

Chris nodded enthusiastically. “Exactly why we brought your firm on board. The previous designers we consulted were all flash, no substance. Beautiful renderings that would have been impractical nightmares to actually live in.”

Richard swirled his whiskey thoughtfully. “I’m particularly interested in the master suite design. The way you’ve positioned the bed to capture both the sunrise and the city views is quite clever.”

“That was actually inspired by traditional feng shui principles,” Jess explained. “Positioning the bed where it receives natural light but maintains privacy while offering views that connect the resident to both nature and the urban landscape.”

“Fascinating,” James said. “My wife is obsessed with feng shui. She’d appreciate that thoughtfulness.”

“The materials palette is exquisite as well,” Chris added. “The combination of local limestone with those Italian marble accents in the master bath... absolute perfection.”

"We wanted to honor the Texas landscape," Jess explained.

Margaret nodded approvingly. "Jessica understands that true luxury isn't about opulence for its own sake. It's about creating experiences, moments of beauty in everyday life."

"That's exactly it," Jess agreed. "Even something as simple as the morning routine becomes elevated when you're surrounded by thoughtful design."

Richard's eyes crinkled with amusement. "Well, at these price points, the morning routine should feel pretty damn special."

They all laughed, her tension easing.

The conversation flowed smoothly from there, touching on design trends and material sourcing challenges. Jess found herself relaxing into the discussion, her initial nervousness replaced by professional confidence. These men might control millions in investment capital, but in matters of design, she was the expert. Tom's absence, while still felt, no longer seemed to diminish her moment.

As a waiter approached with fresh drinks, Chris raised his glass in a small toast. "To Skyline Austin and the remarkable team bringing it to life."

They all clinked glasses, and Jess felt a surge of satisfaction. This project, her vision realized in collaboration with talented colleagues, was something to be genuinely proud of.

As the clock approached 7:30, the ballroom had filled considerably. The energy shifted as staff discreetly adjusted the lighting, creating focal points toward the stage area where a podium stood bearing the Skyline Austin logo. The string quartet transitioned to a softer melody, signaling the upcoming formalities.

Jess felt a hand at her elbow and turned to find Margaret.

"You're making quite the impression," Margaret murmured, nodding toward several guests who were clearly discussing Jess. "That dress was a strategic choice."

"I'd like to claim it was calculated," Jess admitted, "but honestly, I just saw it and knew."

Margaret's lips curved into a rare genuine smile. "Sometimes instinct trumps strategy. Either way, you've got half the room wondering who you are and the other half pretending they aren't looking." She paused, studying Jess's face. "How are you holding up? I notice Tom couldn't make it."

"Work emergency in San Diego," Jess explained, the familiar pang of disappointment flickering briefly.

"Ah," Margaret nodded, understanding immediately. "The curse of the two-career household. Richard's wife stopped attending his events years ago. Said she couldn't bear another conversation about commercial real estate portfolios."

Jess laughed. "I actually find it fascinating. I just wish..."

"That he could be here for your moment," Margaret finished. "I understand." She glanced around the room before continuing in a lower voice. "This industry doesn't make relationships easy. My ex-husband used to say he was married to a ghost who occasionally appeared at breakfast."

Jess blinked, surprised by the personal disclosure. Margaret rarely discussed her private life.

"I'm not saying that to discourage you," Margaret clarified. "Just to acknowledge that what you're building, both professionally and personally, requires sacrifices. The question is always whether they're worth it." She squeezed Jess's arm. "For what it's worth, I think you're navigating it beautifully."

Before Jess could respond, the microphone crackled to life. Chris Webb approached the podium, his confident stride drawing all eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Chris began, his voice carrying effortlessly across the now-quieting room. "Welcome to the official launch of what I believe will become Austin's most iconic residential development."

The crowd settled, champagne glasses stilling as attention focused forward.

"When we first conceived Skyline Austin, we envisioned more than just another luxury tower. We wanted to create a vertical community that would redefine urban living in this vibrant city." Chris gestured toward the windows, where Austin's actual skyline twinkled in the gathering darkness. "A place that would honor Austin's unique character while elevating the everyday experience of its residents."

Jess watched him work the room, noting how he made eye contact with key investors while seeming to address everyone simultaneously.

"Tonight isn't just about showcasing spectacular architecture or innovative amenities," Chris continued. "It's about celebrating a vision of how we live, how we connect, and how thoughtful design can enhance every aspect of our existence."

He paused, building anticipation.

"At the heart of this vision are the phenomenal penthouse residences, which exemplify our philosophy that luxury isn't about excess, it's about exceptional

experiences. To bring this philosophy to life, we partnered with Austin Design Group, whose team has created interiors that are nothing short of transformative."

His gaze found Jess in the crowd, acknowledging her with a slight nod.

"I could attempt to describe these remarkable spaces, but I'd rather let the visionaries themselves share their inspiration. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the design team behind Skyline Austin's penthouse collection."

Applause filled the room as Jess, Sam, and Annie made their way to the stage. Though they'd rehearsed this moment, the reality made Jess's heart race.

The presentation flowed smoothly, with Sam discussing the sustainable materials selection, Annie highlighting the smart home integration, and Jess explaining the overall design philosophy. Their coordination made the presentation feel conversational rather than rehearsed.

"We approached each residence as a canvas," Jess explained. "Not for our own artistic expression, but for the lives that will unfold within these spaces. Every sight line, every material choice, was considered through the lens of human experience."

The crowd seemed genuinely engaged, particularly when the screens displayed the virtual walkthrough of the master suite. A collective murmur of appreciation rose at the reveal of the bathroom's seamless transition to the private terrace, where the soaking tub appeared to float above the city.

"The boundary between interior and exterior becomes permeable," Jess continued, "creating moments of connection with both the natural and urban environments. Privacy is maintained through strategic design rather than obvious barriers."

As they concluded the formal presentation, Chris returned to the podium.

"Before we open the floor to questions, I'd like to add that these designs aren't just beautiful concepts. They're being meticulously realized as we speak, with completion scheduled for next spring."

The Q&A session continued with Jess and her team deftly handling a variety of questions. A silver-haired woman inquired about sustainability practices, allowing Jess to highlight their use of locally sourced materials and energy efficient systems. A young architect asked about the integration of smart home technology, giving Sam an opportunity to explain their approach that prioritized intuitive use over visible gadgetry.

What could have been a challenging moment came when a skeptical developer questioned the project's timeline, suggesting the design elements might be compromised during construction. Jess maintained her composure, explaining the

collaborative process they'd established with the construction team and the quality control measures already in place.

Throughout the exchange, Jess felt herself growing more confident with each response. The absence of Tom beside her, initially a source of anxiety, had become almost empowering. Without his reassuring presence to lean on, she was discovering the full extent of her own expertise and poise under pressure.

As the Q&A concluded, Jess caught Margaret's approving nod from across the room. That subtle acknowledgment from her typically reserved mentor felt more validating than any applause.

Jess felt her phone vibrate in her clutch. Finding a quiet corner, she checked the screen to see Tom's message:

"How's it going? Knocking their socks off?"

She smiled, typing quickly: "Presentation went well. About to have dinner. You?"

His response came almost immediately: "Still in conference room hell. CEO breathing down our necks. Send a pic when you can?"

Jess glanced around, then quickly snapped a selfie that captured both her and the elegant ballroom behind her. She sent it with the caption: "Wish you were here."

Tom: "Damn. That dress is even more incredible than I remembered. Every man there must be cursing me."

Jess: "Stop it. Very professional crowd."

Tom: "Professional doesn't mean blind. Gotta go. Love you. Super proud of you."

Jess: "Love you too."

She tucked her phone away, the brief connection with Tom both comforting and somehow emphasizing his absence.

The dining portion of the evening was arranged with careful consideration for networking. Round tables of eight ensured conversation, with place cards strategically positioning guests. Jess found herself seated between Richard Harrington and a woman introduced as Elena Vasquez, a prominent real estate attorney.

Throughout dinner, Jess engaged in varied conversations, from design failures in luxury properties to Austin's evolution as a luxury market. She was surprised by how naturally she moved between topics, offering insights without Tom's usual social support.

As the main course was being cleared, Chris Webb rose from his seat at the center table, tapping his glass gently for attention.

"Before we move to dessert, I'd like to propose a toast," he announced, his glass raised. "To Skyline Austin, to the remarkable team bringing it to life, and to the future residents who will call it home. May this building stand not just as a landmark on Austin's skyline, but as a testament to our belief that how we live shapes who we become."

Glasses clinked around the room as murmurs of "hear, hear" rippled through the crowd.

As dessert was served, Margaret approached Jess's table, bending to speak quietly in her ear.

"James Chen is looking to develop a property in Houston. He was quite impressed with your handling of the Q&A. Might be worth having a conversation before the evening ends."

Jess nodded. "Thank you for the heads-up."

"It's not just a heads up," Margaret replied, her voice still low. "It's recognition of the impression you're making. I knew you were talented from the moment I reviewed your portfolio, but tonight you've proven you're more than a gifted designer. You have presence, Jessica. That's rare, and it's valuable."

The unexpected praise from her usually reserved mentor sent warmth spreading through Jess's chest.

"That means a lot coming from you," she said sincerely.

Margaret straightened, resuming her more typical professional demeanor. "Well, don't let it go to your head," she said with the hint of a smile. "We still have the Skyline project to complete."

As Margaret moved away, Jess felt a renewed confidence settle over her. The evening had become a series of small triumphs: the successful presentation, the handled challenges, the conversations navigated, the connections formed, all without leaning on Tom's steadying presence.

After dinner, the event transitioned to more casual networking as the string quartet was replaced by a jazz trio, creating a sophisticated backdrop for continued conversations. Jess circulated through the room, accepting congratulations and discussing potential collaborations with interested parties.

As Jess made her way through the crowd, she noticed Chris Webb, Richard, and James had migrated to a quieter corner near one of the large windows overlooking Austin's twinkling skyline. Their postures were relaxed, drinks in hand, clearly in that post-dinner stage where conversation became more candid. She was about to approach them when Chris's words carried clearly through a momentary lull in the ambient noise.

"...and that dress is absolutely stunning," Chris was saying, his back to Jess. "When she walked in tonight, I nearly forgot I was a married man."

Richard laughed, a low rumble that carried the comfortable entitlement of wealth. "Can you blame yourself? I haven't seen legs like that since my third wife, and she was a former runway model."

"Speaking of models," James added, swirling his scotch, "didn't you mention she did some modeling before interior design? I'd pay good money to see those portfolios."

Jess froze mid step, heat rushing to her face. She should walk away. She should interrupt them. She should do anything but stand there, invisible, as the powerful men discussed her body like a commodity they were considering purchasing.

"Those photographs would be worth whatever the photographer charged," Chris agreed. "But the real thing surpasses any image. When she was presenting, all I could think about was how that mouth would look wrapped around my cock."

Richard chuckled. "Christ, Webb, you're worse than I am. And I'm on wife number four."

"Hey, looking isn't cheating," Chris defended himself. "Besides, my wife knows I have a weakness for blondes. It's practically in our prenup."

"That husband of hers is either the luckiest bastard alive or too stupid to realize what he's got," James said. "Where is he tonight anyway?"

"Business trip," Chris replied. "Poor guy's missing quite a show."

"His loss," Richard said, raising his glass in a mock toast. "Though his absence does make one wonder..."

"Don't even think about it, old man," James laughed. "You've already gone through enough divorces. Besides, she's too smart to fall for your routine."

"Maybe," Richard conceded. "But I've yet to meet the woman who's immune to a penthouse overlooking Lady Bird Lake and a private jet on standby."

The three men laughed, and Jess felt something cold settle in her stomach. This wasn't just crude talk. It was the casual confidence of men who were used to getting what

they wanted, who saw her success tonight not as professional achievement but as elaborate foreplay.

"I'm planning to dance with her later," Chris said, lowering his voice further. "Get a feel for how she moves. Some women, you can just tell they'd be absolute dynamite in bed."

"And you think she's one of them?" James asked.

"Look at how she carries herself," Chris replied. "That's not just confidence. That's a woman who knows exactly what effect she has on men and enjoys it. The way she moves in that dress isn't accidental."

"I bet she likes it rough," James mused. "The professional ones always do. Something about letting go of all that control they maintain during the day."

"Personally," Chris added, leaning in conspiratorially, "I'd love to see that perfect ass turning pink under my hand before bending her over my desk. Those kinds of women need to be reminded who's really in charge."

"Thousand says you won't close that deal," Richard challenged, the casual way he threw out the sum confirming his wealth.

"I don't need your money, Richard," Chris laughed. "But I wouldn't mind the satisfaction of proving you wrong."

Jess had heard enough. She slipped away, moving quickly toward the nearest restroom, her heart pounding. Inside, she braced her hands against the marble countertop, staring at her reflection in the mirror. The woman who looked back at her was flushed, her eyes too bright, her lipstick slightly faded from the evening.

Had she enjoyed the attention, the power her looks gave her in a room full of wealthy, powerful men? The thought made her feel sick and yet... hadn't there been a thrill in commanding the room, in feeling all those eyes on her?

The bathroom door opened, and Annie appeared, concern evident on her face.

"There you are," she said. "Are you okay? You disappeared so suddenly."

Jess straightened, forcing herself to appear composed. "I'm fine. Just needed a moment."

Annie studied her face. "You don't look fine. Did something happen?"

For a moment, Jess considered telling Annie what she'd overheard, sharing the crude objectification by men who held the power to advance or destroy her career. But what would be the point? This wasn't Annie's burden to bear.

"Just overwhelmed," Jess said instead. "It's been quite a night."

Annie relaxed slightly. "Tell me about it. I just had a twenty-minute conversation with some developer from Houston who couldn't seem to decide whether to look at my face or my chest."

"Charming," Jess replied dryly.

"Men," Annie shrugged. "Can't live with them, can't get multimillion-dollar contracts without them." She checked her reflection, adjusting a strand of hair. "Anyway, just wanted to make sure you were okay. Margaret's looking for you. Something about introducing you to someone from New York."

"I'll be right out," Jess promised.

When Annie left, Jess took a deep breath, centering herself. She couldn't let what she'd overheard derail this evening. This was still her professional triumph, regardless of what Chris Webb thought when he looked at her. She reapplied her lipstick with steady hands, straightened her shoulders, and returned to the ballroom.

For the next hour, Jess maintained her professional demeanor, discussing design philosophies and material selections with potential clients, all while carrying the weight of what she'd overheard. Each time Chris Webb's gaze found hers across the room, she felt a chill of recognition. Not of desire, but of seeing someone's mask slip, revealing something beneath.

As the jazz trio transitioned to a slower number, Chris appeared at her side, his timing impeccable as he approached during a lull in her conversations.

"You've been the belle of the ball tonight," he said, his smile showing perfect teeth. "Would the designer of the hour care to dance?"

Jess hesitated. Every instinct told her to decline, to fabricate an excuse about needing to speak with someone else. But the business part of her brain, the part that understood the politics of success, recognized that Chris Webb wasn't just a wealthy developer. He was a gateway to other projects, other opportunities. Skyline Austin was just the beginning of what could be a career defining relationship.

"Of course," she heard herself say, setting down her nearly empty champagne flute.

His hand settled at the small of her back as he guided her toward the small dance floor where a few other couples swayed to the music. The touch was light, professionally appropriate, and yet knowing what she now knew, it felt like a brand against her skin.

"You were spectacular tonight," Chris said as they began to move to the music. His hand rested at her waist. "The way you handled that question about construction timelines was masterful. Most designers would have gotten defensive."

"I understand their concerns," Jess replied, her voice steady despite her discomfort. "But that's why collaboration with the construction team from the early stages is so crucial."

"Exactly," Chris nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. "You understand the balance between vision and execution. It's rare to find both qualities in one person."

The conversation remained professional as they moved across the floor, but Jess couldn't unhear the crude comments, couldn't unsee the mask that had slipped. Every compliment now carried a double meaning, every gesture potentially hiding ulterior motives.

"I've been thinking about future projects," Chris continued. "There's a boutique hotel development in Savannah that would benefit from your aesthetic sensibilities. The historic district has strict guidelines, but I think your approach would be perfect."

"Savannah is beautiful," Jess replied, maintaining her professional tone. "The architectural heritage there is extraordinary."

"You should visit," Chris suggested. "I could arrange a tour of the property. Spring is particularly lovely there."

Was this innocent? A legitimate business opportunity? Or was this the beginning of the "deal" he'd discussed closing with Richard? The uncertainty made every word feel like navigating a minefield.

"That sounds interesting," she said neutrally. "I'd have to discuss it with my team, of course. Annie has a particular expertise in historic renovations."

Something flickered in Chris's eyes. Disappointment? Annoyance at her deflection? It passed so quickly she couldn't be sure.

"Of course," he agreed smoothly. "Though I was particularly impressed with your vision. The way you understand how spaces affect people emotionally... it's almost intuitive."

As the song drew to a close, Jess felt relief wash over her. "Thank you for the dance," she said, already preparing to step away.

Chris's hand tightened slightly at her waist, not enough to raise eyebrows from observers but enough for Jess to notice. "The night's still young," he said. "Perhaps

we could continue our discussion somewhere quieter? The hotel bar has some excellent private seating areas."

And there it was. The proposition, carefully couched in professional language but unmistakable in its intent.

"I appreciate the offer," Jess replied, her voice cool, "but I should circulate a bit more. There are still several people Margaret wanted me to meet."

She stepped back, breaking contact, and offered a professional smile. "Thank you again for the opportunity to work on Skyline. It's been the highlight of my career so far."

Chris's expression revealed nothing as he nodded. "The pleasure's been mine. We'll talk soon about Savannah."

As Jess moved away, she felt both relief and a creeping anxiety. Had she just damaged a valuable professional relationship? Would Chris Webb take her rejection personally and find another designer for his future projects? The politics of navigating these waters without Tom beside her suddenly felt overwhelming.

For the remainder of the evening, Jess maintained her professional demeanor, though she was careful to remain in group settings rather than one on one conversations. She caught Chris watching her several times, his expression unreadable.

By the time the event began winding down around 11 PM, Jess felt emotionally drained. What should have been a pure celebration of professional achievement had been tarnished by the crude reality of being a beautiful woman in a male dominated industry.

Margaret found her as she was preparing to leave. "You did exceptionally well tonight," the older woman said. "I heard nothing but praise for your presentation and your designs."

"Thank you," Jess replied sincerely. "That means a lot."

Margaret studied her face for a moment. "You seem troubled. Is everything alright?"

Jess hesitated. Should she tell Margaret what she'd overheard? Would her mentor understand, offer solidarity, perhaps even advice on how to handle the situation? Or would it be perceived as naiveté, an inability to navigate the realities of their industry?

"Just tired," Jess said finally. "It's been a long week."

Margaret nodded, though her eyes suggested she sensed there was more. "Well, get some rest. Monday morning, we start the real work of bringing these designs to life."

Outside, Jess waited for her Uber, the night air cool against her skin. Her phone vibrated with a text from Tom:

"Still up. Call me when you're home? Want to hear all about your big night."

Jess stared at the message, suddenly unsure what she would tell him. How could she describe an evening that had been both triumphant and deeply unsettling? Would Tom understand her conflicted feelings, or would his protective instincts overshadow everything else?

The Bad Tenant Ch. 05

The Uber rolled to a stop in front of their house just before midnight. Jess stepped out, the night air cool against her bare shoulders after the artificial warmth of the car. Her heels clicked against the concrete walkway as she approached the front door.

Inside, she kicked off her heels with a groan of relief. The house was silent, empty in a way that felt different than usual because of Tom's absence.

She made her way to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water, drinking it in long gulps as her mind raced through the events of the evening. The presentation had gone perfectly. The designs had been well received. Connections had been made that could advance her career significantly. By all objective measures, tonight had been a professional triumph.

And yet she could still hear Chris Webb's voice, the casual objectification, the crude speculation about her sexual preferences. She could still feel the weight of his hand on her waist during their dance, the subtle pressure as he'd suggested they continue their discussion "somewhere quieter."

In the bedroom, she unzipped the dress and let it slip down her body to pool at her feet, leaving her in just her strapless bra and thong.

Jess caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror. She turned, looking over her shoulder at her reflection, studying the curve of her ass, the smooth expanse of her back. These weren't parts of herself she'd earned solely through effort. They were accidents of genetics, gifts of arbitrary fate. Was this all they saw when they looked at her? Not her talent, not her intelligence, not her professional accomplishments, just… this?

She stared at her reflection, seeing herself through Chris Webb's crude words.

"...all I could think about was how that mouth would look wrapped around my cock."

While she'd been talking about design philosophies and material selections, he'd been imagining her on her knees.

It wasn't the first time this had happened. As a female designer, she'd grown accustomed to walking a tightrope. Be attractive enough to command attention but not so attractive that you became a distraction. Dress professionally but not boringly. Be confident but not aggressive. Show enthusiasm but don't appear desperate.

She'd navigated these contradictions for years, had learned to read the subtle shift in a client's gaze when it moved from professional assessment to personal interest. Had

mastered the art of the gentle redirection, the casual mention of "my husband" dropped into conversation like a shield.

Tonight should have been different. This was her project, her moment of professional recognition. And for much of the evening, it had been. Margaret's approval, the investors' questions about her design philosophy, the respectful attention during her presentation, all of it had felt like validation of her work, not her appearance.

Until those comments. Until that dance with Chris. Until the realization that beneath the veneer of professional respect lurked the same old reduction of her worth to her physical attributes.

The hot shower couldn't wash away the memory of their words but it soothed her body. She scrubbed her skin, as if trying to remove an invisible layer of grime. The makeup came off, mascara creating dark rivers down her cheeks before swirling away down the drain.

Wrapped in her fluffy robe, Jess sat cross-legged on their bed. The clock on the nightstand read 12:47 AM. 10:47 PM in San Diego.

She needed Tom to understand, to share her outrage, to validate that this shouldn't still be happening, that her work deserved to stand on its own merits without her appearance entering the equation at all.

Her finger hovered over the call button. Part of her wanted to just text, to claim exhaustion and postpone the conversation. But she knew Tom was waiting. With a deep breath, she pressed call.

He answered on the first ring.

"Hey," Tom's voice came through, warm and eager. "There's my star designer. How was it?"

Jess leaned back against the headboard. "It was... good. The presentation went perfectly. Everyone loved the designs."

"I knew they would," Tom replied, pride evident in his voice. "How are you holding up? You must be exhausted."

"Just got out of the shower," Jess replied, running her fingers through her damp hair. "But yeah, I'm pretty wiped out. What about you? Still holed up in that hotel room?"

"Unfortunately. Room service brought me a sad excuse for a burger about an hour ago." There was a rustling sound as he presumably shifted position. "But enough about my glamorous life. Tell me everything about tonight."

She managed a small smile. “The virtual walkthrough of the master suite got an actual gasp from the audience when we revealed the bathroom’s transition to the terrace.”

“That was all you,” Tom said. “I remember when you first sketched that concept. You were so excited.”

The memory softened something in her. “Yeah, I guess I was.”

“So, networking success? Any promising leads?”

Jess twisted a strand of wet hair around her finger. “A few. Margaret introduced me to some developer from New York. And there might be something in Houston with James Chen.”

“Chen? The real estate mogul? Jess, that’s huge!”

“Yeah, it could be,” she agreed, her enthusiasm not quite matching his. “There was also talk about a boutique hotel in Savannah. Historic district.”

“Sounds perfect for you,” Tom said. “Your aesthetic would work so well with those old buildings.”

Seconds ticked by without conversation.

“Jess?” Tom’s voice shifted, concern setting in. “Everything okay? You sound... off.”

“I’m just tired,” she deflected. “It was a long night.”

His voice softened. “Did something happen?”

Jess closed her eyes, debating how much to share. “It’s nothing, really.”

“Jess,” Tom pressed gently. “Talk to me.”

She sighed, relenting. “It’s just... I overheard some things tonight. Things that weren’t meant for me to hear.”

“What kind of things?” Tom asked.

“Chris Webb and some of the investors,” Jess began. “They were talking about me. Not about my designs or my presentation. About... me. My body.”

“What did they say?”

“It’s just... one of them said I was probably dynamic in bed. The other said I looked like the type who would need to be tamed” Jess’s voice tightened with anger. “They were placing bets, Tom. Actually placing bets on which of them could sleep with me first.”

“They were betting?” Tom’s voice sounded strained. “What kind of stakes?”

“Does it even matter?” she snapped. “It was a thousand dollars. Chris said he’d win easily. Said he could tell I was the type who secretly craves a real man to put me in my place.” She let out a bitter laugh. “They talked about me like I wasn’t even human. Like I was just some prize to be won.”

“That’s gross,” Tom said, but there was a strange tension in his voice. “Did they say anything else?”

Jess went silent for a moment, trying to understand his fixation on the details. “Chris said something about wanting to see my ass turning pink before bending me over his desk. They were being crude. Objectifying. He said something about...” She hesitated, the words sticking in her throat. “About how my mouth would look wrapped around his… his cock.”

She waited for the explosion, the protective fury. Tom had always been quick to anger when someone disrespected her. She needed that now, his indignation, his outrage on her behalf.

It didn’t come.

Instead, there was a loaded silence, punctuated only by Tom’s slightly altered breathing. “What else?” Tom asked.

Jess blinked, confused by his response. “What do you mean, what else?”

“I mean, what else did they say?” Tom clarified. “About you.”

Something in his tone made her pause. “They... one of them mentioned my legs. Compared them to his ex-wife, who was apparently a model.” She frowned, trying to understand his reaction. “Tom, why are you asking for details? Aren’t you angry?”

“Of course I’m angry,” Tom replied quickly. “I’m fucking furious that they would talk about you like that. I just... I want to understand exactly what happened.”

Jess’s brow furrowed as she tried to make sense of the disconnect between his words and his tone. “They talked about me like I was a piece of meat, Tom. It was disgusting.”

“God, Jess, I’m so sorry,” Tom said. “That’s... that’s fucking awful.”

A sudden realization hit her. His reaction now, his questions about Derek, his fascination with Brandon’s flirting, his excitement after Bob’s photo session. The pieces formed an undeniable pattern.

“Tom,” she said slowly. “Are you turned on right now?”

“What? No, I’m-”

“Don’t lie to me,” she cut him off. “I can hear it in your voice.”

The silence that followed confirmed her suspicion more than any denial could have.

“Jesus Christ, Tom,” she whispered. “You are, aren’t you?”

“Jess, it’s not…” He stopped himself. “It’s complicated.”

“Then uncomplicate it for me,” she demanded, sitting up straighter. “Because from where I’m sitting, it sounds like my husband gets off on other men objectifying me.”

Tom’s exhale was shaky. “It’s not about the objectification, Jess. I hate that they disrespected you like that. I do. But...”

“But what?”

“I don’t know… just knowing that other men want you, that they fantasize about you... it reminds me how fucking lucky I am.”

Jess rubbed her temple, trying to process this revelation. “Do you have any idea what it’s like?” she asked. “To work so hard to be taken seriously, to try being recognized for your brain, only to have it all reduced to how you look? To have your professional accomplishment overshadowed by men thinking about what you’re like in the bedroom?”

“Jess, I-”

“I’ve spent my entire career fighting to be seen as more than just a pretty face,” she continued, the words flowing now, unchecked. “Do you know how many times I’ve had to prove myself?”

“Of course I know,” Tom said. “I’ve seen it. I’ve watched you struggle with it.”

“Have you? Because it doesn’t sound like you understand at all.” Her voice cracked slightly. “Tonight was supposed to be my moment, Tom. And instead, I had to listen to those men reduce me to a sexual object. And now I find out that my own husband, the one person who should see me completely, gets turned on by the same objectification that’s been holding me back.”

“That’s not fair,” Tom protested. “I’m proud of your accomplishments, Jess. I celebrate your talent and your smarts every day. This isn’t about reducing you to just your body.”

“Then what is it about?” Jess demanded. “Because from where I’m sitting, it feels like it.”

There was a long pause before Tom spoke again. “I don’t know exactly,” he said finally. “But a part of it is how incredible it feels to be the one you chose when you could have anyone.”

The sincerity in his voice made something in her chest twist. “But that’s just it, Tom. I didn’t choose you because you were the best option among a bunch of different men. I chose you because of who you are. Not because you won some competition.”

“I know that,” Tom said. “But there’s something deeper, something almost primitive that gets triggered when I see or hear about other men wanting you.”

Jess considered his words, trying to separate her feelings about tonight’s experiences from this new understanding of her husband. “You’ve been weird about this stuff lately. With Brandon at the gym, with Derek at yoga. Even with Bob.”

“I know,” Tom admitted. “I’ve been trying to understand it myself.”

“So when you asked me about Derek,” she said slowly, “about him spotting me during handstands, you were imagining his hands on me. And that turned you on.”

“Yes,” Tom said quietly. “I guess it did.”

“And hearing about Chris Webb and those investors talking about me, about what they’d like to do to me... that turns you on too.”

“It’s not that simple, Jess,” Tom sighed. “The thought of anyone actually hurting you or disrespecting you makes me furious. But knowing that they want you, that they fantasize about you, and that you’re mine regardless... yes, that affects me.”

“I’m not yours, Tom,” Jess said. “I’m not property. I’m your wife. Your partner.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Tom backpedaled. “I just meant-”

“I know what you meant,” Jess cut him off. “And I get it, on some level. But you have to understand how fucked up the timing of this revelation is.”

The conversation stalled, each recognizing the different between their perspectives.

“Why haven’t you ever mentioned this?” Jess asked.

“How exactly was I supposed to bring it up, Jess? ‘Hey babe, just so you know, I get turned on when other men lust after you’? It’s not exactly dinner conversation.”

A slight smile crossed Jess’s face despite her frustration. “Fair point.”

“Besides,” Tom added, “I wasn’t sure how I felt. If it’s normal or if it makes me some kind of fucking deviant. I’m still not sure.”

“Madi says it’s not uncommon,” Jess offered. “Men getting aroused by other men desiring their partners… I just never thought you would be one of them”

“You discussed this with Madi?” Tom sounded surprised.

“Not exactly,” Jess clarified. “She noticed how you reacted to Brandon’s flirting. She had a theory.”

“Of course she did,” Tom said with a short laugh. “Madi has theories about everything.”

The tension between them had shifted, becoming something more manageable, more familiar. Jess found herself unwinding slightly. “She called it a power thing, a way of validating their choice.”

“Maybe she’s right,” Tom conceded.

“So what now?” Jess asked. “Where does this leave us?”

“I don’t know,” Tom admitted. “I’m still trying to understand it myself. But I want you to know that I see you, Jess. Your talent, your intelligence, your kindness, your drive. Not just your body. Never just your body.”

Jess wanted to believe him. Mostly, she did. But the timing of this revelation, coming on the heels of tonight’s crude objectification, left her feeling unsettled.

“I need time to process this,” she said finally. “It’s been a long night, and this is... a lot.”

“I understand,” Tom replied. “And I’m sorry I’m not there with you. I should be.”

“Yeah,” Jess agreed softly. “You should be.”

A deep sigh escaped Tom’s lips. “Listen, I should be landing in Austin around 9 tomorrow. I’ll be out by 9:30 at the latest.”

Jess’s fingers absently traced patterns on the bedspread, her mind still swimming with everything they’d just unpacked between them. “I’ll pick you up,” she said.

“You don’t have to,” Tom replied quickly. “I can grab an Uber. You’ve had a long night and-”

“I want to,” Jess interrupted. Despite her confusion, despite this new revelation about her husband’s desires, the thought of seeing him, of ending this distance between them, suddenly felt urgent. Physical presence might bridge what words over a phone could not. “I’ll be there.”

The relief in Tom’s exhale was palpable. “Thank you.”

A quiet moment passed as they processed their words and the words they still hadn't shared. Tom cleared his throat. "Jess, about everything we just talked about... I don't want you to think-"

"Let's not do this over the phone," she cut in, gentler this time. "We should talk about it face to face. Tomorrow."

"You're right," Tom agreed. "Face to face is better."

Jess glanced at the clock. Her eyelids felt heavy, the emotional toll of the evening finally catching up to her physical exhaustion. "I should probably get some sleep."

"Yeah, me too. Early flight and all." Tom paused, and she could picture him running his fingers through his hair the way he did when he was uncertain. "Jess?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you." he struggled for words. "All of you."

The sincerity in his voice made her throat tighten unexpectedly. She wanted to stay angry, to hold onto the sense of betrayal, but beneath it all was the undeniable reality that this was Tom, her Tom, the man who had been her partner and champion for years.

"I know," she whispered. "I love you too."

"Even when I'm being a complicated asshole?" A hint of their normal banter crept back into his tone, tentative but hopeful.

"Especially then."

"Good night, Jess."

"Good night, Tom."

Tom hit the button to close the Tesla's trunk, watching it lower automatically. The airport pickup zone buzzed with activity around them. Vehicles pulled in and out, reunions happened everywhere, and impatient drivers occasionally blared their horns. But in this moment, his focus narrowed to just Jess standing in front of him.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she echoed, her eyes searching his face.

They moved toward each other simultaneously, closing the gap. Tom's arms wrapped around her waist as hers encircled his neck. The embrace was tight, desperate almost,

both of them holding on like they were afraid the other might slip away. When their lips met, the kiss was neither hesitant nor performative. It was real.

Tom's hand moved up to cradle the back of her head. Despite last night's conversation, despite the unresolved tensions and newly exposed desires, this fundamental truth remained unchanged: he loved this woman with every cell in his body.

"I missed you," he murmured against her lips.

"I missed you too," she replied.

A car horn blared behind them. A security officer waved at them to move along, pointing emphatically at the "No Waiting" sign.

"We should go," Jess said, reluctantly stepping back.

Tom nodded, his hand lingering on her waist before finally releasing her. They moved to their respective sides of the Tesla and got inside.

Jess pulled smoothly into the airport traffic, her hands confident on the steering wheel. Tom watched her profile, the way her eyes focused on the road, the slight furrow between her brows that always appeared when she was concentrating.

"So," he began, his voice sounding too loud in the quiet car. "About last night-"

"Not while I'm driving," Jess interrupted, her tone gentle but firm. "Let's wait until we're home."

"Okay," he agreed.

Tom's mind raced with all the ways he could explain himself, all the words he'd rehearsed on the flight home. None of them seemed adequate now.

"How was your flight?" Jess asked, her eyes still on the road.

Tom welcomed the topic. "Not bad. I actually slept a little, which was surprising."

"You never sleep on planes," Jess remarked.

"I know. I guess exhaustion finally won out over my hatred of airplane seats."

"Those first-class seats looked pretty comfortable to me."

"Trust me, even first-class becomes a torture chamber after long enough," Tom replied.

As they drove home, Tom watched Austin's skyline grow larger through the windshield. It was still a bit strange to him, even after years of living here. Austin had been his choice, a career opportunity too good to pass up, a chance to start fresh with Jess.

“So,” Tom said. “You mentioned that you got your period.”

“Yeah.”

“How are you feeling about that?”

She shrugged. “It is what it is. Can’t force these things, right?”

“We can try again,” he offered. “When the time is right.”

“When the time is right,” she echoed. “That’s what we’ve been saying for a year now.”

“I know,” he acknowledged. “But the promotion’s going to change things. We’ll have more security, more savings.”

“I’m sure we will,” Jess replied. “How was San Diego, anyway?”

Tom sighed, running a hand through his hair. “We made a lot of progress this week, especially yesterday. The team really pulled together, and we figured out most of the critical issues. But there’s still a lot of work ahead this week.”

“Long days?”

“Yeah,” Tom admitted. “Probably. But just until this project is over.” He watched her face carefully. “It won’t be like this forever, Jess.”

“It never is,” she replied, a hint of old frustration coloring her voice. But then she softened. “I know you’re doing your best.”

“I am,” Tom said earnestly. He hesitated, his fingers fidgeting with the seatbelt strap. “There’s something else, though.”

Jess glanced at him briefly before returning her eyes to the road. “What is it?”

“Davis emailed me this morning. I need to go back to San Diego for a few days. Wednesday to Friday, same as last week.”

The car went silent.

“I see,” she finally said. “So you’ll be home for what, four days before leaving again?”

“I have to do this, Jess.” Tom turned more fully toward her. “The CEO’s breathing down Davis’s neck, and there are still issues that need my direct attention.”

Jess nodded, her eyes fixed on the highway ahead. “Of course. The client needs you.”

The resignation in her tone made his chest ache. “I’m sorry. I know the timing’s bad, especially after everything we talked about last night.”

“It’s fine,” she said, though they both knew it wasn’t. “That’s the job, right? That’s why they’re promoting you.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” Tom promised. “Maybe we could do something special before I leave? Tuesday night, just the two of us?”

Jess’s expression softened slightly. “That would be nice.”

Tom reached across the center console to rest his hand on her thigh. “And when I get back, we’re taking a proper weekend away. No work, no phones, just us.”

“I’d like that,” Jess replied, her voice warming slightly despite the disappointment still evident in her face. She covered his hand with her own, squeezing gently before returning it to the steering wheel.

The drive home felt both too long and too short. They entered the house together. Tom carried his bag to their bedroom while Jess moved to the kitchen.

“You hungry?” she called after him. “I’ll make some eggs and bacon. There’s coffee too.”

“That sounds perfect,” Tom replied, grateful for her offer. “I’ll just change quickly.”

In their bedroom, Tom set his bag down and took a moment to breathe. He changed out of his travel clothes into comfortable jeans and a t-shirt, splashed water on his face in the bathroom, and studied his reflection. The man looking back at him appeared unchanged on the surface. Same hair, same eyes, same features he’d always had. But inside, he felt fundamentally altered by the admission he’d made to Jess.

The smell of brewing coffee and sizzling bacon filled the kitchen. Jess stood at the stove, spatula in hand, her back to him. Tom paused in the doorway.

“Smells amazing,” he said, announcing his presence.

Jess glanced over her shoulder, offering a small smile. “Coffee’s ready if you want some.”

Tom poured himself a cup, then leaned against the counter, watching her cook. This was such a normal Saturday morning ritual for them. Breakfast together, casual conversation. Except today, everything felt unstable, balanced on the edge of transformation.

“Need any help?” he offered.

“I’ve got it,” Jess replied, cracking eggs into the pan. “Almost done.”

Minutes later, they settled at the dining table with plates of toast, fried eggs, and crispy bacon. The food was a welcome distraction, giving them something to focus on besides the conversation looming ahead.

They ate in silence before Tom finally spoke. “Jess,” he began. “About last night.”

Jess took a sip of her coffee, then met his eyes directly. “I’ve been thinking about it all morning,” she said. “About what you told me.”

Tom nodded, swallowing hard. The revelation lay between them now, no longer his secret burden but something they both had to carry.

Tom set down his fork. “I’ve been thinking about it too. About how my explanation wouldn’t capture all of it because I don’t understand it myself.”

“Try,” she said simply. “I need you to try.”

Tom stared at his plate for a moment, organizing his thoughts. “When you told me what Chris Webb said about you, what they all said, I should’ve been just angry. And part of me was. The thought of them disrespecting you like that. But there’s this other feeling too. This... excitement.”

Jess remained silent, giving him space to continue.

“It’s like... knowing these powerful men, these successful men, want you... it creates this feeling in me. Pride and jealousy and excitement all mixed together. And I know how fucked up that sounds.”

“You already said that last night” Jess replied. “How long, Tom? How long have you been feeling this way?”

Tom exhaled slowly. “I think it’s always been there, just beneath the surface. Remember how jealous I used to get when we first started dating?”

Jess nodded. “You once threatened to punch some guy for buying me a drink.”

“I was an idiot,” Tom admitted. “But I think what’s happening now is the evolution of that same feeling. Back then, it was jealousy because I was insecure. I was scared of losing you. But as I felt more secure in us, that feeling started transforming into something else.”

“Into arousal,” Jess supplied.

“Yeah,” Tom admitted. “Look, I know the timing was awful. You were dealing with actual objectification, with men reducing you to your body, and then to learn that your husband gets turned on by the idea of other men wanting you... I can see how that felt like… like a betrayal.”

“It did,” Jess confirmed. “It felt like you were siding with them somehow, like you were joining in the same reduction of who I am to just... this.” She gestured down at her body.

“But that’s not it at all,” Tom insisted, leaning forward. “Like I said already, I see all of you. Your talent, your intelligence, your kindness, your drive. I’m in awe of those things every day.”

Jess nodded slowly. “I believe you believe that,” she said carefully. “But can you understand why it feels complicated from my side? Especially after what happened at the party?”

“Of course I can,” Tom said. “And I’m sorry for how I reacted last night. You needed support, not... whatever that was.”

They fell quiet, just observing each other for a moment.

“I’m not sure I can work with Chris and those investors after this,” Jess said, changing direction. “They see my looks first and my mind second. That’s always going to be the case.”

“Could you request a different project?” Tom suggested.

Jess shook her head. “Skyline’s huge. Walking away would hurt me professionally.” She paused. “It’s frustrating because I’ve been here before. When I was modeling, I got this rush from being admired, from all the attention. But I started to realize that I was being valued for something I had no control over. My genes, my youth, the symmetry of my face.”

“That’s why you left modeling.”

“Exactly. I wanted to be valued for my mind. For something I created or earned.” Her voice gained strength as she continued. “I worked my ass off to get where I am. Years of education, proving myself, building a reputation based on my talents. Not my looks. And then in one night, I’m right back where I started. Just a pretty face, a body to be fantasized about.”

Tom leaned forward. “But that’s not all true. Your work speaks for itself. The Skyline designs are amazing, and everyone in that room knew it. That’s why they were there.”

“Tell that to Chris Webb,” Jess said bitterly.

“Look,” Tom said, his tone shifting to something more thoughtful. “You’re beautiful… unusually beautiful. That’s just a fact. People notice and they react. So why not use it?”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“You used your beauty to make money modeling. That was a career choice. Why act like it’s not an advantage now?”

“Because I want to be taken seriously as a professional.”

"And you are," Tom insisted. "But think of it this way. If a man is extremely tall and good at basketball, he wouldn't complain that his height is an unfair advantage. He'd lean into it. He'd use it."

A reluctant smile tugged at the corner of Jess's mouth. "Did you just compare my tits to LeBron James's height?"

Tom chuckled. "I'm saying that your beauty's part of your package, along with your intelligence, your creativity, your work ethic. Why not own all of it?" Tom leaned back in his chair. "The problem isn't that men notice that you're beautiful. It's that some of them, like Chris Webb, don't see past it to everything else you offer."

"Are you actually suggesting that I deliberately use my looks to my advantage with Chris? The same man who was placing bets on fucking me?"

Tom winced at her bluntness. "No, not exactly." He leaned forward, choosing his words carefully. "What I'm suggesting is that you stop seeing your beauty as something separate from your professional self. It's all part of the same package."

"That sounds suspiciously like telling me to use my looks," Jess challenged.

"It is but it's more nuanced than that," Tom insisted. "What if you stopped apologizing for the effect you have on people and just... owned it? You walk into a room, and heads turn. That's power. That's presence. And in your industry, presence matters."

Jess's fingers drummed against her mug. "So I should just accept that men like Webb will always see me as a potential conquest?"

"No, you should make them see that you're aware of their game and you're ten steps ahead. Think about Margaret. She's brilliant, respected, and she's also completely aware of how she presents herself. You think she doesn't know exactly what she's doing with those power suits and that intimidating stare?"

"That's different," Jess argued. "Margaret isn't dealing with men discussing what she'd look like on her knees."

"Maybe not now, but you think she hasn't faced similar bullshit in her career? The difference is she found a way to weaponize their expectations against them."

Jess fell silent.

"Look," Tom continued, "what if instead of feeling reduced or diminished when someone notices your looks first, you use that moment to showcase your talent? Let them underestimate you. Then demolish them with your skill. Their confusion when

they realize they've been intellectually outmaneuvered by the 'pretty face' becomes your advantage."

Jess couldn't help the small smile that formed as she imagined the scenario. "There is something satisfying about watching their faces when they realize I actually know what I'm talking about."

"Exactly. And the thing is, Jess, you've earned the right to be in those rooms. Your work got you there, not your looks. Your looks just make them pay attention faster. I'm not saying it's fair or right. I'm saying maybe there's a way to reclaim that power for yourself."

Jess considered his words. "That's... actually not a terrible point."

"I'm occasionally insightful," Tom replied with smile. "Usually by accident."

Their eyes met across the table, and something in the tension between them eased. Not gone but transformed into something more manageable.

"So," Jess said after a moment. "About your... revelation."

"Right."

"It can't have been easy keeping that to yourself."

"I didn't even think to bring it up," Tom admitted. "I wasn't really sure of what I was feeling anyway. And I was afraid you'd think I was disrespecting you or something."

Jess's expression softened. "Tom, we've been together for more than six years. Did you really think I'd judge you that harshly?"

"I don't know," Tom answered. "This isn't exactly normal, Jess. Most men don't get turned on thinking about other guys wanting their wives."

"Define normal," Jess challenged. "For all we know, plenty of men feel this way and just never talk about it."

Tom hadn't considered that possibility. "Maybe."

They sat together in peaceful silence for a moment, both contemplating.

Jess tilted her head, her eyes studying Tom with new curiosity. "Tell me more about how this evolved. You said it started as jealousy and turned into... excitement? How did that happen?"

Tom took a breath, gathering his thoughts. This was the part he'd been both dreading and needing. "It's like I said, when we first started dating, every guy who looked at you felt like a threat."

“Go on,” Jess said softly.

“I kept wondering what the hell you were doing with me. Why would you stick with me when you had so many options.”

“Because I loved you,” she replied.

“I know that now.” Tom said. “But back then, I was insecure as hell. Every guy who approached you felt like he was trying to take you away from me.”

“And that changed?”

Tom nodded. “After we got married, something changed. I stopped seeing other men as threats because I felt secure with you. I knew you’d chosen me, committed to me. But the attention never stopped.”

“No, it didn’t,” Jess acknowledged.

“And that’s when things got... complicated.”

“And that’s when the jealousy changed?” Jess prompted.

Tom nodded slowly. “Yeah, but it wasn’t overnight. It was gradual. I’d notice guys checking you out, and instead of that punch-to-the-gut feeling, I’d feel this... I don’t know... this surge of pride? Like, yeah, look all you want, but she’s with me.”

“That doesn’t sound like a sexual thing yet,” Jess observed.

“It wasn’t,” Tom agreed. “But then I started getting... curious.”

“Curious how?”

Tom’s cheeks flushed slightly. “I started wondering.”

“Wondering what?”

Tom swallowed hard. “Wondering what if you smiled back? What if you let him buy you a drink? What if you danced with him at a club? How would he handle you?”

Jess’s eyes widened slightly. “And that... turned you on?”

“Not at first,” Tom clarified. “At first it was just curiosity. But then the scenarios in my head started getting more detailed. I’d picture you leaning in close to hear him over the music, his hand finding your waist, you laughing at something he said...”

“And then?”

“And then I’d picture you kissing him.”

The confession pulsed in the silence that followed, each heartbeat stretching the moment further, but Jess’ face remained neutral.

Jess took a sip of her coffee. “Does it go further?” she asked, her voice remarkably steady. “In these scenarios of yours. Does it go beyond kissing?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

Tom couldn’t meet her eyes. “Yes.”

Jess exhaled slowly. “You imagine me having sex with other men.”

It wasn’t a question, but Tom nodded anyway. “I wondered what sounds you’d make. What words you’d say. What your face would look like with someone else.”

“Someone like who?” Jess pressed. “Anyone specific?”

Tom shifted uncomfortably. “Sometimes it’s a faceless stranger. Sometimes it’s... people we know.”

“Brandon?” Jess guessed.

Tom nodded, heat creeping up his neck. “Yeah.”

“Who else?”

“Does it matter?”

Jess leaned forward. “It matters to me.”

Tom ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know, it’s friends, coworkers, Derek, your yoga teacher. And... Bob.”

“Bob?” Jess’s eyebrows shot up. “Our tenant Bob? The one you were so worried about being alone with me?”

“That’s different,” Tom insisted. “Fantasy versus reality.”

“But you imagined me with him?”

Tom nodded, feeling exposed.

Jess was silent for a long moment, processing. “In these fantasies, are you there? Watching?”

Tom shook his head. “No. In my mind, you’re alone with them. I’m not there influencing how you act. It’s like... I’m seeing the real you, how you’d naturally be with someone else. Like I’m watching a TV show or I’m a fly on the wall.”

“So you’re not imagining a threesome situation or anything like that?”

"No," Tom clarified. "I'm not in the room at all. It's just you and whoever I'm imagining you with."

Jess took a sip of her coffee, her eyes never leaving his face. "And afterward? In these scenarios, what happens after I've been with someone else?"

Tom blinked, looking slightly confused. "Afterward? I... I don't really think about that part. The fantasies aren't like some ongoing story with a plot. They're just... moments. Scenes. It's not like I'm picturing our whole life changing or something. I don't think about the 'after' at all."

"So these are just... disconnected sexual scenarios?" Jess asked, her brow furrowing slightly.

"Yeah," Tom admitted. "Just snapshots of you with someone else. The fantasy is about that moment, that encounter. Not about what it means for us or what happens next. It's not a whole alternate reality I'm building, just these intense scenes that... that turn me on."

Jess's expression shifted, something calculating in her eyes. "That's interesting. So you're not actually fantasizing about me having relationships with these men. Just sex."

"Exactly," Tom replied. "It's purely physical in my mind. It's not about you developing feelings for them or anything like that."

"And how far does this fantasy go?" she asked, her voice calm. "Is it just about thinking about it, or would you want to..." she hesitated, choosing her words carefully, "act on it in some way?"

The question was heavier than anything that had come before. Tom's heart hammered against his ribs as he considered how to answer. This was the cliff edge he'd been avoiding, the difference between private thoughts and real-world actions.

"I haven't thought about the specifics," he lied.

"I find that hard to believe," Jess countered, her tone not accusatory but skeptical. "You've clearly given this a lot of thought."

Tom ran a hand through his hair. "Okay, that's not entirely true. I have thought about it. But it's complicated."

"I'm listening," Jess said, setting her coffee mug down and giving him her full attention. "You've never thought about what acting on this might actually look like? Never pictured a specific scenario?"

Tom felt exposed, like someone had turned a spotlight on him during what was supposed to be a private moment. The fantasy had been safe when it existed only in his mind, when he could control every aspect of it. But articulating it to Jess, making it real through words, felt dangerous in a way he hadn't anticipated.

The memory of last Saturday night flooded Tom's mind in vivid detail. Not the photoshoot, but what came after. His mind drifted to the image of Bob stroking his massive cock to completion while staring at pictures of Jess.

Later that night, Tom's mind had betrayed him with images of Jess on her knees in front of Bob, her lips stretched wide as she struggled to accommodate his cock.

And the next morning, when Jess had woken him with her mouth, he'd again imagined her struggle to take Bob's cock down her throat, imagined her determination to master the challenge.

Chris Webb's words at the party had hit eerily close to home: "All I could think about was how that mouth would look wrapped around my cock." It was the very thought that had consumed Tom's mind as Jess's head bobbed between his legs, except in Tom's forbidden fantasy, it wasn't his own modest cock receiving her skilled attention but Bob's massive one.

The guilt was crushing. He should tell her. But how could he admit to fantasies this extreme?

And this wasn't just about his fantasies anymore. This was about an actual violation of Jess's privacy, about their tenant jerking off to her photos without her knowledge or consent. And admitting that he'd known about it for a week, that he'd kept it from her while letting her interact with Bob alone… it might be one revelation too many.

If he told her this, would she ever look at him the same way? Would she ever feel safe in their marriage again? The risk was too great, the potential damage too severe.

"Tom?" Jess's voice pulled him back to the present.

He swallowed hard, shoving the memory away. "Sorry, just... thinking."

Jess studied his face. "So have you?"

Tom shifted in his seat. "Okay, maybe I've thought about it," he conceded. "Just... maybe it'd be fun to see you flirt back with other guys. To watch you enjoy that attention openly instead of always deflecting it."

Her eyebrow arched. "Just flirting?"

“For now, yes,” Tom said, then immediately regretted the qualifier. “I mean, I’m not saying it would need to move beyond that. Just that flirting seems like a safe starting point, if we were ever to explore this.”

“So if Brandon flirts with me at the gym, you’d want me to flirt back? Maybe touch his arm and laugh at his dumb jokes?”

Tom’s stomach felt scrambled at the specific example. “Actually, I don’t think it would be a good idea with people we know well. Brandon’s a friend, and that would make things messy.”

“What about Derek, then? My yoga instructor?”

Tom shook his head quickly. “No, that’s not what I meant either.”

“Good, because I wouldn’t flirt with Derek,” Jess said. “People would notice, and I’d get a reputation.”

“Exactly,” Tom agreed, relieved she understood. “It would need to be someone more... removed from our daily lives, our social life.”

Jess studied him, her head tilted slightly. “So to be clear, when you say ‘flirt,’ that’s all you mean? You’re not suggesting I actually sleep with someone else?”

“I don’t know,” Tom replied. “The fantasy in my head is one thing. The reality of you actually being with someone else is completely different.”

“And what’s the difference?” Jess pressed.

Tom considered her question carefully. “Fantasy exists in a vacuum. It’s just these separate moments without consequences. Reality is messier. Feelings get involved. Jealousy could emerge. You might enjoy being with someone else too much.”

“You’re scared I’d like it better with someone else?” Jess asked, zeroing in on his insecurity.

Tom’s cheeks flushed. “Maybe. A little. But that’s not the only concern.”

“What else, then?” Jess asked.

“What if it changes how we see each other? What if I can’t handle seeing you with someone else, even though I think I want to?” Tom’s words tumbled out faster now, giving voice to fears he’d barely acknowledged to himself. “What if it ruins what we have?”

Jess leaned forward, her eyes on Tom’s face. “Let me make sure I understand you. If you were absolutely certain that I wouldn’t leave you, that this wouldn’t damage our relationship... is this something you’d want to happen?”

Tom's mouth went dry. "Yes," he admitted, the word escaping like a confession. "I think I would."

"You think?" Jess pressed, her voice calm but insistent. "Be clear with me, Tom."

Tom met her gaze, his heart hammering against his ribs. "Yes. I would."

"Then spell it out," Jess said. "What exactly are you asking for? What's your fantasy here? Because it sounds like you're suggesting something beyond innocent flirting."

Tom swallowed hard. "My ultimate fantasy would be... you having sex with someone else."

Tom watched Jess's face, searching for signs of disgust or judgment, but her expression remained carefully neutral.

"So what are you actually suggesting here? That I just go sleep with random men and tell you about it?"

"No, not random men," Tom said quickly, realizing how his words might be interpreted. "I want you to be safe, comfortable. I just... I want you to be your playful self. To maybe not shut down the guys who approach you. To go along with it a little and then tell me about it."

"Go along with it," Jess repeated, her tone unreadable.

"Yeah," Tom nodded. "Remember last week? When you sent me those pictures from your office bathroom? God, Jess, that was so hot. And Sunday night when you took off your panties at the restaurant? We had some of the most intense sex we've had in years."

"So that's what you want? More of that playful, sexual side of me?"

"Exactly," Tom said. "You're naturally flirty, naturally sensual. I've watched you push it down around other men. I know you were doing that for me."

Jess smiled. "You know what's funny? You're right. I have been careful. I've acted almost prudish around other men, always making sure to mention 'my husband' early in conversations, shutting down flirtation before it can begin." She shook her head, a soft laugh escaping. "And now I find out my husband wants the opposite."

"Not the extreme opposite," Tom clarified. "I'm not asking you to sleep with every guy who looks at you twice. Just... maybe explore this side of yourself. With me. For us."

"So you want to start gradually," Jess said, her tone thoughtful. "Beginning with me flirting back when men approach me."

"Yes," Tom nodded. "Exactly."

Jess studied him for a long moment, her eyes searching his face. "I need time to think about all of this," Jess said finally. "When I woke up this morning, I wasn't expecting it to lead to a discussion about acting on those fantasies."

"I understand," Tom said quickly. "And there's no pressure, Jess. None at all. This is just me being honest about feelings I'm still trying to understand myself."

"What happens if I say no?" Jess asked. "Will you resent me for denying you?"

"God, no," Tom insisted. "Jess, you're my wife. My partner. Your comfort and happiness come first. Always."

"And what happens if I say yes?" she countered. "What if your jealousy comes back? What if seeing me actually flirt with someone else brings back all those insecurities you used to have?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "That's the scary part. I think I'd be okay, but I can't guarantee it. That's why we'd need to go slowly, to check in with each other every step of the way."

"This is all just fantasy, right?" Jess asked, her eyes finding his. "If we never explore this, never act on it, you'd be okay with that?"

"Absolutely," Tom assured her. "Jess, you are my priority. Us, our marriage. I'd never do anything to damage what we have."

Jess nodded. "Do you understand why this is so big for me? Why I need time to process this?"

"Of course I do," Tom said. "It's a lot to process."

Their eyes met across the table, years of shared history flowing between them.

"Can we agree on something?" Jess asked suddenly. "No more keeping things from each other? Even the weird shit, even the stuff that's hard to say. We talk about it."

"Of course." Tom agreed automatically but immediately felt guilty. Her words triggered the thought of what he'd just decided to keep from her. The image of Bob masturbating to her photos flashed in his mind again.

He opened his mouth, caught between his fresh promise of honesty and his earlier decision to protect her from this ugly truth. The conflict must have shown on his face, because Jess's expression shifted to concern.

"What is it?" she asked, studying him.

Tom swallowed hard. “It’s about Bob,” he began, unsure where his own words were leading him.

Jess looked confused. “Bob? What about him?”

The doorbell chimed, cutting off his words. They both jumped, the sudden intrusion shattering the moment.

“Fuck,” Tom muttered, equal parts frustrated and relieved at the interruption. “Who the hell is that?”

The doorbell rang again, more insistent this time.

“I’ll get it,” Tom sighed, rising to his feet.

Through the frosted glass of their front door, Tom could make out the broad silhouette of a man. His stomach clenched as he realized who it was. He opened the door to find Bob standing on their porch, toolbox in hand.

“Morning,” Bob greeted with a nod. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

Tom stood at the door, staring at Bob’s broad figure, all his senses sharpening with unexpected alarm. The older man’s appearance felt almost supernatural in its timing, as if he’d been summoned by the mere mention of his name.

Tom, hyper-aware of what he’d been about to confess to Jess, forced a smile while fighting the urge to slam the door shut. “Just having breakfast. What can I do for you, Bob?”

“Remember when we did that inspection? We talked about starting work on the weekends.” Bob’s eyes flickered over Tom’s shoulder, searching the space behind him. “Thought I’d get an early start on that kitchen backsplash.”

Tom blinked, his mind still reeling. “Right. The backsplash. Listen, Bob, this isn’t really a good-”

“Bob!” Jess’s voice came from behind Tom, bright with surprise. She appeared at his side. “I thought I heard your voice.”

Bob’s expression brightened noticeably at the sight of her. “Morning, Jess. Hope I’m not interrupting anything important.” His eyes flickered between them.

“Not at all,” she assured him, her smile genuine. “We were just finishing breakfast. What brings you by?”

“Remember that list we made?” Bob set down his toolbox and reached into the pocket of his work shirt, pulling out a folded paper. “Thought we could get started on some of these projects this weekend. Like we discussed.”

“This weekend?” Tom started, but Jess was already nodding enthusiastically.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked.

Bob jerked his thumb toward his truck. “Got those natural stone samples for the kitchen backsplash. High-end stuff. Thought maybe we could start there, knock it out this weekend.”

“Oh, the backsplash!” Jess’s eyes lit up. She turned to Tom. “Didn’t we talk about that? It would be such an improvement over what we have now.”

Before Tom could respond, Bob continued. “Got a connection with a supplier. This particular stone would run you about five grand retail.” He let that sink in for a moment. “But I can get it for a fraction of that. Say, a thousand for materials, and I’ll handle the installation.”

Tom’s eyebrows shot up. Even at Bob’s “discounted” rate of a thousand, it was more than they’d planned to spend on a backsplash. They’d also just been discussing finances and their delayed family plans due to money constraints.

“That’s... quite an investment,” Tom began carefully.

“Can we see the samples?” Jess asked, her excitement palpable.

Bob grinned. “Sure thing. They’re in the truck. Come on, I’ll show you.”

They followed Bob to his truck where he opened the passenger door and pulled out a large canvas bag. He unzipped it and spread it open across the hood of the vehicle.

Inside were several stone samples, each one more striking than the last. Bob selected one and handed it to Jess.

“This is the one I had in mind for your kitchen,” he said. “It’s got these beautiful veins of blue and green running through it. Extremely rare.”

Jess’s face transformed as she held the stone sample. The sunlight reflected off the mineral deposits, making them shimmer with an almost otherworldly glow. The base color was a warm ivory that would complement their existing cabinetry perfectly.

“It’s gorgeous,” she breathed, running her fingers across the polished surface. “Tom, look at this.”

Tom had to admit, it was beautiful. The stone had depth and character that their current basic tile backsplash completely lacked. He could already imagine how it

would transform their kitchen, adding that touch of luxury and sophistication that Jess had always wanted.

But a thousand dollars? For a backsplash?

"I don't know, Jess," he said hesitantly. "It's a lot to spend right now."

Jess turned to him, the stone sample still cradled in her hands like something precious. "But it's exactly what we've been talking about. And it's such a good deal." She lowered her voice slightly. "This is the kind of stone I specified for the Skyline penthouses, Tom. It's really high quality."

Bob cleared his throat. "I should mention, this price is just for you folks. Because we're neighbors now." He gave them a smile. "And I can install it this weekend, get it all done before you know it."

"This weekend?" Tom echoed, trying to buy himself some time to think. He and Jess had just started to work through some deeply personal revelations. The last thing they needed was Bob around all weekend.

"The whole weekend?" Jess asked, apparently thinking along similar lines.

"Probably, yeah," Bob nodded. "It's meticulous work. Can't rush it. But by Sunday evening, you'll have a showstopper of a kitchen."

Tom watched as Jess bit her lower lip, a sure sign she was trying to contain her excitement. He knew that look. It was the same expression she'd had when they'd first toured this house, when she'd spotted the potential beneath the dated finishes.

"Tom?" she asked, her eyes pleading. "What do you think?"

He looked from Jess to Bob and back again. A thousand dollars they hadn't budgeted for. A weekend with Bob in their space when they should be focusing on their relationship. Yet the hope and excitement on Jess's face made his resolve waver.

"I..." Tom ran a hand through his hair. "It's a lot of money, Jess."

"But think of the value it adds to the house," she countered. "And with your promotion coming up..."

The promotion. The one he was counting on to fix their financial situation, to finally start the family Jess wanted, to rebuild their savings. It wasn't a sure thing yet, but Davis had made it clear he was on track.

"Please?" Jess asked softly, her fingers still tracing the patterns in the stone. "It would make such a difference."

Tom sighed, recognizing defeat. "Fine. Let's do it."

Jess's face lit up in a smile. "Really? Thank you!" She turned to Bob. "When can you start?"

"Right now, if that works for you folks," Bob replied, already gathering his samples. "I've got all the tools and materials in the truck. Been preparing for this since we talked about it."

Of course he had, Tom thought. How convenient.

They led Bob into the house and up to the kitchen. Bob set his toolbox down on the counter and immediately began assessing, running his hands along the existing backsplash and measuring with his eyes.

"Good thing I've already seen the space," Bob commented. "Makes planning easier." He glanced at Jess. "You've kept it nice and clean in here. Makes my job easier too."

Jess beamed at the compliment. "Thanks. I try to keep things organized."

Bob nodded approvingly. "I'll need to remove the existing tile first. Might get a bit dusty, so you might want to cover anything important."

As Jess moved some of their things to help Bob prepare the space, Tom watched from the doorway with an uneasy feeling settling in his stomach. There was something about the way Bob confidently moved through their kitchen that bothered him.

"So," Bob said conversationally as he began taking items out of his toolbox, "how was that fancy party you mentioned? The one for your big project?"

"Oh, the Skyline launch?" Jess's expression brightened. "It went really well. Our presentation was a hit, and there was a lot of interest in the designs. Some potential new clients too."

"That's great," Bob said with what seemed like genuine enthusiasm. "Always good to see hard work recognized. Talent like yours doesn't go unnoticed."

Jess's smile widened at the compliment. "That's kind of you to say."

"Just stating facts," Bob replied with a shrug. "Now, while I get set up here, why don't you two go about your day? No need to stand around watching me remove old tile. Not exactly thrilling entertainment."

"You sure you don't need help?" Jess asked.

"I'm sure," Bob assured her. "Been doing this longer than you've been alive. I know my way around a kitchen remodel."

Tom felt Jess's hand slip into his. "Come on," she said softly. "Let's let him work."

They retreated to their bedroom. The sound of Bob moving around in their kitchen still reached them, but muffled now.

"So," Jess said, turning to face Tom. "That was quite the coincidence, wasn't it? Bob showing up right when you were about to tell me something about him."

Tom nodded. "Yeah. Weird timing."

"What were you going to say?" Jess asked, her eyes searching his face. "About Bob?"

Tom hesitated. The moment to tell her the full truth seemed to have passed. If he told her now what he'd seen, with Bob just down the hall working in their kitchen, it would create an impossible situation. Besides, how could he explain why he'd kept it from her for so long?

"Tom?" Jess prompted when he didn't answer. "What is it?"

"It's nothing serious," he found himself saying. "Just... I think… I think Bob has a crush on you."

Jess's eyebrows rose, and then she laughed, the sound genuine and dismissive. "Bob? Are you serious? Tom, that's ridiculous."

Tom nodded, feeling both relief and guilt at the partial truth. "I've noticed the way he looks at you when he thinks no one's watching. It's pretty obvious."

"Oh my god, you're actually serious." Jess shook her head, her smile widening with disbelief. "Tom, he's just being nice. He's old enough to be my father and probably sees me more like a daughter than anything else."

"That doesn't mean anything," Tom pointed out. "You're a beautiful woman, Jess. Age doesn't make men blind to that."

Jess rolled her eyes, clearly finding the whole idea absurd. "Tom, I've spent more time with him than you have. He's just a lonely guy who likes fixing things and having someone appreciate his work. If you'd seen how he lights up when I compliment his craftsmanship, you'd understand. It's not about me. It's about feeling valued for his skills."

She placed her hands on Tom's shoulders, her expression softening. "Honestly, he reminds me of my grandpa. Always puttering around with projects, eager to show off his handiwork. There's nothing remotely romantic about it. He's been nothing but respectful."

Tom thought of the image burned into his brain: Bob's massive cock in his hand, Bob's eyes closed in ecstasy as he came to the images of Jess. There had been nothing respectful about that. But he couldn't tell her. Not now.

“I guess you’re right,” he conceded. “It’s probably harmless.”

A mischievous glint appeared in Jess’s eyes. “Is that what you were so worried about telling me? That our tenant thinks I’m pretty?”

“I wasn’t worried,” Tom protested weakly. “Just... observing.”

Jess stepped closer, her arms sliding around his waist. “So,” she said, her voice dropping, “even if your observation was correct... given our conversation earlier, would the idea of Bob having a crush on me bother you? Or would it... interest you?”

Tom swallowed hard, caught off guard by her directness. “I... I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Jess raised an eyebrow, clearly amused by his discomfort. “After everything we just talked about?”

She ran her fingers through the hair at the back of his head as she pressed her body against his. “What if I flirted with him a little?” she whispered. “Nothing serious. Just enough to see if you’re right about this supposed crush. Would that turn you on, Tom? Would it make you happy?”

Tom’s pulse quickened, his body responding instantly to her suggestion despite his conflicted mind. “Jess, I-”

“Remember how you were after those pool photos?” she continued. “How you couldn’t keep your hands off me? How you fucked me so hard?” Her teeth grazed his earlobe. “Is that what would happen if I flirted with Bob? Would you ravage me again afterward?”

Tom’s cock instantly hardened at her words. Jess’s suggestion about flirting with Bob, the same man he’d watched masturbate to her photos, triggered a storm of arousal and anxiety that left him dizzy. The idea was both terrifying and exhilarating.

“You wouldn’t...” he managed.

“Wouldn’t I?” she challenged, pressing her body closer. She could feel his erection against her stomach and smiled, victorious. “That answers my question.”

The reality of what was happening struck Tom with sudden clarity. This wasn’t just abstract talk anymore. Jess was actively considering testing his fantasies in the real world, starting with Bob, a man who Tom knew harbored far more than just a casual interest.

His mind raced through the potential consequences. What if Bob took her flirting as an invitation for more? What if those massive hands, so skilled at fixing broken things, decided to reach for his wife? The thought should have repulsed him, should have

triggered that protective instinct that had dominated their early relationship. Instead, his cock throbbed.

"This isn't a game, Jess," he said. "If you start something like this..."

Her eyes glittered with a newfound understanding of the power she held. "Then what? What happens if I start testing these boundaries? Would you stop me? Or would you encourage me?"

Tom realized she was mapping the contours of his desires in real time, probing for the truth behind his confessions. She wasn't just accepting his fantasy. She was exploring it, turning it over in her hands like a curious object she'd discovered.

A loud crash from the kitchen broke the moment. They both jumped, Jess stepping back as the sound of Bob swearing drifted down the hall.

"I should check on him," Jess said, giving Tom a look that promised this conversation wasn't over.

Tom grabbed her wrist before she could leave. "Jess, wait."

She turned back, eyebrows raised.

"I... I don't know how to feel about this," he admitted. "The fantasy in my head and the reality of you actually flirting with him are different things."

"I know," she said, her expression softening. "I was just teasing you. Besides, I told you, I don't think Bob sees me that way at all."

If only you knew, Tom thought, the image of Bob's massive cock flashing through his mind again.

"Right," he said instead. "Of course."

Jess slipped from his grasp and headed toward the kitchen, leaving Tom to collect himself. He adjusted his pants, willing his erection to subside before following her.

In the kitchen, they found Bob on his knees, gathering pieces of broken tile. He looked up when they entered.

"Sorry about that," he said gruffly. "Pry bar slipped. Nothing to worry about."

"Let me help," Jess offered, already reaching for the dustpan that hung inside their pantry door.

"Not necessary," Bob protested, but Jess was already kneeling beside him, dustpan extended.

"I insist," she said. "Four hands are better than two."

Bob's eyes lingered on Jess for a moment before he nodded, accepting her help. Tom watched from the doorway as they worked together.

"There," Jess said when they'd cleaned up the mess. "Good as new."

"Thanks," Bob said, his voice gruffer than usual. "Don't usually have such pretty assistance."

Jess laughed, the sound bright and genuine. "Sweet talk will get you everywhere, Bob."

Tom's stomach twisted at the casual flirtation. Had she always been this friendly with Bob? Or was this new, inspired by their recent conversation?

"You two should get out of here," Bob suggested, returning to his work. "This part's messy and loud. Demo work always is. Why don't you go enjoy your Saturday? I'll handle this."

"You sure?" Jess asked.

"Positive. I work better alone anyway." Bob glanced at Tom. "No offense."

Tom moved to his home office to catch up on work, but his mind kept wandering. The sounds from the kitchen were a constant reminder of Bob's presence in their home. Every now and then, he heard Jess's voice, followed by Bob's deeper rumble, as she presumably checked on his progress or offered him something to drink.

After a couple hours of staring at spreadsheets, Tom gave up. He wandered back to the kitchen, where the transformation was already underway. Bob had removed about half of the existing tile backsplash, revealing the drywall beneath. A plastic sheet had been spread across the floor, catching the debris, and Bob had set up a small workstation on the island.

"Making progress?" Tom asked, trying to sound casual.

Bob glanced up from where he was carefully prying off another tile. "Steady as she goes. Your wife's been keeping me company on and off. She's got a good eye for design."

"She does," Tom responded. "So how long will this stage take?" Tom asked, partly to break his own train of thought.

"Removal? Another couple hours, probably," Bob replied. "Then we need to prep the surface. The actual installation of the new stone will happen tomorrow."

"So a full weekend project," Tom confirmed, trying to keep the resignation out of his voice.

"Worth it though," Bob assured him. "Like I said, this stone will transform the whole kitchen. Raise the value of your home too."

"That's what Jess keeps saying," Tom acknowledged.

"Your wife's got good instincts," Bob said. "In design and in people."

Something about the way he said it made Tom look at him sharply, but Bob's expression was innocently focused on his work, giving no hint of any deeper meaning.

Tom moved back to the office, back to his spreadsheets. An hour later he found Jess in the living room, flipping through a magazine.

"How's it going in there?" he asked, nodding toward the kitchen.

"Good," Jess replied without looking up. "Bob says he's right on schedule. We should have a beautiful new backsplash by tomorrow evening."

Tom settled onto the couch beside her. "Great."

Jess turned another page in her magazine. "I was thinking," she said casually. "We should invite Bob to stay for dinner tonight. As a thank you for all his help."

Tom stiffened. "Dinner? Here?"

"Yes, here," Jess replied, looking up at him. "Where else? We could order something in. It's the least we can do."

"The least we could do is pay him," Tom pointed out. "Which we are. A thousand dollars."

"That's for materials," Jess countered. "He's not charging us for labor."

Tom sighed. The last thing he wanted was to extend Bob's presence in their home beyond what was necessary, especially after the revelations from earlier in the day. But he could see from Jess's expression that she was set on the idea.

"Fine," he conceded. "Dinner. But just takeout, nothing fancy."

Jess smiled, clearly pleased with his agreement. "Great. I'll ask him if he has any preferences."

She set aside her magazine and headed back toward the kitchen. Tom heard her voice, then Bob's deeper response, followed by Jess's laugh.

When Jess returned, her smile told him Bob had accepted the invitation. "He said he'd love to stay for dinner. He just wants to finish up for the day and take a quick shower in his place first."

Tom nodded, already resigned to the evening ahead. "What are we ordering?"

“I thought Indian,” Jess suggested. “From that place on Sixth Street? I remember Bob mentioning he likes spicy food.”

“Indian is fine.”

They spent the next few hours or so in relative silence, Jess occasionally checking on Bob’s progress while Tom worked on his laptop. The sounds from the kitchen gradually changed from the aggressive noise of demolition to preparation.

Finally, around six, Bob appeared in the living room doorway. “That’s me done for the day,” he announced, wiping his hands on a rag. “Wall’s prepped and ready for installation tomorrow.”

“That’s great,” Jess said, looking up from her iPad. “Thanks for all your hard work today.”

“Just the beginning,” Bob replied. “The real transformation comes tomorrow.” He glanced down at his dusty clothes. “I’ll head down and get cleaned up, then be back for dinner, if that offer still stands.”

“Absolutely,” Jess assured him.

“Give me about thirty minutes,” Bob said, already moving toward the door. “Just enough time to wash off the day’s work.”

After Bob left, Jess turned to Tom. “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

“What wasn’t?”

“Being neighborly,” Jess replied. “Bob’s been a huge help, and it’s nice to show some appreciation.”

“Sure,” Tom agreed, though he didn’t entirely share her enthusiasm. “Neighborly.”

Jess placed the food order while Tom set up the dining table, laying out plates and silverware.

By the time Bob returned, freshly showered and dressed in clean jeans and a button-up shirt, the food had arrived. He’d made an effort, Tom noticed. The shirt was pressed, the jeans newer than his work pairs.

“Something smells good,” Bob commented.

Jess smiled, gesturing toward the spread on the dining table. “Help yourself. We’ve got tandoori chicken, lamb vindaloo, some samosas, and a couple of other things.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Bob said, taking the seat across from Jess. Tom sat at the head of the table, with Jess to his right and Bob to his left.

As they served themselves, Bob kept the conversation flowing, asking Jess more about her work and the Skyline project. His interest seemed genuine, his questions thoughtful. Occasionally, he'd include Tom in the conversation, but his focus primarily remained on Jess.

"So you designed the interiors for the penthouse units?" Bob asked, clearly impressed. "That's a big responsibility."

"It was a team effort," Jess said modestly. "Sam and Annie contributed significantly."

"But you led the team," Bob pointed out. "That takes vision, leadership. Not everyone has that."

Jess smiled, clearly pleased by his recognition. "Thank you. It's been a challenging project, but seeing it come together has been incredibly rewarding."

"I know that feeling," Bob nodded. "There's nothing like seeing a vision become reality. Whether it's a luxury penthouse or a simple kitchen backsplash." He gestured with his fork toward their kitchen. "Tomorrow, you'll see your space transformed. That stone is going to make everything else in the room look better too."

"I can't wait," Jess admitted, her excitement palpable. "It's going to be such an improvement."

Bob took a bite of his vindaloo, nodding appreciatively at the spice level. "Perfect," he commented before turning to Tom. "So, how long will you be in San Diego next week?"

Tom blinked, surprised by the question. "Wednesday through Friday. How did you know I was going back?"

Bob shrugged, taking another bite. "Jess mentioned it while I was working." He turned to Jess. "You'll be on your own for a few days, then?"

"I'll manage," Jess replied, her tone light. "I've got plenty to keep me busy."

"Still," Bob said, "must be tough. My second wife, Karen, could never handle when I traveled for work. Always complained I was gone too much."

Jess's fork paused halfway to her mouth. "It's not ideal," she admitted. "Especially with Tom leaving so soon after just getting back. But that's how it goes sometimes."

"How often do you travel?" Bob asked Tom.

"Not often," Tom replied. "This is unusual. Same client, urgent situation."

"Back-to-back trips," Bob mused. "Karen used to say that was the hardest. When I'd return just long enough for her to get used to having me home, then leave again. Said it was almost worse than if I'd just stayed away."

"It is hard," Jess agreed. "The constant readjustment. One day you're figuring out how to sleep alone, the next you're back to sharing a bed, then alone again."

Tom turned to her, surprised by her candor. They'd never discussed this aspect of his work trips before.

"And it's not just the physical absence," Jess continued. "It's knowing you're focused elsewhere, dealing with some crisis, while I'm here juggling everything else. By the time you get home and readjust, you're preparing to leave again."

Bob nodded sympathetically. "That's exactly what Karen used to say. Never truly present, even when physically home." He turned to Tom. "No offense meant. Just sharing what I've learned the hard way."

Tom felt a flash of irritation at Bob but he couldn't deny the truth in Jess's words. "I'm sorry it's been difficult," he said to Jess. "We haven't really talked about how the travel affects you."

"It's fine," Jess said quickly, seeming to realize how much she'd revealed. "Like I said, I manage. And it's important for your career."

"Still," Bob interjected, "it's good to acknowledge these things. My ex-wife was also creative like you, Jess. She always felt unheard about her design ideas, her creative vision. I learned too late that listening is sometimes more important than solving." He shook his head. "By the time I figured that out, she'd already found someone else who made her feel heard."

The implication created a silence that Bob seemed entirely comfortable with.

"Well," Tom said pointedly, "Jess and I communicate pretty well. We're solid."

"Of course you are," Bob agreed quickly. "Anyone can see that. Just sharing war stories from the trenches of failed marriages." He turned back to Jess. "What other projects are you working on besides Skyline? Something tells me a talent like yours stays busy."

The conversation shifted, but the undercurrent remained. Tom watched Bob's careful attention to Jess, the way he leaned in when she spoke, asked follow up questions that showed he was genuinely listening.

By the time they finished dinner, the sky outside had darkened to deep blue. Bob helped clear the table, carrying plates to the kitchen despite Jess's protests that he'd already done enough work for one day.

"Just being polite," Bob insisted. "My mother would roll in her grave if I let a beautiful woman clean up after feeding me."

The compliment was casual, almost throwaway, yet Tom caught the slight color that rose in Jess's cheeks. She laughed it off, but the effect of Bob's words was obvious.

Finally, Bob announced it was time for him to head back to his own space. "Early start tomorrow," he explained. "Want to make good progress on that backsplash."

"What time should we expect you?" Jess asked.

"I'll be up here around ten, if that's not too early for a weekend."

"Not at all," Jess assured him. "We'll be up."

Bob nodded, then turned to Tom, extending his hand. "Thanks for dinner. And for letting me work on your kitchen. It's going to look fantastic when it's done."

Tom shook his hand. "Thank you for the work. Looking forward to seeing the finished product."

Bob's grip was firm, his eyes direct. For a brief moment, Tom had the unsettling feeling that Bob could see right through him, could read every thought in his head. Then Bob released his hand and turned to Jess.

"Goodnight, Jess. Thanks again for your hospitality."

"Goodnight, Bob. See you in the morning."

After Bob left, Jess turned to Tom with a satisfied smile. "That was nice," she said. "He's good company."

"Yeah," Tom agreed, though his mind was elsewhere. "He is."

As they moved around the kitchen cleaning up, Tom found his eyes drawn to the partially dismantled backsplash, the blank slate waiting for tomorrow's transformation. Much like their marriage, he thought. Things were shifting, changing. What would emerge on the other side?

He glanced at Jess. "Penny for your thoughts?" Tom asked.

Jess turned to face him. "I was just thinking about Bob," she admitted.

"Oh? What about him?"

"Just that he seems lonely," Jess said. "All that skill, all that knowledge, and he lives alone in a rented apartment. It's kind of sad."

"He made his choices," Tom replied, more defensively than he'd intended. "Two failed marriages, remember?"

"I know," Jess acknowledged. "But still. There's something... I don't know. Something gloomy about him. Like he's missing something important in his life."

Tom didn't respond immediately, unsure what to make of her observation.

"Anyway," Jess continued when Tom remained silent, "I'm glad we're letting him help with the house. It seems to give him purpose, you know? And the kitchen's going to look amazing."

"Yeah," Tom agreed.

Jess moved towards Tom and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. "Thank you for saying yes to the backsplash. I know it wasn't in our budget."

"You're welcome," Tom said, pulling her closer. "Anything for you."

Tom stood at the window staring out at their backyard. His mind kept replaying the day's events on an endless loop: the conversation with Jess, his near confession about Bob, Bob's perfectly timed interruption, the kitchen backsplash, the dinner that followed.

It all felt like some bizarre cosmic joke. He'd finally opened up about his deepest, most private desire, only to have the man at the center of his unspoken shame show up on their doorstep minutes later. And not just show up but insert himself into their home. It was as if Bob had sensed the exact moment when Tom was at his most vulnerable and arrived to drive the knife in deeper.

The sound of the bathroom door opening pulled Tom from his thoughts. He turned to see Jess coming out in her plush robe cinched tightly at the waist.

"Hey," she said.

Tom nodded. "Hey."

She moved to stand beside him at the window, following his gaze out to the yard. "What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Nothing important," Tom replied.

Jess didn't press him. Instead, she leaned into him a little more, her damp head finding his shoulder.

"Today was a lot," she acknowledged. "For both of us."

Tom turned to her, abandoning the window to face her fully. "Yeah," he agreed. "It was."

"Come to bed?" she asked, her hand finding his.

Tom nodded, allowing her to lead him away from the window. They moved together toward their bed, both sinking onto the edge of the mattress.

"I've been thinking about what we talked about," Jess said. "About your... fantasies."

Tom tensed slightly, uncertain where this was going. "What about them?"

"I just want you to know," she continued, "that it doesn't change anything between us. Not in any way that matters."

"No?" Tom asked.

"No," Jess affirmed. She shifted to face him more directly. "Tom, we've been together for six years. We've built a life together. Your fantasies are just one small part of who you are, of who we are together."

Her words soothed his anxiety.

"I know it took a lot of courage to tell me," she continued. "And I'm glad you did. I want to know all of you, even the parts you're afraid to show."

"I was nervous," he admitted. "That you'd think I was... I don't know, weird."

"Tom," Jess's voice was gentle. "There's nothing weird about fantasies. Everyone has them. They're just thoughts, imaginations."

"But these particular thoughts..."

"Are just a facet of who you are," she finished for him. "And who you are is the man I fell in love with. The man I'm still very much in love with."

Tom felt some knot of tension he'd been carrying loosen. "I love you too," he said. "So much."

Jess smiled, the expression lighting her entire face. "I know."

She leaned forward then, pressing her lips to his in a kiss that was soft and unhurried. Her hand came up to cup his face, her touch tender. When she pulled back, her eyes met his directly. No evasion, no uncertainty.

This time, Tom reached for her, his hands cupping her face as he kissed her. Jess responded immediately, her lips parting, her body leaning into his. He felt her hands on his shoulders, steadying herself as she pressed closer.

Slowly, deliberately, Tom's fingers moved to the knot of her robe, tugging gently until it came loose. The robe parted, revealing her body, still a bit damp from the shower, her skin flushed and warm.

Tom pushed the robe from her shoulders, letting it fall to the bed behind her. She sat in front of him, completely bare, completely vulnerable, yet radiating quiet confidence. How many times had he seen her naked? Hundreds, thousands perhaps. Yet each time felt like a gift freely given that he could never quite believe he deserved.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, the words inadequate but heartfelt.

Jess smiled, reaching for the hem of his t-shirt. "Your turn," she said, helping him pull it over his head.

Together they removed the rest of his clothes and then they were both naked. They shifted to lie properly on the bed, facing each other on their sides.

Tom traced the curve of her waist, marveling at the softness of her skin. His touch was exploratory, as if he were mapping her body for the first time. Jess's hands mirrored his movements, her fingers trailing along his shoulder, down his chest, lingering over his heart.

Their lips met again, the kiss deepening as their bodies pressed closer. Tom rolled Jess gently onto her back, his weight supported on his forearms as he hovered above her. Her legs parted naturally, cradling his hips between her thighs.

Tom took his time, his mouth leaving hers to explore her throat, her shoulder. His lips traced a path down to her breast, where he lingered, tongue circling her nipple. Jess's soft gasp encouraged him further, his teeth grazing the sensitive flesh before soothing it with his tongue.

He moved to her other breast, giving it the same attention, responding to her sighs and the subtle arch of her back. Beneath him, Jess was all warmth and softness, her body responding to his touch with enthusiasm. Her hands tangled in his hair, holding on as if to anchor herself to him.

"You feel so good," she murmured.

Tom continued his path downward, lips trailing across her ribs, her stomach, pausing to dip his tongue into her navel. Jess's fingers tightened in his hair, her breathing quickening. When he settled between her thighs, her legs fell open wider, offering herself to him without hesitation.

He breathed in her familiar scent before pressing his mouth to her pussy. The first broad stroke of his tongue drew a moan from Jess, her hips lifting slightly to meet him.

Tom took his time, alternating between gentle suction of her clit and firm strokes of his tongue, reading her body's responses.

Jess's thighs trembled as he found his rhythm, his mouth on her pussy while his fingers teased her entrance. When he finally slid two fingers inside her, her back arched off the bed, a quiet "Oh" escaping her lips.

"That's it," he murmured.

He curled his fingers inside her, finding that spot that always made her gasp, while still working her with his tongue. Jess's hands left his hair to clutch at the sheets as pleasure built within her.

"Tom," she breathed, her voice laced with need. "Please. I want you inside me."

He gave her one last kiss before moving back up her body, his lips finding hers in a deep, intimate kiss that let her taste herself on his tongue. Jess reached between them, her hand wrapping around his erection, guiding him toward her entrance.

"Wait," Tom said, pulling back slightly. "Condom."

Jess nodded, releasing him as he reached for the nightstand. He fumbled a moment before grabbing a condom from the drawer and tearing the package open. Jess took it from him and rolled it into his cock.

When he pressed against her entrance again, they both held their breath. Tom pushed forward slowly, watching Jess's face as he filled her inch by inch.

Once fully seated inside her, Tom paused, savoring the sensation of their joined bodies. It wasn't just physical pleasure, though that was overwhelming in itself. It was the intimacy of the moment, the vulnerability of being completely open to another person, both physically and emotionally.

"I love you," he said, the words pulled from somewhere deep inside him.

"I love you too," Jess replied. "Now move, please."

Tom began to thrust, his pace slow. Each movement was deliberate, designed to bring them both pleasure rather than chase his own release. Jess's legs wrapped around his waist, her ankles crossing at the small of his back, pulling him deeper with each stroke.

They found their rhythm easily. It wasn't frantic or desperate. It was a slow, steady build of pleasure and connection. Tom supported himself on one elbow, his other hand free to cup her breast and slide down to grip her hip, always maintaining that physical connection.

Jess's hands were equally active, running along his shoulders, down his back, her nails occasionally digging in slightly when he hit a particularly sensitive spot. Her face was open, expressive, showing every flicker of pleasure without reservation.

"You feel so good," Tom murmured, bending to capture her lips in another kiss. "So perfect."

As Tom moved in and out, her breathing quickened. Her inner muscles began to flutter around him. Tom recognized the signs of her approaching orgasm and maintained his steady pace, wanting to draw out her pleasure as long as possible.

"That's it," he encouraged. "Let go. I've got you."

Jess's eyes locked with his, vulnerability and trust radiating from her gaze. Her hands tightened on his shoulders, her body tensing beneath him. When her orgasm finally hit, it wasn't the explosive, screaming release they sometimes chased. Instead, it was a deep, rolling wave of pleasure that moved through her entire body, her mouth falling open in a silent "oh" as her eyes briefly fluttered closed.

The sight of her beneath him, the feel of her inner walls pulsing around his cock, drove Tom closer to his own orgasm. He maintained his steady pace, drawing out her pleasure while building his own.

"Jess," he gasped, feeling his control slipping. "I'm close."

Her eyes opened, focusing on him. "Come for me," she urged, her voice warm with affection. "Let me feel you."

Tom's rhythm faltered as his orgasm built, his thrusts becoming more erratic. Jess's hands slid down to his ass, pulling him deeper till he finally lost control. He buried his face against her neck, groaning as came inside the condom.

For long moments, they remained locked together, both breathing heavily.

Eventually, he rolled to the side. The silence between them was comfortable, a shared aftermath of mutual pleasure.

After a moment, Tom rose to throw the condom in the bathroom trash. When he returned, Jess had pulled the covers back and was waiting for him.

He slid in beside her, drawing the covers over them both as he gathered her into his arms. Jess came willingly, her back to his chest, her body fitting against his like a puzzle piece sliding into its designated spot. Tom buried his nose in her damp hair, breathing in the scent of her as he tightened his arm around her waist.

"We're going to be okay, you know," she said softly. "Whatever comes, we'll face it together."

In that moment, with her body pressed against his, it was easy to have faith. The doubts, the fears, the guilt, they were still there, lurking at the edges of his mind. But for now, at least, they couldn't touch him.

They fell silent then, the only sound their gradually slowing breaths. Outside, the moon continued its arc across the sky, casting silver light across their backyard, across the pool where Bob had photographed Jess exactly one week ago.

Inside the sanctuary of their bedroom, Tom and Jess drifted toward sleep. Tom's last conscious thought was of Jess, not the fantasy version that populated his secret thoughts, but the real woman in his arms. The woman who knew his darkest desires and hadn't turned away. The woman who had seen him at his most vulnerable and still chosen him.

For tonight, at least, that was enough.

Downstairs, in his separate apartment, Bob Caldwell lay awake, staring at his ceiling, thinking his own thoughts about the couple above him, making his own plans for the days to come.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 06

Jess pushed through the glass doors of Austin Design Group's office on Monday morning. The weekend's revelations about Tom's fantasies remained at the edge of her consciousness like a half-remembered dream. Vivid in parts, hazy in others, but impossible to fully dismiss.

She nodded at the security guard, a middle-aged man who always straightened his posture when she approached. His eyes followed her across the marble lobby, not lusty but definitely appreciative. Last week she might have ignored his attention entirely. Today, she noticed it, cataloged it, wondered if Tom would find it arousing if she mentioned it.

The thought made her cheeks warm as she stepped into the elevator.

"Hold the door!" Sam's voice echoed across the lobby. She thrust her arm out to stop the closing doors, and he slid in beside her, slightly breathless. "Thanks. Morning, Jess."

"Morning, Sam." She pressed the button for the thirty-fourth floor.

Sam couldn't quite hide his enthusiastic energy. "So," he began. "Seems you made quite the impression on the investors."

Jess raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"James Chen's office reached out directly," Sam confirmed. "And apparently, Chris Webb hasn't stopped talking about the master suite design. Margaret's been fielding calls over the weekend."

The memory of Chris' crude comments flooded back. How her mouth would look wrapped around his cock, how he'd like to see her ass turning pink under his hand. She forced a smile.

"That's great news for the team," she offered.

"Great news for you, you mean," Sam corrected. "Everyone knows you were the driving force behind those designs. Annie and I were mostly support. This is your moment, Jess. Enjoy it."

The elevator arrived at their floor, doors sliding open to reveal the office already buzzing with activity. Designers hunched over drafting tables, account managers paced while on calls, junior staff darted between desks with coffee and printouts.

"Anyway," Sam said as they walked toward their desks, "congratulations. You've earned it."

"Thanks, Sam," she replied, unable to fully enjoy the praise when it felt so closely tied to Chris Webb's sexual interest in her.

At her desk, Jess found a small arrangement of fresh flowers with a note in Margaret's handwriting: "Excellent work on Friday. See me at 10." She set down her bag and turned on her computer, mentally preparing for whatever lay ahead. The flowers were unlike Margaret, who typically showed approval through additional responsibilities rather than gestures of appreciation.

"Someone's got an admirer," Annie remarked, appearing beside Jess's desk with two coffees. She handed one to Jess. "Margaret's never sent me flowers, and I've been here longer than you."

Jess accepted the coffee gratefully. "Thanks. I'm as surprised as you are. Margaret's not exactly the nurturing type."

"She is when she sees dollar signs," Annie replied, sitting on the edge of Jess's desk. "And you, my friend, have become a walking, talking profit center." She sipped her coffee, studying Jess. "You okay? You seem... I don't know. Different today."

"Just tired," Jess deflected. "It was a busy weekend."

Annie nodded. "Well, get ready for things to get even busier. Margaret's been in meetings since seven this morning. My money's on multiple new projects coming our way."

As Annie walked back to her desk, Jess's phone buzzed with a text.

Tom: Morning, beautiful. How's the office treating you today?

Jess smiled, typing back: Everyone's acting weird. Apparently I'm the new golden child.

His response came quickly: No surprise there. Probably have clients fighting over you now.

She hesitated before typing: Security guard checked me out this morning. Thought you'd want to know. Her finger hovered over the send button for a moment before she pressed it, her heart beating slightly faster.

Three dots appeared immediately, then disappeared, then reappeared. Finally, she got a response.

Tom: What did he see that I'm missing right now?

So this was real. His fantasy wasn't just talk. It genuinely turned him on to think about other men desiring her.

Jess: Black pencil skirt, white blouse. Nothing special, but he definitely noticed.

Tom: I bet he did. Probably imagining what's underneath.

Jess: Meeting with Margaret at 10. Talk later xo

Tom: Good luck. Love you.

Jess set her phone aside and turned to her computer but her mind kept drifting. Was she really considering playing into Tom's fantasy? Flirting with other men, letting them desire her, just to turn him on? The idea felt foreign yet oddly liberating.

As she tried to focus on emails, colleagues stopped by her desk to congratulate her on the Skyline presentation, each interaction reinforcing what Sam had said. Something had shifted in her professional standing. People were looking at her differently now, with new respect, new awareness.

Or had they always looked at her this way, and she was only now noticing because of Tom's confession?

At precisely 9:55 AM, Jess stood and made her way to Margaret's office where Margaret DeVore sat behind a large mahogany desk.

Jess knocked softly on the glass door.

Margaret looked up and gestured for Jess to enter.

"Jessica," Margaret said. "Sit."

Jess settled into one of the chairs facing Margaret's desk.

"Thank you for the flowers," Jess began. "They weren't necessary, but I appreciate the gesture."

"You earned them," Margaret replied. "The Skyline presentation was flawless. More importantly, it's already generating substantial interest in our firm." She leaned forward slightly. "Chris Webb personally called me Saturday to express his appreciation for your work. So did James Chen."

Jess nodded, keeping her expression neutral despite the knot forming in her stomach. "I'm glad they were pleased with the designs."

"Pleased is an understatement," Margaret replied. "They were impressed. Chen mentioned a development in Houston he'd like us to consult on. And Webb is determined to have you on the team for the Savannah hotel project."

"Savannah…" Jess echoed. "What exactly is the scope there?"

“Full interior renovation of an 1850s mansion being converted into a boutique hotel. Sixteen rooms, each unique, plus common areas, restaurant, bar. It’s a dream project, Jessica. The kind that wins awards and features in design magazines.”

“It sounds incredible,” Jess admitted. And it did. Professionally speaking, it was exactly the type of project she’d always wanted. Creative freedom, historical context, luxury budget.

“When would that project begin?”

“That’s the complication,” Margaret said. “Both projects are slated to kick off within weeks of each other. Savannah in about a month, right after Skyline ends. Houston shortly after.” She leaned forward slightly. “Can you handle both simultaneously?”

“Yes,” Jess answered without hesitation. The professional opportunity was too significant to pass up, regardless of her personal discomfort. “I believe I can.”

Margaret nodded, satisfaction evident on her face. “I thought you might say that. I’ve already started assembling support teams for both projects. You’ll have substantial resources.”

“Thank you for your confidence in me.”

“You’ve earned it,” Margaret replied simply. She glanced at her watch. “The Savannah and Houston projects will require significant preparation. I’ll have my assistant send over the preliminary briefs in a week so you can start familiarizing yourself with the parameters.”

“I appreciate that,” Jess said.

“One more thing before you go,” Margaret added, her tone shifting to something more mentorly. “These high-profile clients can be demanding. If you need additional resources or support as you juggle these projects alongside Skyline’s completion, don’t hesitate to ask. My door is always open.”

“Thank you, Margaret. That means a lot.”

Margaret nodded, already reaching for her ringing phone. “That’s all for now. We’ll set up project planning meetings for later this week.”

Back at her desk, Jess stared at her computer screen without really seeing it. The opportunity Margaret had just presented was career defining. Under normal circumstances, she’d be ecstatic, already planning concepts and sketching ideas. Instead, she felt trapped, caught between professional ambition and personal dignity.

Her phone buzzed with another text from Tom: How was the meeting?

Jess hesitated before replying: Interesting. She says Webb and Chen both want me for upcoming projects. Career making stuff.

Tom responded immediately: That's incredible! Told you they'd be fighting over you. So proud of you, babe.

She typed back: Thanks. Tell you more tonight.

She set her phone down and immersed herself in work. By lunchtime, Jess had almost managed to push thoughts of Webb and Chen to the back of her mind.

Rather than joining colleagues in the break room, Jess opted to eat at her desk, a salad she'd picked up from the building's café downstairs. As she stabbed at cherry tomatoes, her mind returned inevitably to the weekend's revelations, to Tom's confession about his fantasies, to the strange mix of shock, confusion, and, if she was completely honest with herself, curiosity that had followed.

The memory of last week's bathroom photos flooded back. It was the thrill of taking them, knowing the effect they'd have on him. And then the panties at the restaurant, the way his eyes had widened when she'd slipped them into his palm.

There had been a freedom in those moments, a reclaiming of her sexuality that had gotten lost somewhere. She'd felt bold, desired, almost reckless. It reminded her of the rush she'd felt during her modeling days, particularly that shoot with Georgio. The way he'd directed her, encouraged her to embrace her sensuality, to own the power of it. The way strangers had looked at those photos, admired them, desired her through them.

Her computer pinged with a new email, breaking her daydream:

Dear Jessica,

I've spoken with Margaret regarding your potential involvement in our Savannah hotel renovation. Your work on Skyline has been nothing short of exceptional, showcasing exactly the vision and attention to detail this historic property deserves.

I'll be in Austin until Friday and would appreciate the opportunity to discuss the project in more detail. Would you be available for dinner Thursday evening? Le Bernardin at 7pm would allow us the privacy and quiet to review preliminary concepts without interruption.

Please let me know at your earliest convenience.

Regards,

Chris Webb

Jess stared at the screen, her appetite vanishing. Thursday. When Tom would be in San Diego. The timing couldn't be more convenient for Webb, or more problematic for her.

Jess read the email twice, noting the professional language that nonetheless carried undertones she couldn't ignore. "Privacy and quiet" sounded innocuous on the surface, but after overhearing his crude comments, she couldn't help questioning his intentions.

She closed the email without responding, needing to think carefully about how to handle this.

By the time Jess packed up to head home, the office had largely emptied out, just a few dedicated souls still hunched over their desks.

At home, Jess kicked off her heels in the entryway and made her way to the kitchen. She glanced at the nearly completed backsplash. It was exactly as stunning as Bob had promised it would be.

She poured herself a glass of red wine and moved to the living room, sinking onto the couch.

Her phone rang, Madi's name and photo appearing on the screen. Jess felt a rush of relief at the sight. If anyone could help her make sense of the chaos in her mind, it was Madi.

"Hey," she answered, taking a sip of wine.

"Finally!" Madi's voice was an immediate infusion of energy. "I've been dying to hear about the party. How'd it go? Big success? Did all those investors fall at your feet?"

Jess laughed. "Something like that. The presentation went well, actually. Really well. Margaret's been fielding calls from clients who want me for their next projects."

"See? What did I tell you? You're a goddamn rock star." Madi's pride was almost tangible through the phone. "And how'd that dress work out? Was it as devastating as we predicted?"

"It was a hit," Jess confirmed.

"I knew it!" A pause, then, "How was the rest of the weekend when Tom got home?"

Jess took another sip of wine, steadying herself. "We talked. A lot, actually."

"Talked, huh?" Madi's tone carried amusement. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

"That too," Jess laughed. "We had a lot to catch up on."

"And?" Madi prompted when Jess didn't immediately continue.

"And you were right," Jess admitted. "About Tom. About what turns him on."

There was a moment of silence, then Madi's voice came back more measured, intrigued. "You asked him about it? About getting turned on when other men want you?"

"I didn't have to ask," Jess replied. "He told me himself."

"Holy shit," Madi breathed. "I was right! What did I tell you? Damn, I should've been a therapist instead of an event planner."

"Don't quit your day job," Jess teased.

"So what exactly did he say? Like, specifically?" Madi's voice had that hungry edge it always got when she sensed juicy information.

Jess sank deeper into the couch, cradling the wine glass. "He said that he fantasizes about me with other men. Not just flirting, Madi. He imagines me having sex with them."

"Wow," Madi said. "That's... intense. How do you feel about it?"

"Confused? Surprised?" Jess struggled to articulate the mix of emotions. "But also... I don't know. Maybe a little intrigued?"

"Intrigued?" Madi echoed, a note of excitement creeping into her voice. "As in, you're considering it?"

"Not the sex part," Jess clarified quickly. "Just... maybe the flirting? I don't know. It's complicated."

"Of course it's complicated. But also potentially hot as fuck." Madi paused. "So what brought this on? Why did Tom suddenly confess all this?"

Jess shared what had happened at the party, that she'd overheard some clients making suggestive comments, and Tom's reaction had revealed his unexpected turn on.

"Let me get this straight," Madi said slowly. "You heard these rich powerful guys talking about wanting to fuck you, and when you told Tom, instead of getting angry, he got turned on?"

"Basically," Jess confirmed. "And then he explained that it's been a fantasy of his for a while. Like, an evolution of his jealousy from when we were first dating."

“Mmhmm,” Madi hummed, and Jess could practically see her nodding. “That tracks with what little I’ve read about it. The cuckold thing often starts as jealousy that transforms into arousal. The threat becomes a thrill.”

“It’s not a cuckold thing,” Jess protested. “He just... likes knowing other men find me attractive. He said he fantasizes about me sleeping with men. He’s not asking me to.”

“Not yet,” Madi added.

“Madi!”

“What? I’m just saying, fantasies have a way of escalating.”

Jess sighed, conceding the point. “I don’t know.”

“So what’s the plan? Are you going to test it out? Give Tom a little taste to see how he really reacts?”

The directness of the question caught Jess off guard. “I... I don’t know. Maybe?”

“You already did, didn’t you?” Madi’s intuition was uncanny. “I can hear it in your voice. You tried something.”

Jess felt her cheeks warm. “Nothing major. I just... may have teased him a little about Bob.”

“Bob? The old guy? Your tenant?” Madi’s voice rose in surprise.

“Yeah. Tom has this idea that Bob has a crush on me, and I joked about flirting with him to see if he was right.”

“And?” Madi was practically breathless with anticipation.

“And he got hard instantly,” Jess admitted. “Just from me suggesting it.”

“Holy shit,” Madi whispered. “This is hot. Like, seriously hot. But also kind of dangerous, Jess. Playing these kinds of games with someone who lives in your house? Who you’re kind of dependent on for rent and repairs?”

“I know,” Jess sighed. “That’s why it’s just talk for now. Besides, Bob doesn’t see me that way. He’s just a lonely guy who likes fixing things.”

“Mmhmm,” Madi hummed skeptically. “Men are simple creatures, Jess. Show a straight man a beautiful woman being friendly, and he’ll convince himself she wants him. Especially an older guy who’s probably not getting much attention… especially from women like you.”

“You make it sound so predatory,” Jess protested. “Bob’s been nothing but respectful.”

"I'm sure he has," Madi replied. "To your face. But trust me, behind closed doors? He's imagining what you look like naked."

"Madi!"

Madi laughed. "So Bob's the test subject, then?"

"No!" Jess protested. "I was just teasing Tom. I have no intention of actually flirting with our tenant. That would be... inappropriate."

"Right, because inappropriate isn't exactly what this whole fantasy is about," Madi said sarcastically. "Look, I'm not saying you should jump into bed with the guy. But if Tom's into the idea of you flirting with other men, Bob's a ready-made opportunity. He's there, he's apparently into you, and he's not part of your social circle so there's less risk of messy complications."

Presented so logically, it almost made sense. "I hadn't thought about it that way," Jess admitted.

"That's why you have me," Madi replied smugly. "To point out the obvious. By the way, is Tom going to be home tonight? Or do I need to come rescue you from an evening of solo Netflix?"

"He'll be home, but he's leaving for San Diego again on Wednesday."

"What? Already? He just got back!"

"I know," Jess sighed. "Same client, same crisis. He'll be gone Wednesday through Friday again."

"That sucks," Madi said sympathetically.

Jess heard the front door open. "He's home," she said. "I should go."

"Let me know how it goes," Madi insisted. "Every. Single. Detail. But go tend to your man. Call me tomorrow?"

"Will do. Love you."

"Love you more. Bye, babe."

Jess ended the call as Tom appeared on top of the steps looking exhausted. His tie was loosened, his normally perfectly styled hair slightly tussled, as if he'd been running his fingers through it in frustration all day.

"Hey," she said, rising to greet him. "Rough day?"

"The roughest," he confirmed, dropping his briefcase. "Davis is on the warpath about timelines. I spent most of the day on damage control."

Jess pressed a gentle kiss to his lips and he returned it automatically. “Come on,” she said, taking his hand. “I’ve got dinner ready to heat up.”

Tom followed her to the kitchen, where his eyes immediately moved to the arrangement of fresh flowers sitting in the center of their dining table. His brow furrowed.

“Where’d those come from?” he asked, nodding toward the arrangement.

Jess glanced at the flowers as she pulled a container of pasta from the refrigerator. “Margaret sent them. They were on my desk this morning.”

Tom’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Margaret? Ice Queen of Austin Design Group? That Margaret?”

“Yes, that Margaret,” Jess confirmed with a smile. “Apparently, I made quite the impression at the party.”

“Impressive,” Tom said, genuinely amazed. “In the years I’ve known you to work for her, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of her sending flowers.”

“I know,” Jess agreed, transferring pasta from the container to a plate. “It caught me off guard too. Annie actually came over to ask who my secret admirer was.”

Tom approached the arrangement, bending to examine it more closely. “Must have been some presentation,” he commented, touching one of the petals lightly.

“It was,” Jess confirmed, sliding the plate into the microwave.

Tom leaned against the counter while Jess moved around the kitchen. His eyes drifted to the nearly completed backsplash, the stone gleaming under the kitchen lights.

“Backsplash looks amazing,” he commented, gesturing toward the installation. “Bob does good work.”

“He does,” Jess agreed. “He’s coming back tomorrow to apply the sealer, remember?”

“Right,” Tom nodded, his tone slightly distant.

She retrieved his dinner from the microwave and set it on the table with a fork.

“Wine?” she offered, already reaching for a glass.

“God, yes,” he replied, settling at the dinner table and digging into the pasta. “This day deserves alcohol.”

As she poured the wine, Jess studied his profile. There was tension in his shoulders and jaw that went beyond normal work stress.

"You mentioned something about Webb and Chen?" Tom asked between bites. "New projects?"

"Yeah," Jess leaned against the counter, swirling her wine. "Both want me to lead design teams for their upcoming projects. Savannah for Webb, Houston for Chen."

"That's incredible, Jess," Tom said, genuine pride breaking through his exhaustion. "Though not surprising."

"Margaret thinks I can handle both at the same time," Jess continued. "It would be a lot of work, but the opportunity is career defining"

"Of course you can handle both. You're brilliant at what you do."

His immediate faith in her abilities warmed something inside her. This was the Tom she'd fallen in love with, the man who had always seen her capabilities, who had encouraged her to push beyond her comfort zone professionally.

Jess took a deep breath, deciding to dive into the more complicated aspect. "Webb wants to discuss the Savannah project over dinner this Thursday," she said, keeping her tone casual while watching for Tom's reaction.

Tom's fork paused halfway to his mouth, his eyes finding hers. "Dinner? Just the two of you?"

"That's what his email implied," Jess confirmed, taking a sip of her wine.

"How do you feel about that? After what you overheard at the party."

Jess sighed, setting her glass down. "I don't know. But the email was completely professional."

"What exactly did his email say?"

"Just that he wants to discuss the Savannah project in person over dinner Thursday." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "It was very professional language. His assistant will coordinate details tomorrow if I accept."

"You haven't accepted yet?" Tom raised an eyebrow.

Jess bit her lip. "No. I know I should." She hesitated. "But after overhearing him at the party, a small part of me wants to say no. Just find some excuse."

Tom took a long sip of wine, his expression thoughtful. "Jess, I get your hesitation after what you heard him say..." He paused, seeming to choose his words carefully. "But looking at it strictly professionally, this project could be huge for you."

"I know," Jess sighed. "That's what makes this so complicated. If I turn it down, I'm potentially damaging my career over some comments he never intended me to hear. If I go..." She trailed off.

"You're potentially putting yourself in an uncomfortable situation with someone who's already shown his true colors," Tom finished for her.

Jess nodded, relieved he understood her predicament. "Exactly."

Tom cleared his throat. "What if you suggested a different arrangement? Lunch instead of dinner? Or bring someone else from the office?"

"I could," Jess considered. "But I doubt he'd take it well. Men like Webb expect things to happen on their terms."

Tom took another bite of pasta, chewing thoughtfully. "If you do decide to go, what would make you feel comfortable?"

The question surprised her. She'd expected him to either discourage her from going entirely or, given his newly revealed fantasies, to show more obvious excitement. This measured, thoughtful approach was unexpected.

"I'd keep it professional," Jess said firmly. "Meet at the restaurant, discuss the project, and leave. No drinks at the hotel bar afterward, no matter how much he might push for it."

Tom nodded, his expression unreadable. "That sounds reasonable."

Jess studied him, trying to gauge his true feelings. "I'd make it clear I'm happily married. Keep my wedding ring visible the entire time."

"Would that stop him?" Tom asked.

"Men like Webb?" Jess laughed dryly. "No. In my experience, wedding rings just make them more determined."

Tom set down his fork and reached for his wine, taking another long sip as if to steady himself. "So you think he's going to pursue you regardless."

"I think he'll try," Jess acknowledged, meeting Tom's gaze directly. "But that doesn't mean he'll succeed. I can handle Chris Webb."

"I know you can," Tom said.

"Here's a better question," Jess said, deciding to address the elephant in the room. "How do you feel about me having dinner with a man who's made it clear he wants to sleep with me?"

Tom met her gaze directly. “Honestly? I’m... concerned for your comfort. I hate the idea of anyone disrespecting you.”

“But?” Jess prompted, sensing the unspoken caveat.

“But,” Tom admitted, “there’s another part of me that finds it kind of... hot. The idea of knowing how badly he wants you.”

Jess felt a flutter in her stomach at his admission. The rawness of his honesty was both unsettling and strangely intimate.

“Can I suggest something?” Jess said, setting her glass down. “Given everything we talked about this weekend... about your fantasies...”

Tom’s eyes snapped to hers. “What about them?”

“Maybe Chris Webb isn’t the best person to start with. I mean, he’s a professional connection. There’s too much at stake.” She leaned forward slightly. “What if we tried something... simpler first? Less complicated.”

“What did you have in mind?” Tom asked, his tone careful but intrigued.

“I don’t know. Maybe a stranger at a bar?” Jess suggested. “Someone with no connection to our professional lives. Just a harmless flirtation to see how it feels. For both of us.”

Tom’s expression shifted from surprise to consideration. “That could be fun,” he admitted. “But I’m leaving for San Diego on Wednesday, remember?”

“We could try when you get back,” Jess offered. “Maybe the weekend?”

“That could work,” Tom nodded.

Jess hesitated, Madi’s words from their phone call echoing in her mind. “What about Bob?”

Tom nearly choked on his wine. “Bob? What about him?”

Jess shrugged, aiming for casual despite the rapid beating of her heart. “He’ll be here tomorrow to finish the backsplash. And you said yourself you think he has a crush on me.”

“Did you...” Tom set his glass down. “Did you tell Madi about our conversation?”

“Only a bit,” Jess replied, feeling a slight flush rise to her cheeks. “Just that you’re turned on by other men finding me attractive.”

Tom nodded slowly, processing this information. “And Madi suggested Bob?”

“She made some interesting points,” Jess said, watching Tom’s reaction closely. “About how he’s not part of our social circle. And he’s already around the house, so it’s a controlled environment.”

“You’re really considering this?” Tom asked.

“I thought it might be easier to start with Bob than a complete stranger,” Jess explained. “But if you have a problem with it-”

“No,” Tom interrupted, surprising himself with how quickly the response came. “I mean, my first thought is no because of the way he looks at you.”

“But that’s part of the fantasy, isn’t it?” Jess asked quietly. “Knowing someone wants what’s yours?”

Tom ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, that’s why another part...” He trailed off.

“Another part?” Jess prompted gently.

“Another part of me… says yes. That I don’t have a problem with it.”

“You don’t?” Jess studied his face, noting the flush spreading across his cheeks. “Because when we were on the phone last week, you seemed pretty uncomfortable with Bob being alone with me.”

Tom shifted in his chair, clearly struggling to articulate his thoughts. “That was different. I wasn’t there, and I was worried about a complete stranger being alone with you.”

“But we’ve gotten to know him better since then,” Jess pointed out. “He’s been in our home, working on our kitchen. We’ve had dinner together. He’s been nothing but respectful the entire time.”

“True,” Tom agreed. “And the idea of you flirting with him...” He cleared his throat. “It’s…”

“It’s what?” Jess pressed, sensing his arousal beneath his discomfort.

Tom met her eyes, a flash of vulnerability in his gaze. “It’s kind of hot,” he admitted.

Jess smiled. “How would I do it?” she asked innocently. “Flirt with him, I mean.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe... wear something that shows you off? Laugh at his jokes?”

“Or maybe,” Jess continued, “I could wait until you’re in San Diego. Give you something to think about while you’re away.”

“Jess…”

"Would it torture you?" she pressed. "Sitting in meetings, imagining Bob watching me while I wear those tight leggings Brandon said would give someone a heart attack?"

"Jesus," Tom groaned.

"Would you want me to tell you about it? Call you afterward?"

Tom swallowed hard. "Of course."

Jess took a deep breath, changing the direction of the conversation while considering her next words carefully. "So, I know we're playing a game, but I have to decide what I'm comfortable with, Tom. This can't just be about turning you on. It has to make sense for me too."

"Of course," Tom said immediately. "Your comfort and safety come first. Always."

"Thanks," Jess said softly.

Tom nodded. "Just know that whatever you do, I support you."

After clearing their plates, they moved to the couch with fresh glasses of wine. The conversation drifted to Tom's upcoming trip, details about the Meridian implementation, plans for Tuesday night before he left.

Jess found herself stealing glances at Tom, wondering how their relationship had arrived at this unexpected juncture. Six years together, and she was only now discovering this hidden desire of his. It made her wonder what other secrets might be buried beneath their comfortable routine.

As they prepared for bed, Jess's mind spun with possibilities. The dinner with Chris Webb was in her thoughts, a professional opportunity laced with potential danger. She knew she should be focused on the career implications, on strategizing how to handle a powerful man with questionable intentions.

Instead, her thoughts circled back to Bob, to the unsettling possibility of deliberately flirting with him. How would she do it? What would she wear? Would she really have the courage to do it?

Later, in bed, with Tom's arms wrapped around her, Jess felt a peculiar mix of emotions. Excitement and apprehension, curiosity and caution.

Jess closed her eyes, her decision developing in the darkness. She would accept Webb's dinner invitation with professional enthusiasm. Her career demanded it. She would handle him professionally, firmly establishing boundaries while securing her place on the Savannah project.

And tomorrow, when Bob came to finish the backsplash, she would begin her experiment, testing the waters of this new reality. Nothing extreme, nothing that would truly compromise their landlord-tenant relationship. Just enough to see how it felt, to discover if the reality matched the fantasy that had ignited unexpected passion between her and Tom.

A realization struck her as she drifted toward sleep. She wasn't just doing this for Tom. She was doing it for herself too, reclaiming a part of her identity she'd packed away when she'd left modeling. That sense of being seen, of commanding attention, of wielding the unique power that came from being the beautiful Jessica Marshall.

Bob Caldwell checked his watch as he walked up to the Marshalls' front door Tuesday morning at 9:57 AM. Perfect timing. Tom would be firmly entrenched in his office miles away, and Jess would be working from her home office. He'd confirmed this pattern over the past week, noting their comings and goings like a hunter studying prey.

He held his toolbox in one hand and a plain brown shopping bag in the other. Inside the innocuous brown bag were three smoke detectors, two regular ones and a special one with a tiny camera built into its housing. The device was a marvel of engineering, nearly undetectable unless you knew what to look for, capable of capturing both video and audio, transmitting directly to his laptop.

This was different from the panty theft. That had been impulsive and animalistic. This was deliberate, calculated, a permanent intrusion into their most private space. If he was caught, there'd be no explaining it away. But the potential reward... Christ, the thought of having unlimited access to Jess's most intimate moments made his cock stir in his pants.

"Keep it together," he muttered to himself as he reached out and pressed the doorbell. The chime echoed inside the house, followed by the faint sound of movement. He composed his features into the mask of humble helpfulness. Just good ol' Bob the handyman, always ready to lend a hand, never wanting anything in return except, perhaps, a smile and a cup of coffee.

Moments later, the door swung open, and there she stood.

Jessica Marshall, fucking hell. She wasn't dressed for the office, but she wasn't exactly dressed for a lazy day at home either. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a casual ponytail, with a few strands artfully escaping. She wore a fitted deep blue V-neck t-shirt that hugged her breasts just right, not overtly sexual but still enough to make a

man notice. Her legs were encased in those black leggings women seemed to live in these days, the material clinging to her ass and thighs like a second skin.

But it wasn't just her appearance that hit him like a sledgehammer. It was her smile. Warm, genuine, lighting up her entire face in a way he hadn't seen directed at him before.

"Bob!" she exclaimed, as if his arrival was the highlight of her morning. "Right on time."

"Always am," he replied with a smile. "Punctuality's the one virtue I've managed to hang onto."

Jess laughed. "Come on in," she invited, holding the door wider. "I was just making coffee. Would you like some?"

"Wouldn't say no," Bob replied, stepping in.

Her enthusiasm caught him off guard. In their previous interactions, she'd always been friendly but a bit reserved, maintaining that careful distance that beautiful women instinctively created around themselves for protection. Today, something felt different. The barrier seemed thinner somehow.

Bob followed her up the stairs, his eyes fixed on the hypnotic sway of her hips. Those leggings were practically pornographic. He wondered if she knew what she was doing, wearing those around him. Probably not. Women like Jess were used to men looking. They became desensitized to it.

"Working from home today?" he asked casually as they reached the top of the stairs.

"Tuesdays and Thursdays," she confirmed, leading him into the kitchen. "The office gets chaotic sometimes. It's easier to focus here."

His nearly completed backsplash transformed the kitchen exactly as he'd promised, the natural stone adding depth and character to the room.

"Backsplash looks even better in the daylight," he commented, setting his toolbox on the counter. "Just needs the sealer to protect it."

"It's gorgeous, Bob," Jess said, genuine appreciation in her voice. She moved closer to examine it, standing beside him. "You were absolutely right about it. I can't believe the difference."

She moved to the coffee maker, reaching up to open a cabinet above it. The motion caused her shirt to ride up slightly, revealing a strip of tanned skin at her lower back. Bob drank in the sight, imagining running his tongue along that exposed flesh.

“How do you take your coffee?” she asked, glancing back at him over her shoulder, highlighting that body, that perfect ass.

“Black’s fine,” he replied.

“A man of simple tastes,” she observed with a small smile. “I should have guessed.”

“Nothing wrong with appreciating the basics,” he replied, watching as she poured two mugs. “But I know quality when I see it.”

Jess handed him a steaming mug, their fingers brushing briefly during the exchange. The simple contact sent electricity up his arm. God, he was behaving like a teenager, getting worked up over the slightest touch.

“Thank you,” he said, taking a careful sip. It was too fancy for his taste, some gourmet shit Tom probably insisted on.

Jess leaned against the counter opposite him, cradling her own mug. “So, backsplash today. How long will the process take?”

“Not long,” Bob assured her. “Hour, maybe less. It’s simple work.”

“And then we’re officially done with the kitchen reno?”

“This phase, anyway,” Bob replied with a smile. “But there’s always more that can be done. Cabinet hardware, under cabinet lighting, maybe some floating shelves on that wall.” He gestured toward an empty section. “A kitchen’s never really finished, just paused.”

Jess laughed. “You sound just like me with my design projects. There’s always one more thing that could be perfect.”

“Exactly,” Bob agreed. “The curse of people who care about their work.”

She seemed to consider him for a moment, her head tilted slightly. “Speaking of which, I got some exciting news yesterday. I made some connections at last week’s party, and they want me to be part of their design teams for upcoming projects.”

“That’s fantastic,” Bob said with genuine enthusiasm. “Not surprised, though. Talent always gets recognized eventually.”

“Thank you,” she replied, her smile widening. “One project’s in Houston, the other’s in Savannah. It’ll mean some travel, but the opportunity’s too good to pass up.”

“Savannah’s beautiful,” Bob commented. “All that history, the architecture... perfect setting for someone with your eye.”

Jess looked pleased by his compliment. “The project’s a boutique hotel in the historic district. Converting an 1850s mansion. I’m really excited about it.”

"You should be," Bob replied. "But with you traveling for work and Tom gone on business, might not see much of each other."

Something flickered across her face, quickly masked.

"We'll figure it out," she said, her tone light. "But it is ironic that just as Tom's travel increases, mine will too."

"Marriage is about finding your rhythm," Bob offered, slipping into his wise old man persona. "The coming together and moving apart. Like a dance."

"Poetic," Jess remarked with a small smile. "You're full of surprises, Bob."

"Been around long enough to learn a few things," he replied modestly. "Two marriages teach you what works and what doesn't."

Jess sipped her coffee. There was curiosity in her eyes, something searching that hadn't been there before.

"What would you say is the most important thing you've learned?" she asked. "About relationships, I mean."

The question seemed genuine, not just polite conversation. Bob allowed himself a moment to consider his response, sensing an opportunity to deepen the connection between them.

"Communication," he said finally. "Not just talking, but really hearing each other. Being present." He set his mug down, leaning forward slightly. "That was my biggest mistake both times, being physically present but mentally elsewhere. By the time I figured that out, the damage was done."

Jess nodded, her expression thoughtful. "That makes sense. It's easy to take each other for granted, to forget why you fell in love in the first place."

"Exactly," Bob agreed. "And then one day, you wake up next to a stranger."

Neither spoke for several seconds, the casual conversation heavier than warranted.

"Well," Jess said, straightening up. "I should let you get to work."

"Right," Bob nodded, draining the last of his coffee. "Oh, nearly forgot to mention, brought something else that might interest you."

Jess raised an eyebrow, curiosity evident in her expression. "What's that?"

Bob reached into the bag and pulled out one of the smoke detectors. "Was cleaning out some inventory and found these. Brand new. Noticed your smoke detectors are older models."

Jess glanced up at the ceiling where the existing detector was mounted, its once white plastic now yellowed with age. “They came with the house,” she acknowledged. “We’ve never replaced them.”

“Most people don’t until they fail,” Bob said with a nod. “These new ones have ten-year batteries. Also detect carbon monoxide, which your old ones don’t. Real peace of mind.”

It was a practiced speech, one he’d given countless times to justify upgrades on renovation projects. The difference was, this time, he actually had a personal stake in convincing her.

“That makes sense,” Jess said, eyeing the device in his hand. She bit her lower lip thoughtfully, drawing his attention to her mouth. “How much do we owe you for them?”

Bob waved his hand dismissively. “Nothing. Like I said, they were just sitting in my inventory. Can’t even remember what job they were originally for. I can install them for you after I finish the backsplash. Might take half an hour tops.”

Jess seemed to hesitate, though he couldn’t tell whether it was genuine or just politeness. She took a step toward him, closing some of the distance between them.

“You’ve already done so much,” she protested, though her tone lacked conviction. “We should at least pay for the detectors.”

“Absolutely not,” Bob insisted. “Consider it my contribution to your safety. Can’t have anything happening to my favorite landlords, can I?” He held her gaze, letting a hint of genuine affection show.

“Well, if you’re sure,” she relented, looking up at him. “That’s really thoughtful of you, Bob. Thank you.”

“Happy to help,” he replied with a modest smile. “Now, let me get started on that backsplash. Sealer needs time to dry.”

As Bob worked on the backsplash, applying the sealer, Jess settled at the dining table with her laptop. It all felt oddly intimate. Him working in her kitchen, her at her computer, like they shared this space regularly. Like he belonged here.

The process of sealing the backsplash was straightforward, allowing his mind to wander. He pictured the smoke detector with its hidden camera, imagined the perfect angle that would capture both the bed and the closet entrance. Would he see her changing? Would he catch her in intimate moments with Tom? Or would he perhaps witness her alone, pleasuring herself when Tom was away?

An hour later, Bob wiped down the backsplash one final time, stepping back to admire his work. The sealer had brought out the depth of the stone, protecting it while enhancing its natural beauty. He had to admit, it looked damn good.

"All set," he announced, turning to find Jess already watching him, having apparently abandoned her work at the laptop. "What do you think?"

She moved closer, her eyes widening as she took in the finished result. "It's beautiful," she breathed. "Even better than I imagined."

Her genuine appreciation pleased him more than he would have expected. There was something gratifying about impressing a woman with good taste, especially one whose opinion he'd come to value.

"It'll protect the stone for years," he explained. "Just wipe it down with mild soap and water for cleaning. Nothing abrasive."

"Got it," Jess nodded, turning to face him. "Thank you, Bob. For suggesting this, for the discount... for everything. You've really transformed our kitchen."

There was something in her eyes, a warmth that hadn't been there in their previous interactions. She stood close enough that he could smell her perfume, feel the slight heat radiating from her body.

"Happy to do it," he replied. "Like I said, I enjoy the work. Keep my hands busy."

Her eyes flickered down to his hands briefly before returning to his face. "They're clearly very skilled," she commented.

Bob felt his heart rate quicken. Was he imagining the undercurrent in her words? The slight emphasis on "skilled" that transformed an innocent observation into something more suggestive?

"Just need to wash up before I install those smoke detectors," he said, moving toward the sink.

As Bob washed his hands, scrubbing at the stubborn residue beneath his fingernails, he felt the familiar tightening in his groin that had plagued him all morning. Being in Jess's space, catching the occasional whiff of her perfume, watching her lean over her laptop, it had kept him in a state of semi-arousal.

He dried his hands on a towel, then turned slightly away from Jess, reaching down to adjust himself in his jeans. His cock had settled at an awkward angle, pressing against his zipper. With what he thought was a discreet movement, he repositioned himself, easing the discomfort.

When he looked up, Jess's eyes met his directly. She'd been watching him. In that frozen moment, there was no mistaking what she'd seen.

Jess didn't look away as he might have expected. Instead, something shifted in her gaze, a flash of curiosity perhaps. Then she blinked, and it was gone, replaced by her usual polite expression.

"Everything okay?" she asked, her tone casual.

"Yeah," Bob replied, clearing his throat. "Just been on my feet too long. Gets uncomfortable."

Jess smiled. "I can imagine."

Bob stood motionless for a heartbeat too long, processing what had just happened. She'd seen him adjusting his erection, and instead of embarrassment or disgust, there had been... interest? No, he was projecting again. Reading into normal human reactions.

He cleared his throat. "Let's install these smoke detectors."

"Of course," Jess agreed. "Where do they need to go?"

"One here in the kitchen," Bob explained, retrieving the devices from their bag. "One in the hallway outside the bedrooms, and one in the master bedroom."

"Makes sense," Jess nodded. She hesitated, then added with a small smile, "Need me to hold the ladder for you?"

The image of her standing below him, looking up, perhaps admiring the work of his hands again... Bob forced the thought away.

"Appreciate the offer, but I'm steady on my feet," he replied with a wink.

"I'm sure you are," she replied. "I'll be at my laptop if you need anything."

Bob started with the kitchen. The process was quick and straightforward. Remove the old unit, disconnect the wiring, connect the new one, mount it to the bracket. Years of experience made the task almost automatic, allowing him to complete it in under ten minutes.

"One down, two to go," he announced, moving the ladder to the hallway. The second installation went equally smoothly. Another regular unit, another quick installation.

Finally, it was time for the bedroom installation, the one that mattered.

"Just the bedroom left," he announced, gathering his tools. "Then I'll be out of your hair."

"No rush," Jess replied, standing up. "It's nice having company while I work."

Bob moved toward the master bedroom, ladder balanced on one shoulder, toolbox and smoke detector in his opposite hand. His heart rate quickened as he approached the threshold that separated public from private, crossing into the sanctuary where Tom and Jess spent their most intimate moments. There was something almost sacred about a couple's bedroom, which made violating it all the more thrilling.

"Is it alright if I go in?" he called out, feigning politeness though he'd already begun entering.

Jess appeared in the hallway behind him. "Of course. Let me just move a few things."

She brushed past him, their shoulders touching briefly. Bob watched as she straightened the already made bed, adjusted a decorative pillow, smoothed out an invisible wrinkle in the duvet. It was the instinctive reaction of a woman who hadn't planned on inviting a man into her bedroom.

Her presence complicated things. He'd hoped she'd stay absorbed in her work while he installed the detector, giving him the privacy needed to position the camera perfectly. Now he'd need to be even more careful with her eyes potentially tracking his every move.

"I'll just swap this one out," he said, pointing toward the existing smoke detector.

"Whatever you think is best," Jess replied. She moved to perch on the edge of the bed, crossing her legs in a way that drew his eyes naturally to her legs. "You're the expert."

Bob positioned the ladder beneath the existing detector and climbed up. From this vantage point, he had an excellent view of the room and of Jess, who sat watching him, her posture relaxed yet somehow attentive. The angle gave him a direct line of sight down her V-neck shirt. He could see the curves of her breasts, the lace edge of a light blue bra. He forced himself to look away, focusing on the task at hand.

"These old models," he commented, unscrewing the detector from its mount, "usually just twist off. But sometimes the bracket gets stuck."

As he disconnected the old wiring, Bob's mind raced through competing considerations. The camera had limitations, fixed lens with no remote adjustment capabilities, inevitable blind spots directly beneath and behind the unit itself. Ideally, he'd position it to capture the entire bed where they'd sleep and fuck.

"How often should they be replaced?" Jess asked, still watching from below.

“Manufacturers say every ten years,” Bob replied, “but most people forget. Truth is, they should be tested monthly and replaced on schedule.” He disconnected the old detector’s wires. “Not many people are that diligent, though.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever tested ours,” Jess admitted. “Probably not the safest approach.”

“We all take risks without realizing it,” Bob said, depositing the old unit in his toolbox and retrieving the special smoke detector. The weight difference was noticeable. The camera added significant heft, but not so extreme that Jess would notice if she held it.

His pulse quickened as he carefully positioned the new detector. This was the moment of truth. The camera lens was tiny, concealed within what appeared to be a standard feature of the smoke detector’s design. It needed to be properly aligned to capture both the bed and the closet entrance. The trouble was, he couldn’t check the feed in real-time. His laptop was in his apartment downstairs, and the camera would only activate once it was powered up and connected to the home’s electrical system.

“Everything okay up there?” Jess asked, noticing his hesitation.

“Just making sure I have the wiring right,” Bob replied smoothly. “Different models have different connections.”

He mentally mapped out the camera’s field of view, estimating its coverage. A bit more to the right would capture the closet better, but might miss the far side of the bed where Jess would sleep. A bit more to the left would provide excellent bed coverage but might cut off part of the closet entrance.

Greed won out. He positioned the camera to include both areas, knowing the compromise might cost him optimal coverage of either. Better to capture some of everything than all of one thing, he reasoned.

“Let me test it,” he said, pressing the test button. The loud beep confirmed that the alarm function worked properly. The tiny red indicator light blinked inside the housing, invisible to Jess but a confirmation to Bob that the eye was now open, watching.

“All set,” Bob announced, climbing down the ladder. “Three new detectors, all hardwired with backup batteries. You’re protected for the next decade.”

“Thank you, Bob,” Jess said. She had no idea what he’d just done, no concept of the invasion he’d orchestrated.

Bob was already imagining the footage he’d soon be watching. He itched with anticipation to return to his apartment and check the feed, to see exactly what his electronic eye had captured.

“Happy to help,” he replied, folding the ladder. “Safety’s important.”

As they walked back toward the kitchen, Bob felt a sense of triumph. Phase one of his plan was now complete. The camera was in place, and tonight, when Tom and Jess went to bed, he would have front row seats to their most intimate moments.

In the kitchen, Bob inspected the backsplash, running his fingers lightly over the sealed stone. “Looking good,” he confirmed. “Give it twenty-four hours before getting it wet, just to be safe.”

“I’ll leave a note for Tom,” Jess said, making a mental note. “He sometimes splashes water everywhere when he does dishes.”

“Men,” Bob said with a good-natured shrug. “We’re not exactly known for our attention to detail.”

“Some men are,” Jess corrected, gesturing to the backsplash. “Your work shows incredible attention to detail.”

“Well, that’s different,” Bob replied. “That’s craftsmanship. Been doing it so long it’s second nature.”

“Still,” Jess insisted, “it’s impressive. Most people don’t care that much about doing things right.” She moved a step closer. “I’ve noticed that about you, you know. You take pride in everything you do, even the small things.”

The compliment warmed him, partly because it felt genuine and partly because it created another thread of connection between them. She was seeing him, not just as a tenant or a handyman, but as someone with skill, with value.

“I appreciate that,” he said honestly.

Jess glanced at her watch. “I should probably get back to work soon. My video call’s in twenty minutes.”

“I’ll get out of your hair,” Bob said, gathering his tools. “Just need to pack up.”

He collected his equipment, wiping down the counters one last time, returning the kitchen to pristine condition. His mind, however, was already downstairs, already imagining what the camera feed might show, already contemplating the hours he’d spend watching Jess in her most private moments.

As he packed the last of his tools, Jess leaned against the counter, watching him. Something in her posture had changed since their last interaction. She seemed very comfortable in his presence now, more relaxed.

“I really can’t thank you enough,” she said. “For everything you’ve done around here. The faucets, the backsplash, and now the smoke detectors. You’ve made such a difference.”

“Happy to help,” Bob replied. “Like I said, keeps my hands busy.”

“Still,” Jess persisted, “it means a lot to us. To me.”

The way she emphasized that last part, “to me”, sent a surge of satisfaction through Bob’s body. He’d made an impression. He’d earned her gratitude, maybe even her admiration. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

“That’s all I need to hear,” he said, closing his toolbox. “Knowing my work’s appreciated makes it worthwhile.”

They made their way toward the stairs, Bob carrying his toolbox and ladder. There was something different in the air between them, a shift in the dynamic that he couldn’t quite name but could definitely feel. The professional wall had begun to crumble, revealing glimpses of something more personal beneath.

At the bottom of the stairs, Bob set down his tools, preparing to say goodbye. He expected the usual polite farewell, a smile, a thank you, perhaps a wave. What he didn’t expect was for Jess to step forward, closing the distance between them.

“Seriously, thank you,” she said, her voice softer now. And then, before he could respond, she leaned in and wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

Bob froze for a split second, caught completely off guard. Her body pressed against his, her warmth seeping through the thin fabric of her shirt. She was softer than he’d imagined, yet somehow more solid too, not the fragile porcelain doll her appearance suggested, but a woman of substance and strength.

His arms closed around her automatically, returning the embrace. The contact sent blood rushing to his groin, his cock hardening despite his attempts to control it. Bob found himself pulling her closer, his erection pressing against her hip through his work jeans.

He could smell her shampoo, feel her waist beneath his palm, the gentle curve where it flared into her hips. The hug lasted only seconds, but he felt her body tense slightly at the unmistakable pressure against her. Any longer would have crossed an unspoken boundary, but in those seconds, something fundamental shifted.

She pulled back, a hint of color in her cheeks. Something flickered across her face. Surprise? Discomfort? He couldn’t tell.

“Thanks again,” she said, taking a small step backward. “I should get ready for my call.”

“Of course,” Bob managed, his voice rougher than intended. “I’ll see you around.”

As he gathered his tools and headed toward the door that connected to the laundry room, he could feel her eyes on his back.

In the laundry room, Bob paused, setting down his toolbox and ladder. His heart hammered in his chest, not from the physical exertion but from the unexpected intimacy of that hug and his body’s response to it. He hadn’t anticipated it, hadn’t planned for it. She had to have felt him against her, his hardness unmistakable through the denim.

That wasn’t like Jess, or at least, not like the Jess he’d observed so far. She had always maintained a careful physical distance, had always kept their interactions firmly in the professional realm. This was different. This was personal. This was a choice she’d made, a boundary she’d willingly crossed.

Why? What had changed?

And more importantly, how would she respond to discovering his desire so directly, so physically? Would she retreat, create distance between them? Or was that slight widening of her eyes, that faint flush to her cheeks, a sign of something else?

Bob moved through the door that led to his apartment, his mind racing with possibilities. Had she sensed his desire somehow? Was she responding to it unconsciously? Or was there something more deliberate at play?

No, that was wishful thinking. She was just being friendly, grateful for his help. The hug meant nothing beyond a simple expression of appreciation. He was reading too much into it, allowing his fantasies to cloud his judgment.

Bob made a beeline for his desk. “Come on, come on,” he muttered, jabbing at his laptop’s power button.

The machine whirred to life with slowly. His cock had been half hard since he’d installed the camera, the anticipation building with every passing moment.

Finally, the screen flickered to life. Bob launched the software he’d installed earlier that morning. A loading bar appeared, counting up the percentage in tiny digital increments that made Bob want to put his fist through the screen.

“Fucking load already,” he growled.

When the interface finally appeared, Bob quickly navigated to the camera feed. His heart hammered against his ribs as the first grainy images materialized on screen.

"Fuck!"

The expletive exploded from his lips as he leaned forward, squinting at what he was seeing. The camera's view wasn't what he'd envisioned at all. It zoomed in more than he'd expected, the angle all wrong. The bottom corner of the bed filled one side of the screen while the other side showed an angled view of the floor and part of the entrance to their walk-in closet.

"No, no, no," Bob muttered, frantically adjusting settings, trying to manipulate the angle remotely. But the camera was fixed. What he saw was what he'd get.

"Fucking amateur hour," he berated himself. "Should've just focused on the goddamn bed."

In his greed, Bob had tried to capture too much. He'd wanted to include the walk-in closet, hoping to catch Jessica in various states of undress. But in doing so, he'd sacrificed the main event, the bed.

"Stupid, stupid, STUPID!"

Each repetition was punctuated by a slap to his own forehead. Decades of experience had taught him the cardinal rule: keep it simple. Focus on what matters. And he'd ignored that wisdom in favor of fantasies about catching glimpses of Jessica sliding those leggings down those endless legs.

Now he had the worst of both worlds. The closet view was partial at best. He could see the entrance but not the interior where she would actually change. And the bed view was limited to their feet.

"Goddamn it," Bob muttered, leaning back in his chair and running both hands over his scalp.

Bob contemplated his options. He could try again, of course. Manufacture some reason to replace the detector he'd just installed. Claim a defect, a recall, anything to get back in there and adjust the angle. But that would raise suspicion.

No, he was stuck with this shitty angle, at least for now. He'd have to make do with feet and ankles, with the sounds he could pick up, with his imagination filling in the blanks. It was better than nothing, but far from the all access pass he'd envisioned.

Bob's eyes darted to the clock in the corner of his laptop screen. 11:45 AM. Jessica would be working upstairs for hours yet. Tom wouldn't be home until evening. The bedroom would remain empty, the feed showing nothing but static furniture and shifting sunlight patterns across the carpet.

His initial excitement morphed into frustration. He'd been so close. So fucking close to having everything he wanted.

"Greedy motherfucker," he muttered to himself.

The waiting was its own special torture, anticipation mixed with bitter disappointment. But Bob would wait. He had nothing but time. And tonight, when Tom and Jessica finally entered that bedroom, unaware of the eyes watching them from above, he would take what little he could get and force himself to be satisfied. For now.

Tom Marshall hit send on his final email of the day, satisfaction coursing through him as he closed another loop in the Meridian implementation. His office had fallen quiet around him, colleagues trickling out one by one until only the most dedicated workaholics remained.

His Apple Watch showed 5:47 PM. It was early by his recent standards. He'd planned to push through until at least seven, trying to tie up loose ends before tomorrow's San Diego trip but Davis had stopped by his desk with different instructions.

"Marshall," Davis had said, with a rare display of humanity. "Get the hell out of here. You're going to spend the next three days up to your neck in Meridian's bullshit. Go home. See that beautiful wife of yours. That's an order."

Tom hadn't needed to be told twice. He texted Jess, powered down his machine, swiped his notebooks into his briefcase, and grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. As he walked through the office's main corridor, he felt anticipation and anxiety settling. Three days away from home. Three days away from Jess. It shouldn't feel different from last week's trip, yet it did.

In the elevator, Tom loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar, shedding the corporate skin he wore all day. Despite his fatigue, the thought of Jess waiting for him at home sent a current of excitement through his body.

The parking garage was nearly empty, his Lexus one of the few remaining vehicles. Inside the car, he sat motionless for a moment, hands resting on the steering wheel as the air conditioning fought against Austin's heat. He'd survived another day of pretending to be normal, of attending meetings and answering emails as if his entire understanding of his own sexuality hadn't fundamentally shifted over the weekend.

His phone buzzed with a text.

Jess: Dinner's almost ready. Drive safe.

Tom smiled, started the engine, and backed out of the parking spot.

As brake lights flashed ahead and his car slowed to a crawl, his mind wandered back to their conversation from the night before, to Jess's suggestion about flirting with Bob. The image sent a peculiar thrill through him, a confusing mixture of arousal and discomfort that he still couldn't fully reconcile.

Bob wasn't exactly what Tom had envisioned when he first admitted his fantasies. In the abstract scenarios that had played out in his mind, the men were always more like Brandon. Confident, attractive, age appropriate.

Yet Tom couldn't deny the surge of excitement he'd felt when Jess had suggested it. Something about the reality of it, the tangibility of someone who was already in their lives made the fantasy more potent. Not to mention that huge cock of his.

Tom had always considered himself a fairly conventional guy. He'd dated regularly in college, had a few serious relationships, but nothing particularly wild or experimental. Then he'd met Jess, and everything had clicked into place. He knew immediately that she was the one. Beautiful, smart, ambitious, and somehow, miraculously, interested in him. They'd built a life together, a partnership based on mutual respect, shared goals, and genuine love.

And now, six years into their relationship, he was fantasizing about his wife with other men. Not just fantasizing, actively encouraging her to explore the boundaries of flirtation, to play with fire while he watched from a safe distance. What did that say about him?

A car horn jolted Tom from his thoughts. He'd been sitting at a green light, lost in his mental wanderings. He raised a hand in apology to the driver behind him and pushed down on the pedal.

As he pulled into their driveway, Tom noticed their house looked different somehow. Warmer. More inviting. The lights were on inside, casting a golden glow through the windows.

His key turned in the lock, and immediately the scent of cooking food greeted him. Something with garlic and herbs, rich and savory. His stomach growled in anticipation.

"Jess?" he called out.

"Upstairs!"

Tom climbed the stairs, his body already shedding the day's tension with each step closer to her. In the kitchen, he found Jess stirring something on the stove. She wore jeans and a light gray sweater that looked effortlessly casual.

She glanced over her shoulder at his approach, a smile lighting her features. “That was fast,” she observed, sounding pleased.

“Traffic was light,” Tom replied, stepping behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. He pressed his lips to the side of her neck. “Plus, Davis said to spend time with my beautiful wife before disappearing to San Diego again.”

“That’s nice of him,” Jess replied, leaning back against his chest. “Dinner’s almost ready. I figured we’d have an actual meal together tonight since for the next three days you’ll be eating hotel room service and fast food.”

“What are we having?” Tom asked, peering over her shoulder at the pot she was stirring. “Smells amazing.”

“Pasta with my grandma’s bolognese,” Jess replied. “The sauce has been simmering for hours.”

Tom’s stomach growled audibly, making Jess laugh. “I take it you approve?”

“God, yes,” he murmured, pressing another kiss to her neck. “I haven’t eaten since noon.”

Jess reached for the wooden spoon to taste the sauce, offering some to Tom. “What do you think? Need more seasoning?”

Tom tasted, closing his eyes in appreciation. “It’s perfect. Like everything you do.”

Jess rolled her eyes but smiled. “Mr. Marshall. Now make yourself useful and set the table. Dinner in five.”

As Tom moved around the kitchen gathering plates and utensils, his eyes were drawn to the backsplash.

“Backsplash looks amazing,” he commented. “Bob did a great job.”

“He did,” Jess agreed, ladling sauce over the pasta and mixing it together. “He finished it this morning. Said to wait twenty-four hours before getting it wet, so be careful when you’re loading the dishwasher.”

“You know it’s not my strong suit,” Tom joked.

Jess smiled, bringing the pasta to the table. “Speaking of Bob,” she said casually as she set the bowl down, “he installed new smoke detectors today too.”

Tom’s eyebrows rose. “New smoke detectors? Was that part of our agreement?”

“He brought them over. Said ours were outdated,” Jess explained, sliding into her seat. “Said they have ten-year batteries and detect carbon monoxide. He wouldn’t accept payment.”

“Generous of him,” Tom commented. He remembered their conversation from the previous night, how Jess had suggested flirting with Bob as a way to test the waters of his fantasy. A small thrill ran through him. “So how was he today? Still the perfect gentleman?”

Jess’s eyes met his, a hint of mischief lurking in their depths. “Why do you ask?” she responded, twirling pasta around her fork.

“Just curious,” Tom said, trying to maintain a casual tone despite the acceleration of his pulse. “Given our conversation last night.”

Jess took a bite, chewing thoughtfully. “He was… attentive.”

Tom’s fork paused halfway to his mouth. “Attentive how?”

“Just small things,” Jess said with a slight shrug. “The way he watched me. The way he listened when I talked.”

Tom felt a strange flutter in his stomach. “And did you... respond to his attention?”

Jess took a sip of her wine. “I might have been a little friendlier than usual.”

“Define ‘friendlier,’” Tom pressed, his dinner temporarily forgotten.

Jess smiled. “I wore that blue V-neck t-shirt. The one that shows just enough cleavage to be interesting but not enough to be too obvious.”

Tom knew the shirt well. The neckline dipped just low enough to offer a tantalizing hint of what lay beneath. “And?”

“And those black leggings you like so much,” Jess continued. “The ones Brandon said would give someone a heart attack.”

Tom pictured it. “Did he notice?”

“Oh, he noticed,” Jess confirmed. “He tried not to stare, but I caught him a few times when he thought I wasn’t looking.”

Tom swallowed. “What else?”

Jess took another bite of pasta, deliberately drawing out the moment, clearly enjoying the effect her words were having. “We talked. More personally than before. He told me about his marriages, why they failed. About the importance of being present, of really seeing your partner.”

“And then?” Tom prompted when she paused.

Jess’s eyes gleamed. “And then, when he was leaving, I hugged him.”

Tom nearly choked on his wine. “You what?”

“I hugged him,” Jess repeated. “Just to say thank you for all his work. It was brief, completely innocent.”

“How did he react?” Tom asked, food now completely forgotten.

“He froze at first,” Jess said, recalling the moment. “Just for a second. Like he couldn’t believe it was happening. Then he hugged me back.”

Tom tried to picture it, Jess stepping into Bob’s space, wrapping her arms around him, Bob’s surprise followed by his arms closing around her.

“Jesus, Jess,” he murmured.

She tilted her head, studying his reaction. “Too much?”

“No,” Tom said. “No, it’s... it’s fine. I just wasn’t expecting you to actually... test the waters”

“Isn’t that what we talked about?”

“It is,” Tom agreed.

Jess reached across the table, covering his hand with hers. “If it bothers you-”

“It doesn’t,” Tom interrupted. “I’m just... processing. It’s different, hearing about it actually happening versus just talking about it as a possibility.”

“Different good? Or different uncomfortable?” Jess asked, her eyes searching his.

Tom considered the question. The image of Jess hugging Bob, their bodies briefly pressed together, had sent a jolt of something through him. Not jealousy, not exactly. More like... excitement. Anticipation.

“Different good,” he admitted. “Definitely... interesting.”

Jess’s expression relaxed. “Interesting enough that you’re not eating the dinner I spent hours preparing?”

Tom laughed. He picked up his fork and took a bite of the now slightly cooled pasta. “It’s so good,” he said truthfully. “Almost as incredible as my wife hugging our tenant.”

Jess rolled her eyes, but her smile widened. “It was just a hug, Tom. I didn’t jump his bones.”

“Yet,” Tom said before he could stop himself.

Jess’s eyebrows shot up. “Yet?” she repeated. “Is that where your mind is going?”

Tom felt his cheeks warm. “No, I didn’t mean... I was joking.”

"Were you, though?" Jess pressed.

Tom took a sip of wine, buying himself time. "I don't know," he said finally, honestly. "I'm still figuring that out myself."

Jess nodded, accepting his answer. "Well, while I'm willing to explore this... whatever this is... with you, I'm not planning to sleep with Bob or anyone else. That's not what this is about for me."

"What is it about for you?" Tom asked, genuinely curious.

"Honestly? It's about that feeling of being seen, of commanding attention. It reminds me of when I was modeling, that rush of knowing someone is looking at you, really looking."

"You like it," Tom observed. "Being desired."

"I do," Jess admitted. "I always have. But somewhere along the line, I started suppressing it. Became so focused on being taken seriously professionally that I buried that part of myself."

"And now?"

Jess shrugged lightly. "And now I'm realizing it doesn't have to be either-or. I can still acknowledge that side of myself."

Tom nodded, a mix of emotions swirling inside him. Relief that she wasn't planning to take things too far mixed with a little disappointment, and excitement at the possibilities that remained open.

"Speaking of being a respected professional," Jess continued, shifting topics, "Richard Harrington called my office today. He wants me to consult on his personal penthouse reno."

"Richard Harrington? The same one from the party? The one who was..."

"The same," Jess confirmed. "Apparently he was very impressed with the Skyline designs."

"So that's all three of them now," he said slowly. "Webb, Chen, and Harrington. All men you overheard objectifying you, all now wanting to work with you."

"Ironic, right? They see me as a "conquest and a talented designer. I'm not sure which matters more to them."

"And how do you feel about it?"

Jess toyed with her wineglass, considering. "Professionally, it's an incredible opportunity. Three high-profile clients who could showcase my work to exactly the

audience I want to reach." She took a sip. "Personally? It's complicated. I hate knowing that they view me as a piece of meat, but I've decided that I'm not willing to sacrifice my career because they're pigs."

Despite the excitement her words triggered, shame quickly followed. Here she was, navigating possible sexual harassment in her professional life, while he was secretly getting off on the idea of these men desiring her.

"It's almost overwhelming," Jess continues. "Between Skyline's completion, Webb's Savannah hotel, Chen's Houston development, and now Harrington's penthouse... I'm going to be so busy."

"You can handle it," Tom said confidently. "You're the most talented designer I know."

"I'm the only designer you know," Jess corrected with a laugh.

"Not true. I've met Sam and Annie."

"Fine, one of three designers you know," Jess conceded. "But I appreciate the vote of confidence."

"Always," Tom replied, meaning it. His admiration for her talent was genuine and longstanding.

"I also confirmed dinner with Webb," Jess mentioned, her tone shifting slightly. "Thursday night."

Tom's fork paused halfway to his mouth. "Oh?"

"At Le Bernardin," she continued.

"Good," Tom nodded. The thought of Chris Webb, a man he knew had spoken crudely about his wife, sharing a meal with Jess while he was away stirred something complex in his chest, a mixture of concern and that same inexplicable excitement.

"I'll tell you all about it," Jess promised. "Every detail."

The way she emphasized "every detail" sent a shiver down Tom's spine. There was subtext there, an acknowledgment of his newfound interest in her interactions with other men.

"I'd appreciate that," he replied.

They finished dinner with lighter conversation, discussing logistics for his trip. It was comfortable, the easy back and forth of a couple who genuinely enjoyed each other's company beyond just physical attraction.

After clearing the table and loading the dishwasher, carefully avoiding splashing the backsplash, they moved to the bedroom. Tom's suitcase lay open at the foot of the bed, already partially packed.

"You started packing for me?" he asked, surveying the neatly folded clothes.

"Just the basics," Jess replied. "Shirts, underwear, socks. Your toiletry bag is in the bathroom, already packed with travel sizes of everything."

Tom wrapped his arms around her from behind, pulling her against his chest. "What would I do without you?"

Jess leaned back into him, her hands covering his where they rested on her stomach. "Probably show up in San Diego with mismatched socks and no deodorant."

"Probably," Tom agreed with a chuckle, nuzzling her neck. "Thank you for taking care of me. I'm going to miss you."

"It's only three days," Jess reminded him

"I know," he acknowledged. "But it feels different this time."

"Because of what we talked about?" Jess asked.

"Partly," Tom admitted.

"Everything feels more... I don't know. Charged? Like we're standing on the edge of something new," said Jess.

"Does that scare you?" Tom asked.

Jess considered the question. "A little," she confessed. "But it's exciting too. Like we're rediscovering each other."

Tom nodded, understanding exactly what she meant.

"On that note," Jess said, turning around, her fingers toying with the buttons of his shirt, "we should finish packing and get to bed early. You have an early flight."

"You're driving me?" Tom asked, slightly surprised. He'd planned to take an Uber rather than inconvenience her.

"Of course I'm driving you," Jess replied. "I want every possible minute with you before you go."

Tom smiled. "Then we better finish packing," he agreed, though his hands remained on her waist, reluctant to break contact.

Jess rose on her tiptoes, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. "Help me with your suits? I never know which one you want to bring."

Tom nodded, finally releasing her to move toward the closet. As he sorted through his work suits, selecting the navy blue and the charcoal gray for the week's meetings, his mind returned to earlier threads of their conversation.

"So," he began casually, "this hug with Bob..."

Jess glanced at him from where she was organizing his dress shirts. "What about it?"

"Was it just a quick thank you hug? Or..." Tom hesitated, not quite sure how to phrase his question.

"Or what?" Jess prompted.

"Or was it something more...?" Try as he might, Tom couldn't keep a note of hopeful interest from creeping into his voice.

Jess's smile was enigmatic. "What do you think?"

"I think," Tom said slowly, "that you're enjoying making me wonder."

"Maybe I am," she admitted. "After all, you're the one who finds this exciting."

"So do you," Tom countered, remembering her earlier words about rediscovering that part of herself. "At least a little."

Jess conceded the point with a slight inclination of her head. "I won't deny there's something... intriguing about it. About being more aware of my effect on other men."

"Like Bob," Tom supplied.

"Like Bob," Jess agreed. "And maybe others."

There were others now. Chris Webb, James Chen, Richard Harrington, three powerful men who had made clear their interest in Jess, professionally if not personally. Then there was Bob, her yoga instructor Derek, and Brandon.

Tom returned to his suits, trying to process her words. "Others? Like who?"

"No one specific," Jess replied, her voice casual as she folded a dress shirt. "Just... the possibility. The awareness."

Tom nodded, moving to arrange his ties in the suitcase. His throat felt unexpectedly dry. "So, about Thursday... what are you planning to wear? For your dinner with Webb?"

Jess glanced up, studying his expression. "I was thinking my navy pantsuit with that cream silk blouse. Professional but still elegant."

"That's a good choice," Tom agreed, picturing the outfit. The tailored pantsuit was one of his favorites, accentuating her long legs while maintaining an appropriate

business appearance. But now, with their new dynamic hovering between them, he found himself considering alternatives.

"What about that burgundy dress?" he suggested, trying to sound casual. "The one with the wrap."

Jess paused in her folding, eyebrows lifting slightly. "That's a bit more... evening than office," she noted. The dress in question had a plunging neckline and the wrap style emphasized her thin waist. It was stunning but decidedly more provocative than her standard business attire.

"True," Tom admitted. "But it's dinner, not a board meeting."

Jess set down the shirt she was holding and turned to face him fully. "Tom, are you suggesting I dress to attract Chris Webb's attention?"

Her directness caught him off guard. "No, I... I don't know what I'm suggesting," he confessed, running a hand through his hair.

"What do you want to happen on Thursday?" she asked softly. "With Chris. Really."

Tom swallowed, finding the question harder to answer than he'd expected. "I want you to be comfortable," he began. "I want you to secure the Savannah project because it's important to your career."

"That's what you want professionally," Jess persisted. "What about... personally? After everything we've discussed."

Tom moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "I think I'd be okay with whatever happens," he said slowly. "As long as you call me afterward and tell me about it. Everything. As soon as you get home."

"Everything?" Jess repeated, a hint of challenge in her voice. She moved closer, positioning herself between his knees. "Like what?"

Tom looked up at her, his hands naturally finding her waist. "Like what you wore. How he looked at you. What you talked about."

"That's very innocent, Tom," Jess said, her head tilting slightly. "Is that really all you want to know?"

Heat crept up his neck. "No."

"Then what?" she pressed, her fingers playing with the hair at the nape of his neck.

"I'd want to know if he flirted with you," Tom admitted. "If he tried to touch you. How it made you feel."

A small smile curved Jess' lips. "And if he did touch me? Maybe his hand on my back as we walked to the table?"

"I'd want to know all of that."

"What if he suggested drinks at the hotel bar afterward?" Jess continued. "What if I said yes?"

Tom's grip tightened on her waist. "Did you already agree to that?"

"No," Jess assured him. "It's hypothetical. What if I had one drink too many and he offered to walk me to my car?"

"I'd want you to be safe," Tom responded automatically.

"That's not what I'm asking," Jess said. "I'm asking if you'd be aroused thinking about it. About him walking me to my car, standing too close in the dark parking lot."

Tom's breathing had quickened, his imagination supplying vivid details to her scenario. "Yes," he admitted. "It would turn me on."

"What if he tried to kiss me?" Jess whispered, her eyes never leaving his. "What would you want me to do?"

"I... don't know."

"Yes, you do," Jess insisted softly. "Tell me, Tom. What would arouse you more? Me rejecting him? Or me letting him?"

The room suddenly felt too warm, too small. "Maybe... letting him. Just a little."

"Just a little," Jess echoed. Her fingertips traced along his jawline. "Like, letting his lips touch mine for just a moment before pulling away? Or something more?"

Tom's cock strained against his slacks, his arousal impossible to hide. "Maybe something more," he admitted.

"How much more, Tom?" Jess pressed. "His hands on my body?"

"Jesus, Jess," Tom growled, pulling her toward him, burying his face against her stomach. "I don't know."

Jess's fingers threaded through his hair, her touch gentle despite her provocative words. "It's okay not to know," she soothed. "We're figuring this out together. But I need to understand where your boundaries are. What's fantasy and what's too far."

Tom lifted his head to look at her. "I trust you," he said. "I trust your judgment. If something happens... just do what feels right in the moment. And then tell me everything."

Jess studied him. “You know I would never actually sleep with Chris,” she said finally. “He’s a client, and from what I overheard at the party, he’s a pig who sees women as “conquests.”

“I know,” Tom nodded.

Jess nodded. “By the way, Bob texted me today after he left,” she revealed. “Said he forgot to mention a few maintenance tips for the backsplash.”

Tom’s eyebrows rose. “Did he now?”

“Mmm,” Jess confirmed. “Very thorough, our tenant. Wanted to make sure we’re properly caring for his handiwork.”

“And?” Tom prompted.

“And he asked if I’d like to see some other stone samples sometime. For future projects,” she added.

Tom’s pulse quickened. “What did you tell him?”

“I said I’d love to,” Jess replied, watching his reaction. “He has some perfect material for bathroom renovations, apparently.”

“Bathroom renovations. Right.”

“He also thanked me for the hug,” Jess continued. “Said it was the highlight of his day.”

“I bet it was,” Tom muttered.

“Are you jealous?” Jess asked, her fingers playing with the collar of his shirt.

“No,” Tom said, then reconsidered. “Maybe a little. But not in a bad way.”

“In what way, then?”

“In a way that makes me want to see what happens when you explore this side of yourself,” Tom replied.

Jess’s smile widened. “I like the sound of that,” she murmured, leaning down to press her lips against his.

What began as a gentle kiss quickly deepened. Tom’s hands slid from her waist to her ass, pulling her firmly to straddle him. Jess’s arms wound around his neck, her body melting into his as their tongues met.

“Too many clothes,” Jess whispered against his mouth.

Tom stood while holding her, then turned so he could lower her onto the bed. He followed her down, his body on top of hers, his weight supported on his forearms as he kissed her deeply.

"You know," Jess whispered between kisses, "I kept thinking about you today. Even while Bob was here."

"Yeah?" Tom asked, his hands moving beneath her sweater to find warm skin.

"Mmmhmm," she confirmed. "I kept wondering what you'd think if you could see me. If you were watching Bob watching me."

"Did he watch you?"

"The whole time," Jess confirmed. "Every chance he got. He tried to be subtle, but I caught him staring at my tits."

Tom growled, his hands working more urgently now to remove her sweater. "Did you do it on purpose? Give him something to look at?"

Jess lifted her arms, allowing him to pull it over her head. "Maybe," she admitted, her eyes holding his. "Maybe I reached up for those coffee mugs and maybe he watched my ass."

"Fuck, Jess," Tom groaned, his hands moving to unbutton her jeans now, tugging them down her legs.

She lay beneath him in a simple blue bra and matching panties, the same ones she'd mentioned Bob getting a glimpse of when she'd worn that blue V-neck. Tom's mind filled with the image of Bob stealing glances down her shirt, seeing this exact sight in the flesh, experiencing just a fraction of the beauty Tom got to witness fully.

"Did he get hard?" Tom asked, surprising himself with the directness of the question. "When he was looking at you?"

Jess's eyes widened slightly, but she didn't shy away from the question. "I think so," she said. "At one point, I caught him adjusting himself."

Tom's cock throbbed at the confession. "Jesus."

"I pretended not to notice," Jess continued. "But we both knew I saw."

Tom's fingers traced the lace edge of her bra. "And how did that make you feel? Knowing you affected him that way?"

"Powerful," Jess admitted softly. "Desired."

Tom bent to press his lips to her collarbone, then lower, tracing a path between her breasts. "Tell me about the hug," he murmured against her skin.

Jess's fingers threaded through his hair. "It was impulsive," she said. "He was leaving, and I just... stepped forward and put my arms around him."

"How did he feel?" Tom asked, reaching behind her to unfasten her bra. The clasp gave way and he slowly drew the straps down her arms, revealing her breasts inch by inch.

"Solid," Jess replied as the bra came loose.

Tom tossed the bra to the floor.

"He was strong," Jess continued. "His body was so different from yours. Broader, harder."

Tom's mouth found her nipple, his tongue circling before sucking gently. Jess arched beneath him, her fingers tightening in his hair.

"God, yes," she breathed, pushing her breast more firmly against his mouth.

"Did you feel his... reaction?" Tom asked, releasing her nipple before moving to the other. His teeth grazed the sensitive flesh, just hard enough to send a shock of pleasure and pain through her.

"Yes," Jess whispered. "Not at first, but when he hugged me back, when he pulled me closer... I felt it against me. He was hard, Tom. Rock hard just from that simple hug."

"Where?" Tom demanded, his hand sliding down her stomach to the waistband of her panties. "Where did you feel him?"

"Against my hip," Jess gasped as Tom's fingers dipped beneath the elastic, teasing but not yet touching where she needed him most. "I could feel how big he was, even through his jeans."

If only she knew.

Tom ground his still-clothed erection against her thigh, the image unbearably arousing. "And then?"

"And then nothing," Jess said. "The hug ended. It couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds. But it felt... significant somehow."

Tom hooked his fingers into the waistband of her panties, sliding them down her legs. "I bet he's thinking about it right now," he said. "Replaying it in his mind, imagining what might have happened if you'd stayed in his arms a while longer."

"Probably," Jess agreed, her hands moving to his belt, unfastening it. "Just like Chris is probably imagining Thursday night, planning how he'll try to seduce me over dinner."

The mention of Chris Webb sent another surge of arousal through Tom. His slacks and boxers quickly joined the growing pile of clothes on the floor.

“Wait,” Tom said, reaching for the nightstand drawer. They’d been sloppy with condoms recently, but it was the responsible thing to do. His fingers fumbled inside, emerging with a foil packet.

Jess nodded, taking the condom from him, tearing the wrapper open with her teeth. Her eyes never left his as she rolled it down his shaft, giving him a few teasing strokes. Her thumb circled the sensitive head through the latex, smearing the precum that had gathered there.

“Do you think he’ll try to touch you?” Tom asked, positioning himself between her thighs, the head of his cock brushing against her entrance.

“I know he will,” Jess replied, reaching between them to guide him. “Men like him always do. The question is where... and how much I’ll let him.”

Tom pushed forward, sliding into her with a groan. Jess’s legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him deeper, her body welcoming him home. They both paused, savoring the sensation of being joined.

“God, you feel amazing,” Tom breathed, his forehead pressed against hers. “So wet, so tight.”

“You make me this way,” Jess whispered as she lifted her hips, encouraging him to move.

Tom began thrusting, establishing a slow, deep rhythm that had Jess gasping with each stroke. Her nails dug into his back, leaving marks in his skin.

“What would you do?” Tom asked. “If he put his hand on your thigh under the table?”

Jess’s eyes held his. “What would you want me to do?” she countered, meeting his thrusts with movements of her own.

“Tell me your instinct,” Tom pressed. “What would Jessica Marshall do if a man like Chris Webb put his hand on her thigh?”

“I’d probably slide my leg away,” Jess admitted. “But if you’re asking what I’d do knowing it turns you on... I might let his hand stay. Just for a moment.”

Tom’s pace increased. “And if he moved it higher?” he asked, his voice strained.

“I’d stop him,” Jess said. “There are limits, Tom. Lines I wouldn’t cross.”

“But you’d let him flirt with you,” Tom suggested. “Let him think he has a chance.”

“If that’s what you want,” Jess replied, her nails digging into his back as her pleasure built. “Is that what you want, Tom? For me to flirt with Chris? To let him believe he might get more?”

“Fuck,” Tom groaned, his rhythm faltering momentarily. “I want... I want you to do whatever feels right to you in the moment. Whatever excites you.”

Jess’s eyes widened slightly at this admission. “And if what excites me is letting him touch me? Letting his hand stay on my thigh?”

The thought sent a jolt of arousal through Tom so intense he had to pause his movements to avoid coming too soon. “Jesus, Jess,” he panted. “Yes. Whatever you want. Whatever makes you feel good.”

Jess smiled, wicked and knowing. “And you want all the details afterward?” she asked. “Every touch? Every look?”

“God, yes,” Tom admitted, resuming his thrusts, deeper now. “Everything.”

“I’ll call you,” Jess promised, her voice breathy with approaching release. “The moment I get home. Tell you everything he said, everything he did, how he looked at me...”

Her words combined with the sensation of being inside her pushed Tom dangerously close to the edge. He slowed his pace, not wanting this to end too quickly.

“Turn over,” he commanded, withdrawing from her body. “I want to see that perfect ass.”

Jess complied eagerly, rolling onto her stomach and then pushing up onto her knees, presenting herself to him. She looked back over her shoulder, her hair tumbling around her face in disheveled perfection.

“Like this?” she asked innocently, arching her back to emphasize her ass.

“Exactly like that,” Tom growled, positioning himself behind her. His hands gripped her hips as he guided himself back to her entrance, sliding in with one firm thrust that had them both moaning.

From this angle, he could go deeper, hitting spots inside her that made her gasp and clutch at the sheets. The sight of his cock disappearing into her body, her perky ass pressed against him, was almost unbearably erotic.

“Fuck, you look so good like this,” he groaned, his hands kneading the flesh of her ass as he established a steady rhythm. “Taking my cock so perfectly.”

Jess pushed back against him, meeting each thrust. “Harder,” she demanded, her voice muffled against the pillow she’d grabbed. “Fuck me harder, Tom.”

He complied, his hips snapping forward with increased force, the sound of skin slapping against skin filling the room. One hand moved from her hip to slide around her body, finding her clit and circling it in time with his thrusts.

"Oh god," Jess moaned, her back arching even more. "Yes, right there. Don't stop."

"When he's sitting across from you at dinner, are you going to be thinking about this? About my cock inside you?"

"Yes," Jess gasped. "God, yes. I'll be thinking about you the whole time."

"And Bob?" Tom pressed, his fingers working her clit more insistently. "Next time he's here, what will you do?"

"What do you want me to do?" Jess challenged, though her voice wavered.

The question was charged with possibility. Tom leaned forward, his chest pressed against her back, his mouth close to her ear.

"I want you to do whatever excites you," he said, his voice low and intense. "Whatever makes your pussy wet thinking about it. Maybe let him see more... maybe let him want more... knowing only you decide how far it goes."

"Oh god," Jess moaned, her inner walls beginning to flutter around his cock.

"Would that turn you on?" Tom asked, straightening up again, resuming his thrusts. "Knowing how much he wants you? How hard he gets just from being near you?"

"Yes," Jess admitted, her voice breaking. "It would. It does."

"Show me how much," Tom urged, his fingers speeding up on her clit. "Come on my cock, Jess."

His words pushed her over the edge. Jess cried out, her body tensing beneath him as her pussy clenched rhythmically around his cock, trying to milk his orgasm from him.

Tom maintained his pace, working her through her climax before pulling out and flipping her onto her back again. He wanted to see her face when he came.

"Not done with you yet," he growled, pushing back inside her.

Jess welcomed him with a smile, her body pliant and responsive despite her recent orgasm. Her hands found his shoulders, pulling him closer as he resumed his thrusts.

"Come for me," she whispered, her eyes locked on his. "Fill that condom up. Show me what I do to you."

Tom's pace became erratic, his control slipping. "Me," he managed between breaths. "No matter what... always come back to me."

“I know,” Jess assured him, her legs wrapping around his waist again. “I’m yours, Tom. Always yours.”

With a final thrust, Tom buried himself deep inside her as his orgasm hit like a freight train. His body shuddered above her, his release seemingly endless as pleasure coursed through every nerve. He collapsed against her as they both struggled to catch their breath.

For moments afterward, they remained joined, savoring the closeness, the intimacy that went beyond the physical act. Eventually, he rolled to the side, bringing Jess with him so they lay face to face.

“That was...” Tom began, breathing heavy, but words failed him.

“Intense,” Jess replied, her face flushed, her eyes soft with post coital bliss.

“Yeah,” he agreed, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “You okay?”

“More than okay,” she assured him, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips. “You?”

Tom took a moment to genuinely consider the question, to examine his feelings beyond the immediate afterglow. “I’m good,” he said finally. “Really good.”

“You know this is just fantasy, right?” Jess asked, her expression growing more serious. “What we talk about in bed... it’s not necessarily what I want in reality.”

“I know,” Tom assured her.

Jess nodded. “I mean, I’m willing to push some boundaries, to test the waters with flirtation. That can be fun and relatively harmless. But anything beyond that...”

“Would change things between us,” Tom finished.

“Yes,” she agreed. “And I like what we have too much to risk it on a fleeting thrill.”

Her words reassured him, settling something that had been quietly unsettled in his chest since their initial conversation about his fantasies. Despite the wild territory they’d been exploring verbally, their commitment to each other remained the foundation.

“We should probably finish packing,” Jess murmured. “Early morning tomorrow.”

Tom nodded, suddenly aware of his state of undress. He stood, heading to the bathroom to clean up. When he returned, Jess had changed into her sleep shirt, a soft, worn cotton thing that reached mid-thigh.

They quickly finished packing, then moved through their nightly routine. As they finally settled beneath the covers, Tom reached for Jess, pulling her close against him.

“Goodnight, Tom,” Jess whispered.

“Goodnight,” he replied softly.

Bob Caldwell sat at his desk naked, dried cum crusted across his thick chest and protruding belly. The bitter scent of his own ejaculate hung in the stale apartment air, mingling with the sweat and stink of frustrated arousal.

“Fuck,” he muttered, rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

The image on screen remained unchanged: the bottom corner of a king-sized bed, lumps visible beneath the covers where Tom and Jess’s feet rested. The rest was darkness, the bedroom light having clicked off twenty minutes ago. He could make out nothing else, just those goddamn feet.

The night had been a masterclass in frustration. Bob had spent hours glued to his laptop, watching the pathetic feed from his hidden camera, hoping for a glimpse of what he so desperately craved. But the angle, that fucking botched angle, had given him almost nothing. He’d seen them moving around the room, packing Tom’s suitcase, entering and exiting the walk-in closet. He’d seen Tom’s arms wrap around Jess from behind, a tender moment that made Bob’s stomach turn.

But when they’d moved to the bed, when the main event began, he’d seen nothing. Their bodies had disappeared from frame, leaving him with only audio. Grunts, moans, the creaking of bedsprings, the slap of skin against skin. Their words had been largely inaudible, just muffled whispers that tortured him with their secrets.

He’d been reduced to the audio equivalent of a man pressing his ear against a thin wall, straining to catch fragments, imagining the rest. It was pathetic. It was infuriating. And still, it had been enough to make him cum harder than he had in years.

Bob reached for the notebook on his desk. He’d started it the day he moved in, documenting everything he learned about the Marshalls. It was a habit from his contracting days, keep detailed records, note patterns, learn preferences. Information was leverage, and Bob never entered a situation without leverage.

He flipped to the latest page and began writing.

*Jess having dinner with a certain Chris Webb dinner Thursday night. Tom seemed to encourage it? Discussion about flirting with CW. Tom excited by this.

He tapped his pen against the page, considering what else to include. No need to waste ink on extensive details. The notebook was for facts, observations, ammunition, not his masturbatory fantasies.

*Tom also aroused by J's interactions with me. She hugged me today (unexpected) and told T about feeling my hard-on. T excited by this. Both discussed "exploring boundaries" and "flirtation." T giving J permission to "do whatever excites" her.

Bob set down his pen and leaned back in his chair. The implications of what he'd overheard were staggering. Tom Marshall, educated, successful, ambitious Tom Marshall, was encouraging his gorgeous wife to flirt with other men, perhaps even more. And not just any men. Him. Bob fucking Caldwell. The universe had just handed him the keys to the kingdom, and he hadn't even had to pick the lock.

He'd suspected something was off with Tom since catching him watching through the window, but this was beyond his wildest expectations. And Jess seemed curious about exploring this side of herself.

The memory of her hug earlier that day sent fresh blood rushing to his cock. The feel of her body against his, soft yet firm, had been electric. And she'd felt his erection. She'd conformed it. There had been that moment of recognition, that slight tension in her body. Yet she hadn't pulled away in disgust. She'd completed the hug naturally, no abrupt ending, no uncomfortable apology.

But more than just Chris Webb and himself, Bob was fascinated by the Marshalls' dynamic. Tom might think he was setting boundaries, encouraging only mild exploration, but Bob recognized the language of escalation. "Do whatever makes you feel good" was a dangerous permission slip to hand someone, especially when that someone was already testing boundaries.

Bob swiped open a new browser tab and typed "Chris Webb developer Austin" into the search bar. Might as well know what kind of competition he was facing.

The search results populated quickly. Chris Webb's LinkedIn profile appeared first, followed by articles in business journals, mentions in real estate publications, and photos from charity galas. Bob clicked through, studying the images that loaded.

Webb was everything Bob wasn't. Tall, late forties, with the kind of teeth only money could buy and the kind of confidence that came from never hearing the word "no." His custom suits probably cost more than Bob's monthly rent. In one photo, he stood with his arm around a thin blonde woman, his wife presumably. In another, he was shaking hands with the mayor, both men beaming for the camera.

"Smug prick," Bob muttered.

But there was no denying Webb had power, influence, and access. The idea of Webb pursuing Jess, of her responding to his attention, sent a jolt of jealousy through Bob's body.

It was different with Tom. Tom was just the husband, the obstacle, the gatekeeper. But Webb? Webb was a direct competitor. Another predator in the same hunting ground.

Bob closed the browser and returned his attention to the camera feed. Nothing but darkness.

The knowledge that Tom had watched him masturbate, had stood outside his window while Bob stroked himself to completion looking at photos of Jess, now that was powerful leverage. Tom knew Bob desired his wife. Tom had watched Bob's cock, had seen the size of it, had witnessed his release. And Tom had kept silent about it.

What would happen if Bob casually mentioned it? A subtle reference that only Tom would understand, dropped into conversation when Jess was present? "Saw you outside the other night, Tom. Enjoying the view?" The man would crumble, probably. Or would he? Maybe he'd admit it, confess his voyeurism, his arousal. Maybe it would create a strange bond between them, a silent understanding.

Or maybe Bob could use it more directly, lean into Tom's apparent fantasy. "Your wife gave me quite the hug today, Tom. Very... stimulating. I'm sure you understand."

So many options. So many ways to play this.

Bob scratched absently at the dried cum on his chest. He needed a shower before bed, but he couldn't tear himself away from the feed just yet. He kept hoping they would shift in their sleep, that Jess might kick off the covers in the warm night, revealing more of herself to his hungry electronic eye.

He thought back to his marriages, to Sarah and Karen, to the slow death of passion in both relationships. He'd never understood women, not really. They were creatures of contradiction, saying one thing while meaning another, promising forever while already planning their exit.

Sarah had been fresh out of high school, impressed by his ambition and the growing success of his plumbing business. In those early years, she'd looked at him the way Jess looked at Tom, with admiration, desire, trust. Soon, those looks had morphed into impatience, disappointment, resentment. Years later, they'd stopped looking at each other at all.

And that real estate agent she'd fucked behind his back? Not so different from Chris Webb, come to think of it. Same type. Same smug confidence. Same ability to promise a lifestyle Bob couldn't provide.

Karen had lasted longer, before her discontent surfaced. She'd sought escape in pills and shopping, funding both habits with Bob's hard-earned money. marriage had ended with more of a whimper than Sarah's had, both of them too exhausted for the drama of real conflict.

Bob snorted. Love and trust. What a fucking joke. Love was just chemicals in the brain, a biological trick to ensure reproduction. And trust? Trust was for fools who hadn't yet learned how easily people betrayed each other. Tom and Jess would learn that lesson eventually. All couples did. The only question was who would teach it to them.

He reached for the bottle of Jack Daniel's on his desk and took a swig directly from the bottle. The whiskey burned pleasantly going down, a familiar pain that reminded him he was still alive, still in the game.

Bob thought about Jess's upcoming dinner with Chris Webb. Thursday night, when Tom would be safely tucked away in San Diego. Webb would make his move then, no doubt. He'd probably reserved a private table in that overpriced restaurant, would order expensive wine, would find excuses to touch her hand, her arm, the small of her back.

And Jess? What would she do? Would she remember her conversation with Tom, his permission to explore, to flirt, to "do whatever excites" her? Would she allow Webb's touches? Would she respond to them?

The thought should have filled Bob with jealousy, with the territorial rage that had consumed him in his younger years. Instead, it fascinated him. If she responded to Webb, if she allowed certain liberties, it would make Bob's own pursuit easier. She would have already crossed that first psychological barrier, already rationalized the initial steps away from conventional marital boundaries.

Webb, in essence, could be the unintentional pioneer, clearing the path for Bob's own advance.

Bob turned to a fresh page in his notebook and began jotting down ideas. The possibilities were endless. And with Tom's tacit encouragement of this boundary exploration, Bob had more leeway than he'd initially thought possible.

He took another pull from the whiskey bottle.

"Tomorrow," he murmured to himself.

Bob closed the laptop, plunging the room into darkness. Exhaustion washed over him suddenly, the result of hours of intense focus and physical release. He needed to shower, to wash away the dried evidence of his excitement, but his bed beckoned more strongly.

He stood, his knees protesting the movement after hours of sitting hunched at his desk. The whiskey followed him to bed, one final swig before setting the bottle on his nightstand. His last coherent thought before sleep claimed him was of Jess's body pressed against his during that brief, unexpected hug. The softness of her curves, the scent of her shampoo, the slight tension when she felt his hardness against her.

Soon, he promised himself as consciousness slipped away. So fucking soon.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 07

On Wednesday morning, Tom's hand shot out from beneath the covers, fumbling for his phone to silence the blaring alarm.

Beside him, Jess stirred. "Time already?" she mumbled sleepily.

"Yeah," Tom whispered. "Go back to sleep."

Jess's hand found his in the darkness, fingers intertwining. "No. I'm driving you, remember?"

"You sure? I can take an Uber. It's ungodly early."

"I'm sure," she replied, already pushing herself up.

Jess clicked on the bedside lamp, casting a warm glow across her features. Even half asleep, hair tousled and eyes heavy lidded, she took his breath away.

"What?" Jess asked, catching his eyes.

"Nothing," Tom replied. "Just..."

"Just what?"

"Just wondering how I got so lucky."

Jess rolled her eyes but smiled. "Go get ready. We've got a schedule to keep."

Tom headed to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Under the hot spray, he tried to organize his thoughts. In just a few hours, he'd be in San Diego, buried in the Meridian implementation while Jess would remain here in Austin, with Bob lurking downstairs and Chris Webb waiting in the wings.

Last night's conversation replayed in his mind. Jess asking what he wanted her to do with Chris Webb and his response, "Whatever makes you feel good." The memory of her confession, that letting men look at her turned her on too. The thoughts made his cock harden.

"Tom?" Jess's voice came through the door. "Coffee's ready when you are."

"Be right out," he called back, quickly rinsing the shampoo from his hair.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Jess was on the edge of the bed pulling on her socks. She'd twisted her hair into a messy bun and changed into jeans and a simple t-shirt.

They quickly moved through their morning routines, ending with a quick breakfast consisting of scrambled eggs and toast. Tom checked his briefcase one last time, ensuring he had all the materials for his meetings. Jess gathered her purse. Forty-five minutes after they woke, they were inside Jess's Tesla.

The neighborhood was still dark, houses silent as most of Austin slept. Tom glanced up at their home as Jess backed out of the driveway, taking in the warm yellow light they'd left on. As they pulled away, his eyes caught movement behind one of the downstairs windows in Bob's apartment, a shadow shifting behind the blinds.

The pre-dawn streets were nearly empty as they made their way to the airport. The radio played softly, some early morning DJ's voice too cheerful for the hour. Jess drove with one hand on the wheel, the other resting on Tom's hand. The gesture was so casually intimate, so automatic she probably didn't even realize she was doing it.

"So," Tom began. "What's on your agenda while I'm gone?"

"Work, mostly," Jess replied. "I need to start preliminary concepts for the Savannah project. And I've got that dinner with Webb tomorrow night."

"Right," Tom nodded. "Dinner with Webb."

Jess glanced at him quickly before returning her eyes to the road. "Still okay with that?"

Was he okay with his wife having dinner with a man who had openly objectified her, who had placed bets with his friends about sleeping with her? The rational answer should have been an emphatic no. And yet...

"Yeah," Tom said.

"But?" Jess prompted, too perceptive to miss the hesitation in his voice.

"No buts," Tom insisted. "I meant what I said last night. Do whatever feels right in the moment."

Jess's fingers tightened slightly. "Even if that means flirting with him?"

"Yes," he admitted. "Even that."

They lapsed into silence again. The lights of Austin's International Airport appeared ahead, imposing and bright against the still-dark sky.

"Thursday's going to be busy for you," Tom said. "Work, yoga, then the dinner."

"I'll probably skip yoga," Jess remarked. "Not enough hours in the day."

"Derek will be disappointed," Tom commented.

Jess's laugh was soft. "I doubt he'll notice. The class is always packed."

"He'll notice," Tom said with certainty.

Despite the nearly empty streets, the airport approach was congested even at this early hour, with cars jockeying for position at the departures drop-off. Jess navigated the chaos, pulling up to the entrance.

"This is me," Tom said unnecessarily.

Jess put the car in park and turned to face him fully. "Text me when you land?"

"Of course," he promised.

She leaned across the console, hands cupping his face, and kissed him with unexpected intensity. Tom responded instantly, his fingers threading through her hair. The kiss deepened, tongues meeting, her soft moan vibrating against his lips. It was the kind of kiss that belonged in their bedroom, not in a crowded airport drop-off lane.

"Something to remember me by," Jess whispered when they finally broke apart.

Tom rested his forehead against hers. "As if I could forget."

A horn blared behind them. Tom pulled back reluctantly, grabbing his briefcase from the floor. "I'll call you tonight," he promised, opening the door.

"I'll be waiting," Jess replied.

Tom retrieved his suitcase from the trunk and gave Jess one final wave before disappearing into the terminal. Inside, the airport was a hive of early morning activity, with business travelers wearing identical expressions of resigned exhaustion as they shuffled through security.

Security was mercifully quick. Tom was soon at his gate, coffee in hand, watching the sky gradually lighten through the massive windows.

He received an incoming text.

Davis: CEO called this morning. Wants daily briefings while you're there. No pressure.

Tom groaned. Perfect. Just what this trip needed. More scrutiny, more pressure.

The boarding announcement came over the PA system. Tom gathered his belongings and joined the line, showing his boarding pass to the gate agent before making his way down the jetway.

Once settled in his seat in first class, one of the perks of constant business travel, Tom allowed himself to relax.

The plane pushed back from the gate, engines rumbling to life. As it began its ascent, Tom watched Austin recede through the small window. Somewhere down there, Jess was driving home through the streets. Despite the first-class comfort, despite the importance of this trip to his career, Tom wished with sudden intensity that he was with her instead.

Unlike Austin's dry heat, San Diego's atmosphere carried a weight to it, dense with moisture from the Pacific. He hailed a taxi, giving the driver the address of his downtown hotel. As the car merged onto the highway, Tom checked his phone. Three emails from Davis. Two emails from the Meridian project lead. One text from Jess.

Jess: Home safe. Good luck with your meetings today. Love you.

Tom: Landed safe. Missing you already. Love you too.

The hotel was a forgettable business-class establishment, indistinguishable from countless others Tom had stayed in during his consulting career. The lobby featured the standard marble countertops, oversized armchairs, and abstract art that could have been in any major city in America.

"Checking in," Tom told the receptionist, sliding his corporate card across the counter. "Marshall, Thomas. Reservation through Saturday."

The check-in process was quick and impersonal. Within minutes, Tom was riding up the elevator to the ninth floor, key card in hand. His room, when he entered it, was exactly as expected. King bed, desk by the window, bathroom to the right, muted colors throughout. It would be home for the next few days.

Tom set his suitcase down and checked his watch. His first meeting at Meridian's headquarters wasn't for another hour, giving him time to prepare.

Once Tom got settled, he reviewed his notes, forcing himself to reacquaint with the technical details of the implementation despite thoughts of Jess frequently interrupting. Time seemed to move quickly.

The cab ride to Meridian's headquarters took twenty minutes through San Diego's morning traffic.

The day unfolded with meetings upon meetings, each more urgent than the last. Tom moved from the conference room to the server room to individual offices, diagnosing issues, proposing solutions, reassuring stakeholders. It was the kind of intensive

problem-solving he excelled at, and despite the distractions in his personal life, he found himself focusing on the work.

By late afternoon, he had identified several critical issues that had been overlooked in previous troubleshooting efforts. Working with Meridian's technical team, he developed a plan to address them sequentially, starting with the most disruptive.

It was nearly seven when Tom finally returned to his hotel room, loosening his tie as the door closed behind him. His body ached from hours spent hunched over computers and diagrams. His mind, however, buzzed with the satisfaction of progress made.

He ordered room service, a burger and fries, the standard consultant's dinner, and collapsed onto the bed while waiting for his food to arrive. Only then, with the professional demands of the day satisfied did he allow his thoughts to return to Austin, to Jess.

Tom pulled out his phone, checking the time. Jess would be home by now, perhaps working on her designs for the Savannah project, or relaxing with a glass of wine. The image was so clear in his mind, Jess curled up on their couch in those yoga pants she loved, laptop balanced on her knees, concentration furrowing her brow.

Tom dialed her number.

She answered on the second ring. "Hey stranger," her voice came through.

"Hey yourself," Tom replied. "How was your day?"

"Busy," Jess said. "Margaret had me in meetings all morning discussing the Savannah project. Then I had lunch with Annie to go over some material selections for Skyline. Then I went to the gym after work."

"Sounds productive," Tom commented.

"It was. How about you?"

"Made some progress today, but it's a marathon, not a sprint."

"You'll get there," Jess said with certainty. "You always do."

"How's the house?" Tom asked.

"Quiet," Jess replied. "Too quiet, honestly. I keep expecting to hear you coming up the stairs or moving around in your office."

"Seen Bob at all?"

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line.

“Not today,” Jess said. “But I thought I heard him working on something downstairs earlier.”

“Right. Okay.”

Another pause, this one stretching longer.

“Are you checking up on me, Tom?” Jess asked, her tone light but with an undercurrent of... something. Not quite accusation. Curiosity, maybe.

“No,” Tom said quickly. “Just... I don’t know. Making conversation.”

“Mmm,” Jess hummed, clearly unconvinced. “Well, if you’re wondering whether I’ve been flirting with our tenant in your absence, the answer is no. I’ve been busy most of the day.”

“I wasn’t…” Tom began, then stopped himself. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s okay,” Jess assured him, her voice softening. “I know this is new territory for both of us.”

Tom exhaled slowly. “Yeah. It is.”

“Are you having second thoughts?” Jess asked. “About what we discussed?”

Was he? The arousal he felt at the thought of Jess with other men remained potent, even stronger in some ways now that physical distance separated them. But along with it came a creeping unease, a sense that once certain doors were opened, they couldn’t easily be closed again.

“Not second thoughts,” Tom said. “More like... I’m still figuring out where my head is at with all this.”

“That’s fair,” Jess replied. “Me too.”

A knock at the hotel room door interrupted Tom’s response. “Hang on,” he told Jess. “Room service is here.”

He answered the door, accepting the covered tray from the server. He then returned to the phone.

“Sorry about that. Dinner just arrived.”

“Don’t let it get cold,” Jess said. “We can talk more tomorrow. You should eat and get some rest.”

“I wish you were here,” Tom said suddenly.

Jess’s reply was immediate and warm. “I wish I was too. But we’ve done this before, just last week.”

“I know,” Tom acknowledged. “It just feels different this time.”

“Because of everything we’ve talked about?”

“Partly,” Tom admitted. “And you have your dinner with Webb tomorrow.”

“Do you want me to cancel?” Jess asked.

“No,” he said quickly. “It’s important for your career. And...” He hesitated, then decided to be completely honest. “And I want to know what happens. What he does, how you respond.”

“I’ll tell you everything,” Jess promised. “Every detail. I’ll call you right after.”

“Please,” Tom responded.

“I should let you eat,” Jess said. “Call me tomorrow?”

“Definitely,” Tom assured her. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” Jess replied. “Goodnight, Tom.”

“Goodnight.”

The call ended, leaving Tom alone with his cooling burger and tumultuous thoughts. He ate quickly, barely tasting the food, his mind replaying fragments of their conversation.

Later, lying in the hotel bed, Tom stared at the ceiling and tried to make sense of the contradictory emotions battling within him. The intense arousal at the thought of Jess with other men, the fear of what might change between them if fantasy became reality, and also the deep, persistent guilt over what he’d seen and kept from her, of Bob jerking off to photos of her.

Tom’s dreams were a chaotic blend of conference rooms and bedrooms, of spreadsheets and naked bodies, of Bob’s face leering from behind half-closed blinds. He woke several times, disoriented in the unfamiliar room, reaching instinctively for Jess only to find empty space beside him.

Tom rolled onto his side, away from the empty space where Jess should have been and closed his eyes. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges. For now, he needed rest.

The next morning, Jess adjusted her posture, feeling the ache in her back that appeared when she’d been sitting too long. She glanced at the wall clock, a housewarming gift from her parents, and realized with mild surprise that she’d been hunched over her

laptop for more than three hours straight. Outside her window, the mid-morning light had shifted to the more direct rays of noon.

On her screen, dozens of browser tabs competed for attention. Historic mansions in Savannah, conservation guidelines, design magazines showcasing boutique hotel transformations, Pinterest boards featuring Southern architectural details, and at the center of it all, a rough mood board she'd been assembling.

The Savannah project was exactly the kind of challenge she'd dreamed of since design school. A century and a half old mansion with history seeping from its walls, waiting to be reimagined as a luxury boutique hotel while honoring its architectural legacy. The kind of project that made careers, that won awards, that ended up featured in Architectural Digest.

And tonight, she'd be discussing preliminary concepts with Chris Webb over dinner at Le Bernardin, an elite Michaelin star rated restaurant in downtown Auston.

Chris Webb, who she'd overheard crudely speculating about what her mouth would look like wrapped around his cock.

The complexity of her current situation wasn't lost on her. On one hand, this project represented a significant professional opportunity. On the other, accepting Webb's dinner invitation meant sitting across from a man she knew viewed her as a potential conquest as much as a design professional.

And then there was Tom, encouraging her to explore the boundaries of flirtation, getting aroused at the idea of other men desiring her. Her husband, who had told her to "do whatever excites you" when discussing how she might respond to Webb's advances.

It was exhilarating and terrifying, empowering and confusing all at once. After years of carefully establishing professional boundaries, of mentioning "my husband" early in conversations with male clients, of choosing pantsuits over dresses for important meetings, she was now contemplating exactly how much flirtation she might allow herself tonight.

"Focus, Jess," she muttered, closing several tabs of historic Savannah mansions. "Concepts first, existential crises later."

She pulled up a blank document and began typing notes for her meeting with Webb, keeping them professional. Architectural features to preserve, questions about the target clientele, thoughts on balancing historic character with luxury amenities, whether the owners wanted to include any references to the mansion's history in the design narrative.

Jess paused, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. The professional notes were important, but she needed another strategy too, a plan for handling Webb himself. She opened a new document and started writing personal notes.

Redirect personal compliments to professional achievements, maintain physical space and body positioning to minimize contact opportunities, mention Tom naturally in conversation, have a clear exit strategy by scheduling her Uber for a specific time.

The preparation calmed her somewhat, anchoring her in the work she knew she excelled at. An hour later, she had a comprehensive outline of discussion points and an interaction plan with the man himself. She could handle Chris Webb.

Jess stretched, arching her back and extending her arms overhead. She'd promised herself a proper lunch break today. After yesterday's frenzied schedule, she'd barely had time to eat a granola bar between meetings.

As she headed to the kitchen, her phone buzzed with a text.

Tom: 8 AM meeting with CEO done. Survived. How's your day going? Thinking of you.

The simple message made her smile. Despite the evolving complexities of their relationship, or perhaps because of them, Tom's steady presence in her life, even from hundreds of miles away, felt like a vital constant.

Jess: Working from home. Deep in Savannah research. Missing you.

She set her phone down and moved to the refrigerator, surveying its contents. The grocery supply was dwindling, another task she'd need to tackle soon. She assembled a simple salad with the remaining greens and topped it with leftover grilled chicken. As she drizzled olive oil over the creation, her thoughts drifted back to last night's conversation with Tom.

"Are you having second thoughts?" she'd asked him directly when he'd called from San Diego.

His response had been thoughtful. "Not exactly second thoughts. More like... I'm still figuring out where my head is at with all this."

Jess understood the sentiment perfectly. His admission that he fantasized about her with other men had been shocking. The revelation had opened a door neither of them had fully recognized existed in their relationship. Now, with that door ajar, they were both peering through it into unknown territory, trying to determine how far they were willing to step across the threshold.

Jess carried her salad and a glass of iced water to the sliding glass doors leading to their balcony. The day was pleasant, warm without being oppressively hot, a gentle breeze stirring the air. She pushed the door open and stepped outside, inhaling the fresh air.

Setting her lunch on a small wrought iron table, Jess leaned against the railing and gazed out at their backyard. The sight of a figure bent over one of the flower beds along the fence caught her by surprise. Bob was working in their yard, his broad back to her as he pulled weeds from around the base of the rose bushes. He wore a faded blue t-shirt, damp with sweat between the shoulder blades, and cargo shorts that had seen better days.

Jess watched him for a moment, observing the care with which he extracted each weed, ensuring he got the entire root system. Even from this distance, she could see the muscle memory of decades of manual labor in his movements.

"Bob?" she called, waving when he turned at the sound of her voice.

He straightened, one hand coming up to shield his eyes from the sun as he looked toward the balcony. Recognition dawned on his face, and he raised his hand in greeting.

"Afternoon," he called back. "Hope I'm not disturbing your workday. Figured the roses needed some attention."

"Not disturbing at all," Jess replied. "I didn't realize yard maintenance was part of your rental agreement."

Bob chuckled. "It's not. Just can't stand seeing good plants struggling because of weeds. Occupational hazard. Spent too many years fixing things to ignore something that needs attention."

Jess smiled, appreciating his candor. "Well, I'm not complaining. Those roses haven't looked this good in years."

"They just need a little care," Bob replied, brushing soil from his hands. "Good bones, like you said about that Savannah mansion you're working on."

The casual reference to her work reminded Jess that she'd mentioned the Savannah project to Bob during his last visit, when he'd installed the smoke detectors. The day she'd hugged him and felt his unmistakable arousal.

"I was just about to have lunch," she said, gesturing to the table behind her. "Would you like to join me? I could make you a sandwich or something."

Bob seemed to consider the offer, glancing down at his dirt-covered hands and sweat-stained shirt. "Appreciate it, but I'm not exactly presentable. Maybe a rain check?"

"At least let me bring you some water," Jess insisted. "It's getting hot out there."

"Wouldn't say no to that," Bob conceded.

"I'll be right down," she told him before disappearing back into the house.

In the kitchen, Jess grabbed a large glass and filled it with ice water. The casual lunch invitation was exactly the kind of spontaneous boundary testing that both excited and unnerved her. Was she flirting? Being neighborly? Testing her effect on him? She wasn't entirely sure herself, and that ambiguity was part of the thrill.

She made her way down the stairs from their balcony. Bob had returned to the flower bed but straightened as she approached.

"Here," Jess said, offering the glass. "Hydration is important."

"Thanks," Bob said, accepting it with soil-stained fingers. He drank deeply, Adam's apple bobbing as he drained half the glass. "Hit the spot." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, leaving a smudge of dirt on his stubbled chin.

"You missed a spot," Jess said, gesturing to her own chin.

"Occupational hazard," Bob replied, but made no move to clean it off. "Dirt's just part of the package when you work with your hands."

Jess smiled. "So what inspired the sudden gardening impulse?" she asked, gesturing toward the roses.

"Nothing sudden about it," Bob replied. "Been observing these roses since I moved in. They're quality plants, good variety. Just needed someone to show them some attention." He straightened fully, his height and breadth suddenly more apparent. "Ever had a garden yourself?"

"We tried a vegetable garden our first summer here," Jess admitted with a self-deprecating laugh. "Everything died except the zucchini, which took over the entire bed. We harvested so many we were practically begging neighbors to take them."

Bob's laughter was unexpectedly warm, crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Zucchini will do that. Tenacious little bastards. You start with one plant thinking you'll get a few, end up with enough to feed an army."

"Exactly! Tom was researching zucchini recipes for weeks. Zucchini bread, zucchini pasta, zucchini fritters. I think I'm permanently traumatized."

"Next time, try tomatoes," Bob suggested. "Hard to mess up, good yield without overwhelming you, and nothing beats the taste of a homegrown tomato still warm from the sun." His expression softened with what might have been nostalgia. "Had a garden in the backyard of our first house. Sarah used to can the tomatoes, make sauce for winter."

"That sounds lovely," Jess said softly.

"It was," Bob acknowledged, the two simple words somehow containing volumes. He cleared his throat. "Anyway, these roses are coming along nice. Thinking of putting in some companion plants."

"Well, they certainly look better for your efforts," Jess acknowledged.

Bob nodded, seeming satisfied with her approval. "Planning to do a little landscaping along that back section too," he said, pointing toward the far corner of the yard where a patch of ground remained bare. "Thinking some native plants would do well there. Low maintenance, drought resistant."

"That sounds perfect," Jess agreed. "Tom and I have been meaning to do something with that area, but we never seem to find the time."

"Time's the one thing I've got plenty of these days," Bob replied, his tone neutral but carrying an undercurrent that Jess couldn't quite identify. Resignation, perhaps. Or loneliness.

A pang of sympathy tugged at her heart. Bob Caldwell might present himself as a gruff, self-sufficient handyman, but beneath that exterior was a man adjusting to a significantly reduced life. From successful business owner with employees and substantial income to tenant in someone else's home, tackling small projects to fill his days.

"It must be a big adjustment," she ventured. "Going from running your own company to..." she gestured vaguely, not wanting to sound condescending.

"To being some folks' tenant?" Bob finished for her, no bitterness in his tone. "Yeah, it's an adjustment alright. But that's life, isn't it? You build something up, lose it, start again. New chapter." He shrugged those broad shoulders. "Better than sitting around feeling sorry for myself."

His straightforward resilience was admirable. No self-pity, no wallowing in what might have been. Just pragmatic acceptance and forward movement.

"Well, we appreciate you sharing some of it with our yard," Jess said sincerely.

“Happy to help, princess,” Bob replied casually, already turning back toward the flower bed. “These bushes just needed someone who knows what they’re doing to give them some proper attention.”

Jess froze. Princess. The word Tom had started using during sex, seemingly out of nowhere.

And now here was Bob, using it casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“What did you call me?” she asked, working to keep her voice even.

Bob glanced up, seeming genuinely confused by her reaction. “Princess? Sorry if that bothered you. Old habit.” He chuckled, apparently misreading her surprised expression as annoyance. “When you work construction as long as I did, you pick up habits. Not all of them good ones.”

“No, it’s...” Jess struggled to find the right words. “It’s fine, Bob. I was just surprised.”

Bob’s face creased with a frown. “Shouldn’t have assumed,” he said, straightening again. “Always been too familiar for my own good. Karen, my second wife, used to say I didn’t have the right filters.”

Jess recognized the clumsy apology for what it was, an attempt by a man unaccustomed to nuanced social navigation to rectify a perceived misstep. She forced a reassuring smile.

“Really, it’s fine. Just caught me off guard,” she said. Then, curiosity overtaking caution, she added, “Is that what you called her? Karen?”

Bob’s expression changed subtly. “No,” he said. “That was...” he trailed off, then seemed to recalibrate. “Just something I picked up somewhere. Sticks in your head, you know? Some women like it.”

Jess stood there a moment longer, mind racing as she processed the implications of what had just happened. Princess. Such a specific term of endearment. Could it truly be coincidence that both Tom and Bob used the same word?

“Thanks again for taking care of the roses.” she said finally.

“Anytime,” Bob replied without looking up. “Oh, and if you want, I could take a look at that irrigation system this weekend. Noticed it’s not hitting that back corner properly.”

“That would be great,” Jess agreed automatically, her thoughts still tangled around that single word, princess.

“I’ll be here,” Bob said. “Not going anywhere.”

Jess nodded and made her way back inside, her mind churning with questions. By the time she returned to the balcony, her salad had wilted slightly in the warm air, but she barely noticed as she worked through it, her thoughts elsewhere.

Princess. Where had Tom heard it? Had Bob used it before, perhaps when she wasn't around? That seemed unlikely. Tom and Bob hadn't interacted much without her present. Could Tom have heard it from someone else entirely, and the similarity was pure coincidence? Or was there another explanation, one she hadn't considered?

Her phone buzzed with a text.

Madi: So what are you wearing tonight? That navy pantsuit or something more fun?

The message jolted Jess back to the present moment. She'd been texting back and forth with Madi, told her about the pantsuit and Tom's preference for the dress.

Jess: Still deciding. Leaning toward the pantsuit.

The response was immediate.

Madi: BORING. Wear something that will make him eat his heart out. You've got the body, might as well remind him what he's NOT getting.

Jess laughed. Trust Madi to cut through the professional pretense and get straight to the underlying power dynamic.

Jess: Maybe. Talk later. Finishing work now.

Setting her phone aside, Jess tried to refocus on the Savannah project, but her mind kept circling back to that single word. Princess.

She shook her head, forcing herself to return to the design concepts on her screen. Whatever the explanation, she couldn't unravel it right now. She had work to finish before preparing for tonight's dinner.

For the next few hours, Jess immersed herself in research, sketching rough concept layouts for several of the boutique hotel's signature suites. The work provided a welcome distraction from the questions buzzing at the edges of her consciousness.

By late afternoon, she had compiled a substantial portfolio of ideas to discuss with Webb. Satisfied with her preparation, she closed her laptop and headed to the bedroom to get ready for dinner.

Standing before her open closet, Jess surveyed her options with a critical eye. The navy pantsuit was her safe choice, elegant, professional, with a tailored silhouette that flattered her figure without being overtly sexy. It sent a clear message. I am here as a design professional, not as an object for your fantasies.

But Tom's suggestion from their conversation remained in her mind. "What about that burgundy dress? The one with the wrap?"

Something in her rebelled against the safe choice tonight. Why should she downplay her appearance to make Webb see her as a professional? Couldn't she be both beautiful and brilliant? Why accommodate his limited perspective by dressing to diminish her natural assets?

Madi's text echoed in her mind. "Wear something that will make him eat his heart out."

Decision made, Jess pulled the burgundy dress from its hanger. She laid it carefully on the bed before heading to the bathroom. A hot shower helped clear her mind, washing away the residual tension from the afternoon's work and the lingering confusion over Bob's casual "princess." Under the spray, she shaved her legs with care, then left her public mount clean and bare. Afterward, she worked conditioner through her long blonde hair.

Post-shower, wrapped in her plush robe, Jess approached her beauty routine. She applied moisturizer to her still-damp skin, working it until it absorbed completely. Her makeup routine was similarly thorough.

Jess studied her reflection critically. The makeup enhanced her features without looking overdone, striking that delicate balance between professional polish and feminine allure.

Her hair came next and finally, she slipped into the burgundy dress, adjusting it carefully across her shoulders and securing the wrap at her waist. The material draped exactly as she remembered, highlighting her body without clinging too tightly. She stepped into nude four-inch heels, high enough to emphasize her legs but not so high she'd be uncomfortable by the end of dinner.

A delicate gold necklace with a small diamond pendant, Tom's gift for their third anniversary, and matching earrings completed the ensemble.

Jess studied her reflection in the full-length mirror, assessing the overall effect. The woman who looked back at her was polished, confident, beautiful, and very clearly aware of her own attractiveness. She looked nothing like the stereotype of the serious professional woman trying to be taken seriously by downplaying her femininity.

"You want both the project and me," she murmured to her reflection, thinking of Webb. "But you're only getting one."

She mentally rehearsed the phrases she'd prepared earlier. This wasn't about playing games. It was about maintaining professional boundaries while still securing the

project she deserved. Webb might think his position gave him power, but Jess had her own strengths. Her talent. Her confidence. Her intellect. And yes, even her beauty, which she would wield precisely on her own terms.

Satisfied with her appearance, Jess moved back to the vanity to select a perfume. Her fingers hovered over several bottles before selecting a scent that Tom had always particularly liked, applying it to her wrists and neck.

The doorbell chimed just as she was tucking her essentials into a small clutch purse. A glance at her phone confirmed it was the Uber she'd scheduled, arriving precisely on time.

Jess took one final look in the mirror, drawing a deep breath to center herself. Tonight would be a balancing act, professional opportunity and personal boundary-setting, career advancement and self-respect, the complex desires of her evolving relationship with Tom and her own sense of agency in navigating them.

"Let's do this," she told her reflection.

On her way out, she paused at the kitchen counter to send a quick text to Tom.

Jess: Heading to dinner with Webb. Wearing the burgundy dress. Will call you after.

She hesitated, then added another message.

Jess: Also, Bob called me princess today. Coincidence?

Whatever Tom's response, or lack thereof, she'd deal with it after dinner. For now, Chris Webb and the Savannah project awaited.

Jess took one last grounding breath, mentally shifting into professional mode. Then she headed out the door, locking it carefully behind her.

Tom paced the hotel room, checking his phone for what felt like the hundredth time in the past hour. No missed calls. No new texts. Just the message he'd sent to Jess earlier still unanswered on his screen.

Tom: Thinking of you. Call me when you're done?

It was 8:47 PM in San Diego, which meant 10:47 PM back in Austin. Dinner reservations had been for 7 PM Austin time. Even allowing for lengthy professional discussions, Jess should have been done by now. Unless...

He swallowed hard, his imagination filling in the blanks. Unless Webb had invited her somewhere after dinner. A nightcap at the hotel bar, perhaps. Or maybe they were still at the restaurant, conversation flowing easily between them. Maybe Webb's hand

had found its way to her knee beneath the table, his fingers tracing patterns on her skin through the burgundy dress, the one Tom had suggested she wear.

Tom moved to the window, pulling back the heavy curtain to stare at the San Diego skyline. Lights twinkled across the darkness, each one representing lives unfolding, stories being written. Somewhere in that sea of humanity, executives were closing deals, couples were falling in love, marriages were crumbling. And here he was, trapped in a hotel room while his wife dined with a man who openly desired her.

He dropped the curtain and moved to the minibar, contemplating the tiny bottles of liquor before selecting a whiskey. The amber liquid burned its way down his throat, a momentary distraction from the images his mind kept producing.

What would Webb's approach be? Subtle compliments at first, veiled in professional admiration? Then perhaps a comment about the dress, how it complemented Jess's figure? Would he maintain respectful eye contact, or would his gaze wander, taking in the curves Tom knew by heart?

Tom poured another drink, downing it quickly. He'd encouraged this, practically pushed Jess into Webb's orbit. Suggested the provocative dress, given vague permission to "do whatever feels right." And now he was alone with his imagination, his arousal, and the slowly intensifying fear that he'd set something in motion he couldn't control.

He picked up his phone again. Still nothing. But a second later his phone vibrated in his hand, startling him. Jess's name flashed on the screen. Tom's thumb immediately jabbed at the answer button.

“Hey,” he said, unable to keep the anticipation from his voice.

“Hi,” Jess’s voice came through, sounding slightly tired but composed. “Just got home. Sorry it’s so late.”

Tom sank onto the edge of the hotel bed, relief washing over him. “No, it’s fine. I was just... wondering how it went.”

“It was...” Jess paused, and Tom could almost see her organizing her thoughts. “Interesting. Both professionally and... otherwise.”

“Tell me everything,” Tom urged, settling back against the pillows. “From the beginning.”

“Le Bernardin was gorgeous,” Jess began. “All dark wood, white tablecloths, waiters in formal uniforms. Very old-money. Webb was already there when I arrived, waiting at the table.”

"What was he wearing?" Tom asked.

Jess laughed softly. "Are you asking for fashion advice, or are you trying to picture the scene?"

"Both maybe," Tom admitted. "Just trying to visualize."

"Navy suit, light blue shirt, no tie. Very tailored, probably custom. Expensive Rolex watch."

"And he saw you approach in the burgundy dress," Tom prompted.

"Of course he did," Jess replied. "He stood when I approached the table. Definitely checked me out, but subtly."

Tom's pulse quickened. "And then?"

"Then we ordered drinks. I had a gin and tonic. He had some fancy bourbon. We talked about the Savannah project while looking at the menus. He ordered the steak, medium rare. I had the salmon."

The detailed recounting should have been mundane, but Tom found himself hanging on every word, his imagination constructing the scene. Jess in that burgundy dress, Webb's eyes taking her in while pretending to focus on the menu.

"The first part of dinner was completely professional," Jess continued. "Webb walked me through the property history, showed me photos on his iPad. We discussed the owner's vision, budget constraints, timeline. All business."

"And after the 'first part'?" Tom asked, catching her phrasing.

"When the main course arrived, the conversation shifted. He started asking about my background, how I got into design, where I studied. Personal but still professional."

"Did he mention your modeling?" Tom asked.

"He did, actually. Said he'd Googled me after our first meeting. Found some of the old campaigns online."

"How did that make you feel?"

"A little uncomfortable at first," Jess admitted. "Like he was letting me know he'd been looking into me. But he was respectful about it, said I could have had a career in that world if I'd wanted."

"But he was establishing that he'd been researching you."

“Exactly,” Jess agreed. “It was a power move, letting me know he had information. From there, he started asking about my personal life. How I liked Austin, how long we’d been married, that sort of thing.”

“And you mentioned me?” Tom asked.

“Of course I mentioned you,” Jess replied. “I made a point of it, actually. Kept my ring visible the entire time too.”

Tom nodded, though she couldn’t see him. “And how did he react?”

“Here’s where it gets interesting,” Jess said. “He didn’t back off. If anything, he became more attentive after I mentioned you. Started complimenting me more directly. My eye for design, how I’d approached the Skyline project, but also some comments about how the dress ‘suited me perfectly’.”

Tom simultaneously felt jealousy, anxiety, arousal, all tangled together at the knowledge that Webb had openly admired his wife while knowing she was married.

“Did he...” Tom hesitated, uncertain how to phrase the question. “Did he try anything?”

“He didn’t touch me, if that’s what you’re asking,” Jess replied. “But his intent was clear. He held eye contact too long, leaned in when I was speaking, all those little signals men send.”

“And how did you respond?” Tom asked.

“I kept it professional but...” Jess paused, and Tom imagined her biting her lower lip the way she did when considering her words carefully. “I didn’t shut him down completely. I accepted the compliments, smiled, maintained eye contact. Let the conversation flow naturally without creating distance.”

“Like we discussed,” Tom murmured.

“Like we discussed,” Jess confirmed. “Nothing inappropriate, but I didn’t put up the usual walls either.”

Tom shifted on the bed, his body responding to the scenario she described. “Did you enjoy it?” he asked. “His attention?”

“Parts of it,” Jess admitted after a brief hesitation. “Not because it was him specifically, but because there’s something... I don’t know... powerful about knowing someone wants you and being in control of how far it goes.”

“What happened after dinner?” Tom asked.

“He paid, of course. Then we walked out together. The valet brought his car, some ridiculously expensive Mercedes, and he offered to drive me home.”

Tom’s heart rate accelerated. “Did you accept?”

“No,” Jess replied. “I told him I’d already arranged an Uber. He waited with me until it arrived.”

“And then?”

Jess paused for a long moment.

“And then something happened,” Jess said finally, her voice dropping.

Tom sat up straighter. “What? What happened?”

“He asked if I wanted to see the presidential suite at his hotel. Said they’d just completed renovations, thought I might appreciate the design elements as a professional.”

“Jesus,” Tom muttered. “And?”

“And I said yes.”

The room seemed to tilt around Tom. “You... you went to his hotel room?”

“Not exactly his room,” Jess corrected. “The presidential suite. He’s staying in an executive suite on a different floor.”

“But you went with him,” Tom pressed, his blood pounding in his ears. “Upstairs. Alone.”

“Yes,” Jess confirmed. “The suite was beautiful, by the way.”

Tom’s mind was racing, competing emotions battling for dominance. The image of Jess following Webb into a hotel suite made his gut twist but his cock stirred to life.

“What happened in the suite?” he asked.

“He offered me a drink from the minibar,” Jess continued. “I accepted. We sat on the sofa. He asked more about my vision for the Savannah project.”

“Just business talk?” Tom asked, disbelieving.

Jess paused. “At first. But then he moved closer. Said he’d been thinking about me since the Skyline launch. Said the dress was distracting him all through dinner.”

“And what did you say?” Tom’s hand moved to his hardening cock.

“I thanked him for the compliment but reminded him that I was married.”

“And?”

“And he said he knew that, but he also knew that sometimes people had... understandings.”

Tom almost forgot to breathe. “What did he mean by that?”

“He implied that many professional couples he knew had flexible boundaries,” Jess explained. “That in his experience, people often made accommodations for their busy lives.”

“He was suggesting an affair,” Tom translated, his cock now fully hard beneath his palm.

“More like a convenient arrangement,” Jess corrected. “Something discreet, professional on the outside, with... benefits.”

“And what did you say to that?” Tom asked.

“I told him I wasn’t that kind of wife.” Jess paused. “Initially.”

“Initially?” Tom echoed.

“Then he kissed me.”

Tom couldn’t respond. His mouth went dry, and his heart hammered in his chest.

“He kissed you,” he repeated, unable to keep the strain from his voice.

“Yes.”

“And you let him?”

“I did,” Jess replied simply.

“Tell me,” Tom demanded. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

“He leaned in slowly,” Jess began. “Gave me time to pull back if I wanted to. But I didn’t. I was curious, I guess. Wondering what it would feel like.”

“What did it feel like?” Tom’s question came out ragged.

“Different,” Jess said after a moment’s consideration.

Tom pushed his pants down below his ass and wrapped his hand around his cock. “Did you kiss him back?”

“At first, I just let him kiss me,” Jess said. “But then... yes, I kissed him back. Just for a moment.”

“Fuck,” Tom breathed, stroking himself.

“Are you touching yourself?” Jess asked suddenly, her tone shifting.

Tom froze, caught. “I... yes,” he admitted after a beat of silence.

“You’re getting off on this,” Jess stated, not a question. “On hearing about me kissing another man.”

“Keep going,” Tom urged, ignoring her observation. “What happened next?”

“Did you imagine this might happen when you suggested I wear that dress?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know,” Tom stammered. “Please, Jess, just... what happened after the kiss?”

There was a pause, and Tom could almost see Jess weighing her options, deciding how to proceed.

“He put his hand on my thigh,” she continued finally. “He told me how beautiful I was, how much he’d wanted me since the first time he saw me.”

Tom’s hand moved faster now. “Did you let him touch you?”

“Yes,” Jess said. “I let his hand stay there. He started kissing my neck, whispering things in my ear.”

“What things?” Tom was fully committed now, cock fully exposed as he stroked himself.

“That he had a proposal for me. That we could help each other, professionally and personally.”

“What did he do next?” Tom asked, his voice urgent.

“He moved his hand higher,” Jess continued. “Asked if I was wearing underwear. I told him I was. He seemed disappointed.”

“Were you wet?” Tom asked boldly. “When he touched you, were you turned on?”

“A little,” Jess admitted. “Not because of him specifically, but because of the situation. The danger of it. The newness.”

“Did he touch you... there?” Tom couldn’t bring himself to be more explicit.

“No,” Jess said. “But he wanted to. He suggested we move to the bedroom.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tom muttered, his hand working faster. “And did you?”

“We stood up,” Jess continued. “He led me toward the master bedroom. The whole time I was thinking about you, wondering what you’d think if you could see me.”

“I wish I could have,” Tom confessed, losing himself in the fantasy.

“I thought about staying the night,” Jess said. “About what it would be like to let him undress me, to feel his hands on my body...”

Tom’s strokes became urgent. “God, Jess... and then what?”

“Tom,” Jess’s voice cut through his arousal, suddenly sharp and clear. “None of that happened.”

Tom’s hand stuttered to a halt. “What?”

“I made it up,” Jess stated flatly. “All of it. After dinner, I got in my Uber and came straight home.”

A stunned silence filled the line.

“You... made it up?” Tom repeated, disbelief coloring his tone.

“Yes,” Jess confirmed. “He never made that offer to see the presidential suite. We had a professional dinner, he was respectfully flirtatious but appropriate, and then I came home.”

Tom sat frozen on the edge of the bed, cock still in hand, mind struggling to process the whiplash of emotions. “Why would you do that?”

“Why would I do that?” Jess echoed, her voice rising slightly. “Are you seriously asking me that question while you’re sitting there with your dick in your hand?”

Tom flinched at the accusation, quickly removing his hand as if Jess could somehow see him. “What the fuck, Jess. You led me on with that story.”

“And you just begged me for more details while masturbating,” Jess countered. “We talked about me flirting with guys, maybe being more open to their attention. We didn’t talk about me having sex with them, but apparently that’s the part that gets you off.”

“That’s not-” Tom began.

“Yes, it is,” Jess interrupted. “I thought it was a fantasy, Tom. I thought it was something we were maybe exploring theoretically, but you’ve leapt right over the boundaries we discussed. You weren’t just interested in me flirting with Chris. You were practically begging for details about him touching me, kissing me.”

Tom fumbled to pull his pants back up, feeling uncomfortably exposed despite being hundreds of miles away. “You’re the one who made up that story.”

“To test a theory,” Jess replied. “And you confirmed it. This isn’t just about flirtation for you, is it? You want me to sleep with other men.”

The blunt statement was undeniable in its accuracy yet still somehow shocking to hear spoken aloud.

"I want you to do what you want," Tom said, falling back on the answer he'd given before.

"Don't," Jess's voice cut through the line. "Don't give me that non-answer again. It's not fair to put all this on me. Your words are confusing, Tom. You're beating around the bush and making me make all the decisions, and that's not fair."

Tom ran a hand through his hair. "What do you want me to say, Jess? That I know exactly what our boundaries are? Because I don't. I'm figuring this out as we go, just like you are."

"Would you have been okay if I had slept with Chris Webb tonight?" Jess asked directly. "If everything I just described had actually happened, would that have been okay with you?"

Tom hesitated, the honest answer terrifying in its implications.

"Yes," he admitted finally.

"Jesus, Tom," Jess breathed.

"You asked for the truth," Tom said defensively.

"I did," Jess acknowledged. "But I didn't expect... I don't know what I expected, honestly."

"I'm sorry if that upsets you," Tom offered.

"I'm not upset that you have fantasies," Jess clarified. "I'm upset because I feel like a performer in your fantasy. All the pressure is on me to make these huge decisions that will impact our relationship while you sit back and watch from a distance."

Tom winced at the accuracy of her assessment.

"I feel pressured to explore boundaries I'm not sure I want to approach, much less cross," Jess continued, her voice tight with emotion. "And I feel manipulated somehow, like I'm being nudged toward something without the whole picture. If something goes wrong, it'll all be my fault even though it's your fantasy, because I'll be the one acting on it."

"That's not what I want," Tom protested.

"Then what do you want?" Jess demanded. "Because from where I'm standing, it seems like you want me to sleep around while you get to jerk off to the stories afterward."

"It's not about that."

"Then what is it about? Do you have some woman you want to sleep with? Is this about opening our relationship?"

"No," Tom replied. "I'm not interested in anyone else."

"Good," Jess's response was immediate. "Because I don't want you sleeping with anyone else. Ever."

"I wouldn't," Tom assured her.

"So you want to open up our relationship, but only on my side?" Jess pressed. "You want me dating other men?"

"No, not dating," Tom corrected quickly. "We talked about this, Jess… I don't want you having romantic relationships with anyone. That's not what this is about."

"Then what is it about, Tom? Tell me clearly, because I'm tired of guessing."

Tom took a deep breath, forcing himself to articulate what he'd barely acknowledged to himself. "Part of it is... yes, the idea of you being with someone else, physically, and then coming back to me, telling me about it... that turns me on..."

"So you want me to sleep with random guys and tell you about it because it turns you on," Jess summarized, her tone flat.

Tom took a deep breath. "It's not random guys or strangers," he said carefully. "It would be someone we both feel safe with. And the end goal isn't sex… I mean there's no actual end goal or anything. This is just about your comfort, exploring whatever you're comfortable with, whether that's flirting or… whatever"

"That's still pretty vague, Tom," Jess replied.

"I know, and I'm sorry." Tom ran his hand through his hair. "Look, if you don't want to explore this at all, that's completely fine. I accept that fully. We've talked about this before, and I meant what I said then. Your comfort comes first, always."

"But you were just masturbating to the thought of me having sex with Chris Webb," Jess pointed out, cutting through his reassurances. "When I made up that story, you didn't pause for a second."

Tom winced. "You're right. I got caught up in it."

"And you flat-out admitted you'd be okay if I had actually slept with him tonight," Jess continued. "That's a pretty big leap from the flirting."

"I know," Tom acknowledged. "In the moment, hearing your story... I wasn't thinking clearly."

"That's what scares me," Jess said, her voice softening slightly. "If you can't think clearly just talking about it over the phone, what happens when we're actually in a real situation? Where are the boundaries, Tom?"

"I honestly don't know," Tom admitted. "That's why I keep saying it's about your comfort, because I'm still figuring out where my own boundaries are."

"I see," Jess said, her voice suddenly tired. "I need to think about this, Tom. This is a lot to process."

"I understand," Tom said, though the potential implications of her response frightened him. Neither spoke for a long moment.

Tom broke the silence. "How did the rest of the dinner go? Professionally, I mean."

The obvious attempt to change the subject might have seemed abrupt, but Tom sensed they both needed a moment to step back from the emotional edge they'd been approaching.

"It went well," Jess said after a pause, allowing the pivot. "Webb was impressed with my concepts. He wants me to be part of the design team, with creative control within the established budget."

"That's huge, Jess," Tom said, genuine pride breaking through the tension. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," she replied, some warmth returning to her voice. "It is a big opportunity. We're meeting again when he's back in Austin in a few weeks to finalize the approach."

"I'm proud of you," Tom said. "Really."

"I know," Jess acknowledged. "That's one thing I've never doubted."

A couple seconds ticked by without conversation, each lost in private thoughts.

"Oh," Jess said suddenly, as if remembering something. "You never responded to my text about Bob."

Tom's stomach dropped. In the emotional chaos of their conversation, he'd completely forgotten about her earlier message.

"Bob called me 'princess' today," Jess continued. "The same word you've started using during sex. Isn't that a strange coincidence?"

Tom's mind raced, calculating his options. The truth, that he'd heard Bob use the term while masturbating to photos of Jess, seemed impossible to explain now, especially

after the conversation they'd just had. Yet another lie would only compound the problem.

"It is strange," Tom agreed, attempting to sound casual. "Must be a weird coincidence."

"Is it, though?" Jess pressed. "It's such a specific term of endearment. Not honey or babe or something common. Princess."

"I don't know what to tell you," Tom said, hearing the defensive note in his own voice. "Maybe I heard him use it around the house and it stuck in my subconscious."

"When would that have happened?" Jess questioned. "He's never called me that before today, at least not that I've heard."

"I don't know, Jess," Tom's response came out more irritably than he'd intended. "Maybe it's just a coincidence. It's not that unusual a term, is it?"

"It just feels strange," Jess said, clearly not satisfied with his explanation. "Like there's something you're not telling me."

The accuracy of her intuition was unnerving. "I'm not hiding anything," Tom lied, hating himself for it even as the words left his mouth. "We can talk more about it when I get back, okay? Face to face."

Jess was silent for a long moment. "Fine," she agreed finally. "When you get back."

"I land at 9 AM Saturday," Tom reminded her. "Will you pick me up?"

"Of course," Jess replied. "I said I would."

"Right," Tom nodded to himself. "Thanks."

Another silence descended, this one distinctly uncomfortable.

"It's late," Jess said eventually. "I should get some sleep. Early meeting tomorrow."

"Yeah," Tom agreed. "Me too. Big day with the Meridian team."

"Goodnight, Tom."

"Goodnight, Jess. I love you."

There was the briefest of pauses before she replied, "I love you too."

The call ended, leaving Tom alone in his hotel room. He set his phone on the nightstand and lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

What a fucking mess.

The evening had started with anticipation, peaked with arousal during Jess's fabricated story, then crashed into something much more complicated. She'd exposed something raw and uncomfortable about his fantasy, forcing him to confront its implications more directly than he'd been prepared to do.

"You want me to sleep with random guys and tell you about it because it turns you on."

The blunt assessment had been horrifying to hear spoken aloud, yet he couldn't deny its fundamental truth. But there was more to it, wasn't there? It wasn't just about sex. It was about seeing Jess through others' eyes, about the thrill of knowing she could have anyone but chose to come home to him, about the vulnerability and trust required to explore such forbidden territory together.

Or was that just how he justified it to himself?

And now there was the added complication of Bob's "princess" comment, another secret threatening to unravel everything. He should have told her the truth from the beginning. Should have admitted what he'd seen. But how do you tell your wife that you watched your tenant masturbate to her photos and said nothing? That you overheard him murmuring "princess" as he climaxed, and then, in some perverse response, incorporated the very same word into your own bedroom talk?

It was too late now. The longer he waited, the worse the eventual revelation would be. Jess already suspected something. Her intuition was too sharp to fool for long. She'd felt the hesitation in his response, noted the defensiveness in his tone.

Tom groaned and rolled onto his side, pulling a pillow over his head as if he could physically block out the complications of his own making. He'd tell her everything on Saturday, face to face. He'd come clean about Bob, about his own confused feelings, about everything. And hope like hell it wouldn't destroy them.

On Friday morning, Bob's eyes snapped open three minutes before his cheap digital alarm was set to chime. Decades of construction work had programmed his internal clock. He reached over and disabled the alarm, the plastic buttons clicking under his thumb.

He lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening. No footsteps upstairs. Jess wouldn't be up for at least another two hours if her patterns held true.

Bob swung his legs over the side of the bed. His semi-hard cock jutted forward, morning wood as reliable as sunrise despite his fifty-five years. He cupped himself briefly, giving his shaft a squeeze before padding across the bedroom to the bathroom.

He relieved himself, a torrent of piss splashing loudly into the toilet bowl. He flushed and moved to the sink. As he brushed his teeth, he studied himself in the mirror. The face that looked back at him wasn't the one that had charmed Sarah all those years ago. Not even the one that had convinced Karen that he was worth the risk after his first divorce. But it was a face that still held power, if used correctly.

Bob spat into the sink, rinsed his brush, and wiped his mouth on a towel. His mind leapt ahead to the laptop waiting on his desk, to the night's recordings that might reveal glimpses into the increasingly complicated dynamic unfolding between the Marshalls.

He'd waited up last night, watching from behind his blinds as the Uber pulled into the driveway. Jess had emerged from the back seat in that gorgeous burgundy dress he'd heard Tom suggest. Bob had nearly broken his neck racing to the laptop, fingers clumsy with anticipation as he logged into the camera feed.

But the bedroom remained empty. He'd watched the still frame of the unoccupied room, the bottom corner of the perfectly made bed, the entrance to the walk-in closet, all bathed in darkness until finally, exhaustion had won out over voyeuristic determination. He'd gone to bed, dick half-hard and unsatisfied.

Bob moved to his bedroom. He pulled on a faded blue t-shirt and work jeans, not bothering with underwear. The rough denim against his cock was a constant reminder of what hung between his legs, the tool that those pretty college boys with their designer suits and corporate titles couldn't match. Natural selection's great equalizer.

The coffee maker gurgled to life at his touch, the familiar aroma filling his small kitchen as he retrieved a chipped mug from the cabinet. After it brewed, Bob moved to his desk and woke the laptop from sleep.

The camera feed loaded almost immediately. Bob leaned forward, eyes fixed on the screen. At the bottom of the frame, he could make out feet beneath covers on the bed. Jess was still asleep.

He clicked on the timeline, scrolling back to the previous night. The recording showed an empty room after Jess had arrived home. Nothing but stillness and shadow where he'd hoped to see her undressing with his electronic eye.

"Fucking waste," he muttered, taking a gulp of black coffee.

He fast-forwarded, the timeline speeding up until Jess entered the frame. She was wearing the burgundy dress, her phone pressed to her ear, body language tense in a way that immediately piqued Bob's interest.

The audio was low but clear enough. Bob increased the volume.

"Thanks," Jess's voice came through his speakers.

Bob watched as she walked toward the closet, her movements suggesting the kind of restless energy that came with difficult conversations.

"It is a big opportunity," her voice continued. "We're meeting again when he's back in Austin in a few weeks to finalize the approach."

A pause, then, "I know. That's one thing I've never doubted."

She seemed to be wrapping up a conversation, something about her work perhaps, but then her voice sharpened with sudden interest.

Then her voice sharpened with sudden interest. "Oh, you never responded to my text about Bob."

Bob's heart rate accelerated at the mention of his name. He reached for his notebook, pen hovering over a fresh page, ready to document whatever was coming next.

"Bob called me 'princess' today," Jess continued, a note of suspicion evident in her tone. "The same word you've started using during sex. Isn't that a strange coincidence?"

Bob's pen froze midway to the paper. He stared at the screen, processing what he'd just heard. Tom had been using "princess" during sex?

A slow smile spread across Bob's face as understanding dawned immediately. He'd given her that nickname in his head the moment he saw her, the gorgeous blonde princess living in her castle, the very same nickname he'd given Sarah. Must have been muttering it while jerking off to Jess's photos the night he'd caught Tom watching him through the window.

Bob's smile widened. Tom, that fucking voyeur, had heard him call Jess "princess" while stroking himself to completion and then, this was the delicious part, Tom had incorporated it into his own bedroom talk.

"Is it, though?" Jess pressed on. "It's such a specific term of endearment. Not honey or babe or something common. Princess."

Bob began writing rapidly, documenting every word of the one-sided conversation. This was valuable intelligence, the kind of information that created leverage. Jess was suspicious. She sensed something wasn't right. And Tom, poor Tom, was fumbling through some explanation on the other end of the line.

"When would that have happened? He's never called me that before today, at least not that I've heard."

There was a longer pause as Tom presumably offered some weak justification, some attempt to explain away the coincidence.

"It just feels strange," Jess continued. "Like there's something you're not telling me."

Christ, if she only knew. Bob suppressed a laugh, imagining the conversation upstairs, Tom stammering through explanations, caught between confession and lies. What could he possibly say? "Sorry honey, I was watching our tenant jerk off to your photos and heard him call you princess, and somehow that word just slipped into our bedroom talk"?

"Fine," she said, voice clipped with frustration. "When you get back."

In the recording, Jess disappeared from frame completely as she moved to the walk-in closet. When she reemerged minutes later, she had changed into a loose t-shirt and what looked like sleep shorts.

She moved around the room, preparing for bed. The rest of the conversation unfolded in fragments, each piece adding to the puzzle Bob was assembling.

The screen showed Jess climbing into bed, covers pulled up. Then stillness for the rest of the night.

Bob sat back in his chair, tapping his pen against the notebook, mind racing with possibilities. This new revelation about "princess" was the perfect complement to what he already knew about the Marshalls' arrangement.

He flipped back through the pages of his notebook, reviewing his previous observations, particularly his notes from their conversation about Chris Webb's dinner and Tom encouraging Jess to "do whatever excites her." He'd already confirmed that Tom had voyeuristic tendencies, that he was aroused by other men wanting his wife. This "princess" connection added a crucial dimension.

Tom had been there that night, watching Bob masturbate to photos of Jess, and had never admitted it to her. That alone was powerful leverage. It was direct evidence of Tom's deception, of secrets kept from his wife.

Bob reached for his phone, scrolling through contacts until he found Tom's number. His thumb hovered over it, considering. Too direct. Too soon. Better to wait for the right moment, the perfect opportunity to drive the wedge between them.

Bob stared at his notes, considering. He flipped to a fresh page. At the top, he wrote "Saturday Strategy" in neat block letters. Below, he began outlining his plan.

He needed to engineer a situation where he could speak to Tom alone, even briefly, before the couple had time to resolve whatever tensions had been building between them.

Bob drummed his fingers on the desk, mind working through the problem. He needed a reason to intercept Tom immediately upon his return, something that would seem urgent enough to separate him from Jess for a few crucial minutes. Something plausible, something that wouldn't raise suspicion. Then, in those few crucial minutes alone, he'd drop his bombshell.

Nothing explicit. Nothing that could be proven, nothing that would expose Bob's own surveillance. He wouldn't mention the "princess" term at all. Wouldn't even hint at it. Instead, he'd focus entirely on what he knew Tom had seen that night, on the voyeurism Tom had never admitted to Jess. Just enough pressure to establish dominance, to let Tom know that Bob held power over him, without showing his full hand.

The psychological warfare would be devastating. Tom would return home, already anxious about facing Jess after their tense phone conversation, only to discover that Bob knew his secret. He'd be trapped between exposing himself to Jess or playing whatever game Bob was initiating.

Bob mapped out several potential paths, depending on whether Tom tried to bluff, plead, threaten, or negotiate. But regardless of which route things took, the dynamic between them would be forever altered. Bob would have established dominance. The rest would follow naturally.

He wouldn't script exact phrases. That would sound rehearsed, unnatural. Better to internalize the key points, the pressure he wanted to apply, and let the specific wording emerge organically in the moment. The important thing was to convey that he knew what Tom had seen, that Tom's secret was no longer safe, and that the consequences of exposure would be significant.

After two hours, Bob closed the notebook, satisfied. Saturday would be a turning point. Tom Marshall would return home, thinking he was escaping the pressures of San Diego only to find a more insidious pressure waiting for him.

Upstairs, a floorboard creaked. Jess would be getting up soon, preparing for her workday. Bob pictured her morning routine, imagined her stepping into the shower, water washing over naked skin, completely unaware of the machinations taking place below her feet.

The thought brought a smile to Bob's face. Poor Jessica Marshall. So beautiful, so professional, so certain of her place in the world. So confident in her marriage, despite

the recent explorations into territory she didn't fully comprehend. She had no idea what was coming, how her life was about to be upended.

But first, Tom. The keystone that, once removed, would bring the entire structure crashing down.

Everything was falling into place. All he needed was patience, timing, and the right words at the right moment. By this time tomorrow, the first domino would have fallen.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 08

Bob Caldwell sat at his kitchen table. The mug of coffee between his palms had gone cold an hour ago, but he hadn't bothered to reheat it. His focus lay elsewhere, specifically, on the driveway that remained empty since Jessica Marshall had pulled out in her Tesla earlier that morning.

He'd spotted her from behind his partially opened blinds looking fresh despite the early hour. She dressed in dark jeans and a simple white blouse, her blonde hair pulled back in a casual ponytail. Going to pick up her husband from the airport, no doubt. Tom Marshall, returning from his San Diego business trip.

Bob checked his watch again. He had no idea exactly when Tom's flight would land, when they would return.

He moved to the window again, adjusting the blinds just enough to afford him a clear view of the driveway without exposing himself. Waiting to spring a trap on a man who thought himself smarter, more sophisticated, more deserving than Bob could ever be.

College educated Thomas Marshall with his corporate title and management consulting bullshit was just as much of an animal as the rest of them. For all his pedigree and polish, Tom had stood in the dark, watching another man jerk off to photos of his wife. What separated them wasn't morality or restraint, just opportunity and admission.

Bob had spent the previous evening refining his approach, rehearsing key phrases that would cut straight to Tom's insecurities. The goal wasn't to destroy the man. It was to establish dominance, to position himself not as a threat to be eliminated but as a resource to be utilized.

He returned to the table, picking up the notebook where he'd outlined his strategy. The pages were filled with his neat block handwriting, a remnant of drafting classes from his early twenties, when architectural drawings had required exactness long before computers took over.

Through his open window, Bob heard it before he saw it, the distinct sound of the Tesla approaching. He moved back to his position by the window, watching as it pulled into the driveway.

Timing was everything. He needed to intercept them immediately, before Tom had a chance to get his bearings, before he could start any conversation about confessions or revelations with Jess. Bob had surmised that Tom would be jet-lagged, emotionally

off-balance from their phone conversation Thursday night, and completely unprepared for a confrontation.

Bob watched through the window as both car doors opened, and Tom emerged from the passenger side, looking precisely as Bob had anticipated. Tired, slightly rumpled from the flight, shoulders carrying the rigid tension of a man with too many secrets and too few allies. Perfect.

Bob slipped out his door, making his way toward the front yard with the pace of someone addressing a minor but time-sensitive issue. He changed his features into a mask of mild concern, not emergency-level panic that would alarm Jess, but just enough urgency to justify immediate attention.

"Welcome back, stranger!" Bob called out as he approached. He kept his tone casual, neighborly, with just enough volume to announce his presence before they reached their front door.

Tom froze momentarily, his hand on the handle of his rolling suitcase. Jess turned, a polite smile forming on her face.

"Bob," she acknowledged with a nod. "Morning."

Bob closed the distance. "Sorry to bother you folks. I know you just got home and all, but I've got a bit of a situation downstairs. I think there might be a leak in the kitchen."

The word 'leak' worked exactly as intended. Tom's posture shifted from exhausted traveler to landlord, professional obligation temporarily overshadowing personal fatigue.

"A leak?" Tom echoed. "Is it bad?"

"Can't tell yet," Bob replied with a shrug. "Could be nothing, could be a burst pipe. Noticed some moisture near the sink. Just thought you might want to take a look before it gets worse. I can handle it myself, but figured you'd want to know, being the owner and all."

Jess stepped forward, concern replacing annoyance. "Do you need both of us to come take a look?"

This was the delicate pivot point, the moment when Bob needed to separate them without raising suspicion. "No need for the whole cavalry," he said, offering his most disarming smile. "Just figured Tom might want to see what we're dealing with."

Tom glanced at Jess. "I should probably check it out," he said. "Won't take long, hopefully."

Jess hesitated, her eyes moving from Tom to Bob and back again. “I can come too,” she offered.

“Don’t worry about it,” Bob interjected smoothly. “Just some water and pipes. Nothing exciting. Besides, looks like you’ve got luggage to sort out.” He gestured toward Tom’s suitcase.

Tom nodded, setting his suitcase upright. “I’ll just be a few minutes,” he told Jess.

For a moment, Bob thought she might insist on coming anyway. Her eyes narrowed slightly but then she nodded, reaching for Tom’s suitcase handle. “Okay. Don’t be too long, though. You need to rest.”

“Yes ma’am,” Tom replied with a weak smile.

Bob watched as Jess headed toward their front door, the suitcase rolling behind her. He kept his expression neutral despite the satisfaction blooming inside him.

“This way,” Bob said, gesturing toward his ground floor unit. “Thanks for taking a look. Appreciate it.”

Tom followed silently. The man had no idea what was coming, and that knowledge alone made Bob feel ten feet tall.

As they approached his unit, Bob produced his key and unlocked the door. “After you,” he said, stepping back to let Tom enter first.

Tom stepped inside, and Bob followed, closing the door behind them with a soft click that seemed to echo in the stillness of the apartment. The space was tidy, every surface clean, every item in its place.

Bob turned towards Tom. “Between you and me, there’s no leak.”

Tom stopped abruptly. “Excuse me?”

“I said there’s no leak. Never was. Just needed a moment of your time, man to man.” He kept his tone casual, non-threatening.

“What’s this about?” Tom demanded, his voice caught between confusion and rising alarm.

“Why don’t we sit down,” Bob suggested, gesturing toward the small kitchen table.

Tom remained standing, his body language transitioning from confused to defensive. “I should get back upstairs. Jess is waiting.”

“Jess can wait five minutes,” Bob replied. “This conversation has been two weeks coming. Since that first Saturday night, in fact.”

The color drained from Tom's face so rapidly that Bob had to suppress a smile.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tom attempted.

Bob smiled. "Sure you do, Tom. First night I moved in. The pool photoshoot. You suggested it, remember? Had me taking pictures of your wife in that wet swimsuit."

Tom swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing visibly. "What about it?"

"After the photos, after dinner, when you two went upstairs," Bob continued, watching Tom's discomfort grow with each word, "you came back downstairs, didn't you? Came out to the yard to get something you'd left behind."

Tom's hand moved to the back of his neck, a nervous tell if ever Bob had seen one. "I don't remember."

"Sure you do," Bob pressed. "You were out there. You saw me in my unit, through the window. Saw me masturbating to those photos of Jess. And you watched, Tom. You stood there outside my window and watched until I finished."

Tom's face had gone pale. His eyes darted toward the door as if calculating the distance, the probability of escape without further confrontation. "I don't-"

"Don't insult my intelligence," Bob cut him off. "We both know what happened. I saw you that night, just like you saw me."

"What do you want, Bob?"

Bob pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat down, gesturing for Tom to take the seat opposite. This time, Tom complied, his legs seeming to give out beneath him as he sank into the chair.

"Now we're communicating," Bob said. "What do I want? That's an interesting question. Not what you might think."

"Money?" Tom asked.

Bob snorted, genuinely amused. "Christ, no. I'm not blackmailing you, Tom. This isn't about that at all."

"Then what?" Suspicion and confusion warred on Tom's face.

Bob leaned back in his chair, adopting a more conversational posture. "I want to talk about what that moment revealed. About why a successful, educated man like yourself was standing outside another man's window, watching him masturbate to photos of his wife."

Tom stared at the tabletop, his expression a study in shame and discomfort. "It was a mistake," he muttered. "I shouldn't have-"

“But you did,” Bob interrupted. “And that tells me something about you, Tom. Something I recognized because I’ve been there myself.”

Tom’s head snapped up. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve got certain... inclinations,” Bob stated. “Desires that most men don’t talk about, at least not openly. The kind of feelings that make you question yourself, that leave you confused.”

Tom’s breathing had become shallow, his eyes wide. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know more than you think,” Bob replied calmly. “Not because I’m psychic. I know because I recognize the signs. My first wife, Sarah and I, we went through something similar.”

Tom’s brow furrowed in confusion.

Bob continued, telling the story he’d constructed the night before. “Sarah was beautiful, not unlike your Jess. Different, of course, shorter, curvier, but still the kind of woman men noticed. Early in our marriage, I started having these thoughts, these fantasies about other men wanting her, looking at her.”

He paused, gauging Tom’s reaction. The younger man was listening intently now, his attention captured.

“At first, I hid it,” Bob continued. “Felt ashamed. What kind of man gets turned on thinking about his wife with someone else? But the thoughts wouldn’t go away. So finally, I told her.”

Tom stayed silent.

“We were young, experimental. She was curious.” Bob shrugged. “We started small. She’d tell me stories about guys checking her out. Later, we’d fuck like teenagers, best sex of our lives.”

Tom shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I made mistakes,” Bob said, his tone shifting to something more serious. “We took it too far. Started involving friends in our exploration. The boundaries got blurry. Sarah started enjoying her freedom more than our marriage. Started seeing some of those guys without telling me. You know how it ended.”

“She cheated,” Tom said quietly.

Bob nodded. “With one of those friends. Someone who’d started as just a fantasy, a tool in our sex life. Became much more than that.” He sighed. “The fantasies you’re

having, Tom? They're normal. More common than you'd think. But they need to be handled carefully. With respect for the marriage, with clear boundaries."

Tom's expression had transformed from embarrassment to cautious interest. "What makes you think I have these... fantasies?"

"Because men who don't have them don't let other men take pictures of their wife in a wet swimsuit, Tom. They certainly don't stand outside windows watching other men masturbate to photos of their wives," Bob replied bluntly. "They get angry, violent even. They confront the situation. You didn't. You watched, and then you kept it to yourself. That tells me everything I need to know."

"Even if what you're saying is true, why are you bringing this up now?"

Bob leaned forward. "Because I think I might be able to help you. Both of you, actually."

"Help us?" Tom's disbelief couldn't have been more evident. "How exactly would you do that?"

"By offering what neither of you can find anywhere else," Bob replied. "A controlled environment. A safe space to explore these feelings without risking your marriage."

Tom's eyes narrowed.

"I'm suggesting that I'm in a unique position here," Bob continued. "I'm not a friend whose friendship you'd risk. I'm not a colleague whose gossip could damage your career. I'm not a complete stranger who might turn out to be dangerous. I'm just Bob, your tenant, with a clear understanding of what's at play and the experience to navigate them safely."

"You think we should... what? Use you to explore my fantasies?" The incredulity in Tom's voice was almost comical.

Bob chuckled, keeping his tone light. "I'm just saying, if these feelings don't go away, and trust me, they won't, they're going to be explored one way or another. Either in a controlled environment where everyone's intentions are clear, or in ways you can't control."

"Jess would never agree to something like that," Tom said.

"Maybe," Bob conceded. "But women like Jess, beautiful, confident, often have unexplored desires they're afraid to vocalize. Especially to the men they love most."

"What do you mean?" Tom asked.

"It's paradoxical," Bob said, as if sharing profound wisdom. "But sometimes the person we're most afraid of judgment from is the one we're closest to. Jess might have

feelings, desires, fantasies she'd never admit to you directly, not because she doesn't trust you, but because she loves you too much to risk your opinion of her."

Tom's expression suggested Bob's words had struck a nerve. "You don't know Jess."

"I know human nature," Bob countered smoothly. "And I've observed how she carries herself, how carefully she presents herself to the world. Women like that often compartmentalize their sexuality, showing only what they believe is acceptable."

Tom fell silent, his mind clearly racing with implications.

"Look," Bob continued, his voice taking on a more empathetic tone, "I'm not pushing for anything specific here. I'm just offering my perspective as someone who's been down this road before. Like I said, these feelings will either be explored in a healthy, controlled way, or they'll emerge in ways that might damage your marriage."

"And you think you're the solution?" Tom asked, skepticism creeping back into his voice.

"I'm not claiming to be the solution," Bob replied carefully. "Just a potential resource. Someone who understands from experience. Someone who's available if you decide this is something worth exploring."

Tom's gaze moved to the wall, toward the ceiling, as if he could see through it to where Jess waited upstairs. "What's in this for you??"

The question was the crux of the matter, the point where Bob needed to balance honesty with manipulation. He'd prepared for this particular pivot carefully. He paused, as if considering Tom's question deeply.

"Three things," Bob said. "First, I'm genuinely glad we can talk about the masturbation thing openly now. It was awkward knowing you'd seen that and neither of us acknowledging it." He offered a self-deprecating smile, playing up the harmless older man angle. "Getting that out in the open is a relief."

Tom remained silent, waiting for the rest.

"Second," Bob continued, "maybe it sounds sappy, but after losing two marriages, I've been thinking about what wisdom I might pass on. What mistakes others could avoid with the right guidance. Helping a young couple navigate potentially treacherous waters has its own reward."

Tom continued to remain silent, just watching.

Bob's smile shifted to something more direct, more honest. "And third, your wife is gorgeous, Tom. I'm not going to pretend that if exploring these fantasies could involve

me in some capacity, that wouldn't be enjoyable. I'm not a saint, and I won't insult your intelligence by pretending otherwise."

Tom didn't react with the immediate anger or disgust. Instead, he seemed to be considering the admission, weighing its implications.

"Jess mentioned she's got projects coming up in Houston and Savannah," Bob added, careful to reference only what Jess had directly told him in conversation. "She'll be traveling. Meeting with clients. Working with people you don't know, in situations you can't control. Things will happen, Tom. That's life."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tom demanded, defensiveness flaring.

Bob raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Just that life has a way of presenting opportunities, whether we're looking for them or not. I'm offering a known quantity, something you could have input on, rather than leaving things to chance."

Tom stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor. "I need to get back upstairs."

Bob remained seated, his posture deliberately relaxed. "Of course. This is a lot to process. Too much for one conversation, probably."

"This is insane," Tom muttered, though he was speaking more to himself than to Bob. "You're suggesting-"

"I'm not suggesting anything specific," Bob interrupted gently. "Just opening a door to conversation. If you want to walk away and pretend this discussion never happened, that's entirely your prerogative. I'll respect that."

Tom stared at him, searching for deception or threat. "And if I do? If I walk out that door and we never speak of this again?"

"Then this stays between us," Bob assured him. "Man to man. Whatever you decide, Tom, this conversation remains private."

Tom ran a hand through his hair, his internal struggle evident in every tense line of his body. "I need to get back to Jess."

"Go ahead," Bob said, making no move to stop him. "She's waiting for you. Just know the offer stands, no expiration date. If you want to explore this further, I'm here… and Tom? For what it's worth, I genuinely believe most marriages would be healthier if people could discuss their desires openly, without judgment. You're not broken for having these feelings. Neither is Jess, whatever her desires might be."

Tom's hand found the doorknob, gripping it like a lifeline. "You said there was no leak?"

"No leak," Bob confirmed. "But if Jess asks, tell her it was just a loose connection under the sink. All fixed now."

Tom nodded again, opened the door, and stepped out without another word. Bob remained seated, listening to the receding footsteps as Tom made his way back toward the main house, back toward the unsuspecting Jess.

The trap had been set, the bait taken. Tom would be consumed by this conversation for days, turning Bob's words over in his mind, examining them from every angle. The seed had been planted. Now Bob just needed to water it occasionally, give it sunlight, and watch it grow.

Tom Marshall would come back. Bob was certain of it. Not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon. The relief of having his secret acknowledged, combined with the tantalizing possibility of exploring his fantasies safely, would be too powerful to resist.

Bob allowed himself a small, satisfied smile. Sometimes the most effective strategy wasn't blackmail or threats or outright confrontation. Sometimes it was simply understanding what a man wanted, needed, and positioning yourself as the path to obtaining it.

The first domino had fallen. Now it was only a matter of time until the rest followed, one by one, leading directly to Jessica Marshall.

Tom ascended the stairs, each step feeling heavier than the last. His mind replayed fragments of Bob's words on a relentless loop. "...standing outside another man's window, watching him masturbate to photos of his wife..."

He paused at the top of the staircase, forcing himself to take several deep breaths. Jess was waiting. He needed to compose himself, to bury the panic threatening to overwhelm him.

Bob knew. Bob had seen him that night, standing in the shadows, watching. And instead of confrontation or outrage, Bob had offered... what exactly? Guidance? Partnership? A solution to desires Tom barely understood himself?

"Three things," Bob had said. "First, I'm genuinely glad we can talk about the masturbation thing openly now... Second, maybe it sounds sappy, but after losing two marriages, I've been thinking about what wisdom I might pass on... And third, your wife is gorgeous, Tom."

Tom's hand tightened on the banister. The audacity of it all, the calm way Bob had dismantled Tom's defenses and presented himself as some kind of mentor in the art

of complicated desires. The man's assumptions weren't entirely wrong, which made everything worse.

The sound of movement from their bedroom pulled Tom back to the present moment. He straightened his shoulders, tried to arrange his features into something resembling normalcy, and moved toward the doorway.

Jess was bent over his suitcase, unpacking and sorting his clothes. She looked up as he entered, a smile brightening her features until she registered his expression.

"Hey," she said, setting down the shirt she'd been folding. "Is everything okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Just tired," Tom managed, attempting a reassuring smile that felt more like a grimace. "The flight was bumpy, couldn't sleep much."

Jess studied him, her head tilting slightly, that intuitive gaze seeing more than he wanted. "What did Bob want? Was there a leak?"

Tom felt a surge of irrational panic at the mention of Bob's name. "Loose connection under the sink," he recited the lie Bob had conveniently provided. "Nothing serious. He fixed it already."

"That was quick."

"Yeah," Tom agreed, eager to move the conversation away from Bob. "He knows his way around plumbing."

"Well, that's good," Jess said, turning back to the suitcase.

Tom moved toward the bathroom. "I think I'll take a quick shower. Wash off the travel grime."

She nodded. "Take your time. I'll make lunch while you shower."

Tom escaped into the bathroom, closing the door behind him perhaps more firmly than necessary. He stripped, his mind still churning with Bob's words, with the implications of the older man's offer, with the tangled mess of desire and shame that had been growing inside him.

The shower spray hit him with welcome force, hot water washing over tense muscles. Tom closed his eyes, letting physical sensation temporarily drown out the chaos in his mind. But even here, sanctuary eluded him as Bob's words continued to echo. "...these feelings don't go away, trust me, they won't, they're going to be explored one way or another. Either in a controlled environment where everyone's intentions are clear, or in ways you can't control."

Was Bob right? Were these urges Tom had been experiencing truly immutable, a permanent feature of his sexuality rather than some passing phase? And if so, what did that mean for his marriage, for his future with Jess?

Tom grabbed the soap, working it into a lather. The conversation with Jess loomed ahead, unavoidable and potentially devastating. She knew something was off. She'd sensed it in his voice during their Thursday night call, in his evasiveness about the "princess" connection.

How much should he reveal? The whole truth seemed impossible. Hey Jess, remember when Bob called you princess and I repeated that while we were having sex? Well, I said it because I heard him call you that while I watched him masturbate to your photos that first Saturday night. And now he's offering to help us explore my cuckold fantasies.

Tom's stomach turned at the thought. No, he couldn't tell her everything, not yet. Maybe not ever. But he needed to give her something, some truth they could build on.

By the time Tom emerged from the bathroom, towel wrapped around his waist, Jess had already left the bedroom. The suitcase was completely unpacked, his clothes neatly sorted on the bed. He dressed quickly in comfortable jeans and a plain white t-shirt, then padded barefoot toward the kitchen.

The smell of grilled cheese sandwiches greeted him before he entered. Jess stood at the stove, spatula in hand, expertly flipping a sandwich in the pan. Another plate already held a perfectly golden-brown sandwich, cut diagonally the way he liked it. A small side salad completed the simple meal.

"Perfect timing," Jess said without turning. "This one's almost done."

"Smells amazing," Tom replied, moving to the refrigerator. "Want anything to drink?"

"Just water for me."

Tom poured two glasses of water and set them on the table. He took his seat, watching Jess as she transferred the second sandwich to a plate and joined him.

"Comfort food," she said with a small smile. "Figured you could use it after traveling."

"Thanks," Tom said.

For a few moments, they ate in silence. Tom tried to focus on the food, on the simple pleasure of a perfectly made grilled cheese sandwich, on the fact that he was home with his wife after days apart. But Bob's voice kept intruding, fragments of their conversation replaying on an endless loop.

"If these feelings don't go away, and trust me, they won't..."

"Women like Jess, beautiful, confident, often have unexplored desires they're afraid to vocalize..."

"A controlled environment. A safe space to explore these feelings without risking your marriage..."

"Tom?" Jess's voice cut through his thoughts.

Tom blinked, realizing he'd been staring at his half-eaten sandwich without moving for who knows how long. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Just tired. And thinking about work."

"Meridian still a mess?" she asked.

"Yeah," he latched onto the excuse gratefully. "The implementation's behind schedule. Davis is breathing down everyone's neck. The usual corporate crisis."

Jess nodded, setting down her sandwich. "Look, I know you're tired. But I think we need to talk about Thursday night."

Tom's stomach clenched. "Right."

"I want to apologize," Jess began, surprising him. "Making up that story about Chris Webb was manipulative and unfair. I shouldn't have tested you like that."

Tom set his sandwich down. "Why did you?" he asked, genuinely curious despite everything else swirling in his mind.

Jess sighed, running a hand through her ponytail. "I don't know. After our conversations about flirting with other men, about exploring boundaries... I guess I wanted to see how far these fantasies really went for you. If they were really just about flirtation or if they were about... more."

"And you got your answer," Tom said quietly.

"I did," Jess agreed. "And it scared me a little, Tom. The way you reacted, how eager you were for details, how you were..." she hesitated, choosing her words carefully, "...physically aroused by the idea of me alone with Webb."

Tom felt heat rise to his face. "I'm sorry I reacted that way."

"Don't apologize for what turns you on," Jess said, reaching across the table to take his hand. "That's not what this is about. I'm not judging you, Tom. I'm trying to understand. I'm trying to figure out what this means for us, for our marriage."

Tom squeezed her hand. "I know. I'm trying to understand it too."

"The way you responded to my story," Jess continued, "it wasn't just that you believed it. You... wanted it to be true. At least part of you did."

Tom couldn't deny it. "It turned me on," he admitted.

"But you said you would have been okay with it," Jess pressed. "If the story had been real. If I'd really gone to Webb's hotel room. You said yes."

"In the heat of the moment, I said a lot of things," Tom replied carefully. "I think we both need to step back and figure out where our actual boundaries are before we go any further with this."

Jess studied his face. "That's what bothered me most, I think. Not that you have these fantasies, but that all the pressure was on me to decide how far to go. You kept saying 'do whatever feels right,' but that puts all the responsibility on me."

"You're right," Tom acknowledged. "That wasn't fair."

"It also makes me wonder if you even know what you want, Tom. Where your lines are. What you could handle in reality versus what excites you in fantasy."

It was a fair question, one he'd been avoiding even before this morning's confrontation.

"I don't think I do know," he admitted. "Not clearly enough."

Jess nodded, her expression softening. "That's okay. This is new territory for both of us."

Tom seized the opening. "I was thinking… why don't we take a step back from all of this. No more flirting with other men, no pushing boundaries, just us focusing on each other for now."

"Even Bob?" Jess asked, her gaze direct.

Tom nearly choked on his water. "What about Bob?"

"Well, we talked about me possibly flirting with him as a way to test the waters. You seemed excited by that idea before you left for San Diego."

"I know, but..." Tom struggled to find the words that would dissuade her without revealing why. "I think we should pause everything until we're on the same page with boundaries. Including anything with Bob."

"Okay," Jess agreed. "No flirting with Bob. Or anyone else."

"Right," Tom said. "Let's just focus on us for now."

“Speaking of us,” Jess continued, “there’s something else we need to talk about. The ‘princess’ thing.”

Tom felt his chest tighten. “What about it?”

“It just seems strange that Bob would use the exact same endearment you’ve suddenly started using in bed,” Jess said, watching his face carefully. “I mean, what are the odds of that being coincidence?”

“Pretty slim, I guess,” Tom said, struggling to maintain eye contact. “But I honestly don’t know how else to explain it. Maybe I heard him use it around the house and it got stuck in my subconscious?”

“When would that have happened, though?” Jess pressed. “You and Bob haven’t spent much time together without me present, and he’s never called me that before, at least not that I’ve heard.”

Tom shrugged, aiming for casual confusion though his heart hammered in his chest. “It’s just a coincidence, Jess. A weird one, but still just a coincidence.”

Jess held his gaze for a long moment, clearly not satisfied with his answer. But to his surprise, she simply nodded and said, “Okay.”

“Okay?” Tom echoed, uncertain.

“If you say it’s a coincidence, then it’s a coincidence,” she said, her tone neutral in a way that somehow felt more concerning than anger or suspicion would have been.

Tom knew he should find a more convincing explanation, but exhaustion was catching up with him, compounded by the emotional toll of his confrontation with Bob.

“Listen,” he said, running a hand over his face. “I’m sorry I’m not more present right now. Between the travel, the Meridian disaster, and everything else... I just feel drained.”

Jess’s expression immediately softened with concern. “Of course you’re tired. I’m pushing too hard when you’ve just gotten back from a business trip.”

“It’s not that,” Tom assured her. “These conversations are important. I just don’t think I’m in the right frame of mind for them right now.”

“It’s okay,” Jess said, standing to clear their plates. “We can have a normal weekend. You should rest, recharge.”

Tom followed her to the sink, wrapping his arms around her from behind as she rinsed the dishes. “I was thinking,” he murmured against her hair. “Maybe Friday night we

could go out for dinner. Just the two of us. Talk about everything properly when I'm not half-asleep and stressed about work."

Jess turned in his arms, her face brightening. "I'd like that. Where are you thinking?"

"Somewhere nice," Tom replied. "Dressy enough for that green dress you looked so amazing in at the Skyline party."

Her smile widened. "That sounds perfect."

Tom kissed her forehead. For a brief, tender moment, they were just Tom and Jess, husband and wife, planning a date night. No complicated fantasies, no manipulative tenant, no secrets threatening to unravel their life.

"I should probably get some work done this afternoon," Tom said reluctantly. "Catch up on emails, prep for Monday."

"Do what you need to do," Jess replied. "I was thinking of running to Whole Foods anyway. We're out of pretty much everything."

"And maybe hit the gym after?" Tom suggested, knowing her usual weekend routine.

"Probably," Jess agreed. "You don't mind?"

"Not at all. I'll be buried in my office for a few hours anyway." The thought of his office, his sanctuary within their home, called to him. A place where he could sort through his thoughts without Jess's perceptive gaze catching every flicker of emotion.

They separated, each moving toward their respective tasks. Tom retreated to his office, closing the door behind him with a sense of both relief and guilt. He sat at his desk but made no move to open his laptop. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, eyes closed, and allowed Bob's words to replay in full.

"...The fantasies you're having, Tom? They're normal. More common than you'd think. But they need to be handled carefully. With respect for the marriage, with clear boundaries..."

"...Men who don't have them don't let other men take pictures of their wife in a wet swimsuit, Tom. They certainly don't stand outside windows watching other men masturbate to photos of their wives..."

"...Women like Jess, beautiful, confident, often have unexplored desires they're afraid to vocalize. Especially to the men they love most..."

That last part had burrowed deep into his consciousness. Could it be true? Did Jess harbor desires she was afraid to share with him? The thought seemed absurd on its surface. They'd always been open with each other, honest about their needs and wants.

But then again, he'd kept his own growing desires secret until recently. He'd stood outside Bob's window that night, watching, aroused, and never breathed a word of it to Jess. Perhaps they both had depths they were afraid to explore together.

Tom shook his head, trying to clear it. Bob was manipulating him, that much was obvious. The man wanted access to Jess, had admitted as much directly. "Your wife is gorgeous, Tom. I'm not going to pretend that if exploring these fantasies could involve me in some capacity, that wouldn't be enjoyable."

The audacity of it still stunned him. And yet, there had been something disarmingly honest about Bob's approach. No pretense, no false morality, just an acknowledgment of desire coupled with a claim of experience and wisdom.

Tom's stomach churned as he remembered another part of Bob's speech. "We took it too far. Started involving friends in our exploration. The boundaries got blurry. Sarah started enjoying her freedom more than our marriage. Started seeing some of those guys without telling me."

Was that the real danger here? Not that exploring these fantasies would damage Tom's psyche, but that Jess might discover she preferred the excitement of novelty to the comfort of their marriage?

Tom forced himself to open his laptop, to at least maintain the pretense of working. His inbox overflowed with emails from the Meridian project, each one marked urgent, each one adding to the weight pressing down on him. He began sorting through them, his mind still half-occupied with Bob's words and their implications.

The sound of Jess's Tesla whirring in the driveway barely registered. She was going to Whole Foods. Then the gym. Normal weekend activities. Except nothing felt normal anymore.

Tom's cell phone buzzed with a text. He glanced at it, half-expecting it to be from Bob. But it was Davis, checking in on some detail from the Meridian implementation. Tom responded quickly, grateful for the mundane distraction.

The afternoon stretched ahead of him, hours alone in the house with nothing but his thoughts and Bob's voice echoing in his mind. Tom stared at his screen, the words blurring as his concentration wavered. What would he say to Jess when she returned? How could he maintain normalcy when everything had shifted so dramatically beneath the surface?

One thing was clear. He needed distance from Bob. He'd suggested pausing their "exploration" partly to protect Jess from his own complicated feelings, but also to buy time, to figure out how to handle the knowledge that Bob knew his secret.

Tom's mind drifted to the alternative scenario, the path where he told Jess everything. About standing outside Bob's window. About Bob's offer. He tried to imagine her reaction, playing out the scene in his mind.

She would be hurt, obviously. Betrayed by his silence. But beyond that, how would she respond to the revelation that their tenant had offered to help them explore Tom's fantasies? That Bob had admitted to finding her attractive, to being willing to participate? Would she be disgusted? Afraid? Or would there be a flicker of curiosity, the same curiosity she'd exhibited when discussing the possibility of flirting with other men?

Tom shook his head, banishing the thought. No, he couldn't tell Jess. Not yet, maybe not ever. Better to keep Bob at arm's length, to shut down any further exploration until this situation with Bob had somehow resolved itself.

But how? Bob wasn't going anywhere. He had a lease. He lived beneath them, shared their home. Complete avoidance wasn't possible. And now he held this power over Tom, this knowledge that could destroy everything if revealed in the wrong way.

Tom's gaze drifted to the open document on his screen, a halfway composed email response about data migration protocols that suddenly seemed absurdly trivial compared to the personal crisis unfolding in his life.

He let his head fall into his hands, fingers pressing against his temples as though he could physically force his thoughts into some kind of order. There were too many variables, too many potential paths forward, none of them free from risk.

Should he confront Bob directly? Tell him to back off, to forget what he saw, to maintain a strictly tenant-landlord relationship?

Should he acknowledge Bob's offer but firmly decline, keeping communication open while establishing clear boundaries?

Should he continue as if nothing had happened, avoiding Bob when possible and hoping the situation would somehow resolve itself with time?

None of these options felt satisfactory. Each carried its own dangers, its own potential for disaster. And hanging over all of them was the uncomfortable fact that part of Tom, a part he was increasingly unable to ignore, was intrigued by Bob's offer.

Not because he wanted Bob specifically involved in their lives. The thought of the older man touching Jess still made Tom's skin crawl with a complicated mixture of revulsion and if he was honest, intense arousal. But because Bob had articulated something Tom had been feeling for months, that these desires weren't going away,

that they needed some sort of outlet, some form of exploration that wouldn't threaten the foundation of his marriage.

Tom forced himself to return to his email, to focus on the concrete, the manageable, the aspects of his life he could still control. Work had always been his refuge, the place where complexities yielded to analysis and hard work. But today, even that sanctuary felt compromised.

He typed mechanically, going through the motions of professionalism while his mind continued to churn with Bob's words and their implications. The afternoon crept by, marked only by the steady ticking of the wall clock and the occasional ping of incoming messages.

At some point, Tom realized he'd been staring at the same paragraph for nearly twenty minutes without comprehending a single word. He pushed back from his desk with a frustrated sigh, rubbing his eyes as if he could physically wipe away the mental exhaustion.

The house felt too quiet without Jess. Tom wandered into the kitchen for a glass of water, his gaze involuntarily drawn to the floor, to where Bob existed beneath them, probably planning his next move in whatever game he was playing.

"What am I doing?" Tom murmured to himself. He was Tom Marshall, successful management consultant, respected professional, husband to a brilliant and beautiful woman. He wasn't some pawn to be manipulated by a twice-divorced handyman with boundary issues.

And yet, here he stood in his kitchen, jumpier than a teenager caught with porn, all because Bob Caldwell had seen him watching through a window and called him on it.

Tom drained his glass and set it in the sink. This had to stop. He needed a strategy, a plan, something more substantive than avoiding Bob and hoping the problem would solve itself.

His phone buzzed with a text.

Jess: Almost done at Whole Foods. Need anything specific?

The normalcy of the message grounded him. This was his life, texting his wife about groceries, making weekend plans, managing work stress. Bob Caldwell was a complication, not a catastrophe.

Tom: We're out of coffee. And maybe some of those cookies I like?

Jess: Already got the coffee. Will grab cookies. Home in about 30.

Tom smiled. She knew him so well, had anticipated his needs before he even expressed them. This was what mattered, this connection, this shared understanding that went beyond words.

He returned to his office with renewed determination. He would finish out the workday properly, be present for Jess when she returned, have a normal weekend. Friday night's dinner would be a chance to reconnect, to strengthen their bond before figuring out how to handle the Bob situation.

The next hour passed in genuine productivity as Tom focused on his inbox, responding to urgent messages and organizing his thoughts for Monday's meetings. The familiar rhythm of work settled his nerves, providing structure and purpose when everything else felt uncertain.

He heard Jess's car pull into the driveway but remained at his desk, finishing the email he'd been composing. By the time he emerged from his office, she was already halfway through unpacking groceries, reusable bags spread across the kitchen counter.

"Hey," she greeted him with a smile. "Productive afternoon?"

"Got through most of my inbox," Tom replied, moving to help her. "How was Whole Foods?"

"Packed," Jess said. "Saturday afternoon chaos, as usual. But I got everything on the list, plus those chocolate chip cookies you love."

"My hero," Tom said, pulling her into a brief hug. The simple physical contact steadied him, reminded him of what was real and important.

"I was thinking," Jess said as they continued unpacking groceries, "maybe we could order in tonight? Watch a movie? Keep it low key."

"Sounds perfect," Tom agreed.

"But I'm still heading to the gym," she added. "Need to clear my head a bit."

Tom nodded, understanding the feeling all too well. "Take your time. I'll be here."

When everything was stored, Jess headed to the bedroom to change for the gym. Tom followed, settling onto the edge of the bed to watch as she gathered her workout clothes.

"You seem better," she observed, pulling her hair into a tighter ponytail.

"I feel better," Tom replied, and it wasn't entirely a lie. "Work helped, honestly. Looking at concrete problems, finding solutions..."

"Your happy place," Jess teased, but her smile was affectionate.

“One of them,” Tom corrected, his eyes following her movement around the room. “The other is right here, with you.”

Jess paused, her expression softening. She crossed to where he sat, leaning down to kiss him gently. “I’ve missed you,” she murmured against his lips.

“Missed you too,” Tom replied, meaning it completely despite everything else swirling beneath the surface. He deepened the kiss, his hands finding her waist, drawing her closer.

“If you keep that up,” Jess whispered as she pulled away slightly, “I might have to skip the gym.”

Tom smiled, tempted to take her up on the implicit offer. “Raincheck?” he suggested instead. “Tonight, after dinner?”

“Definitely,” Jess agreed, reluctantly stepping back. She disappeared into the closet, emerging minutes later in her workout clothes, the black leggings and sports bra combination that never failed to make Tom’s mouth go dry.

“Shouldn’t be more than an hour,” she said, grabbing her gym bag. “Text if you think of anything else we need.”

“Will do,” Tom replied. “Have a good workout.”

After Jess left, Tom returned to the kitchen, pouring himself another glass of water. The silence of the house settled around him once more, but this time it felt less oppressive, more contemplative. He was Tom Marshall, and he was home. This was his sanctuary, his refuge, the place where he belonged.

Bob Caldwell and his manipulations were a problem, yes. A significant one. But not an insurmountable one. Tom would find a way to handle it, to protect his marriage, to navigate these complex desires without surrendering control to someone else’s agenda.

Friday night’s dinner would be the first step. A chance to reconnect with Jess, to reestablish their bond, to remind himself of what truly mattered.

For now, though, he would allow himself this moment of relative peace. The storm hadn’t passed. If anything, it was just gathering strength. But for this afternoon, in this quiet house, he could pretend that everything was normal, that his world wasn’t teetering on the edge of a precipice.

An hour later, when Jess returned from the gym flushed and energized from her workout, Tom greeted her with a genuine smile. They spent the evening as planned.

Takeout Thai food, a movie they'd been meaning to watch for months, comfortable conversation about everything and nothing.

Later, as promised, they made love slowly, tenderly, without the frantic edge that had characterized their recent encounters. Tom focused entirely on Jess, on her pleasure. No fantasies intruded, no third party existed in his mind. It was just them, husband and wife, finding their way back to each other amidst the gathering complications.

On Sunday morning, Tom woke before Jess, her body curled against his back, her breath warm against his neck. For a moment, he simply lay there, savoring the closeness, allowing himself to exist in the present without the intrusion of Bob's voice or the complicated tangle of desires that had been exposed.

When Jess stirred, mumbling sleepily against his shoulder, Tom turned to face her, watching as consciousness gradually claimed her. This was his favorite version of Jess, unguarded, soft with sleep before the day's demands forced her to don her professional armor.

"Morning," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"Mmm," Jess replied, eyes still closed. "What time is it?"

"Just after eight," Tom said, glancing at the bedside clock. "No rush."

Jess stretched beside him. "Coffee?" she offered, already knowing his answer.

"Please," Tom replied with a smile. "I'll start breakfast."

Jess handled coffee while Tom prepared eggs and toast. The normalcy felt both reassuring and somehow fragile, as if the foundation beneath their established life had shifted significantly. Tom found himself watching Jess more intently than usual, cataloging each familiar gesture, each routine interaction, like a man trying to memorize the details of a beloved landscape before a storm.

After breakfast, Tom moved to his office to catch up on work emails while Jess tackled the laundry that had accumulated during his trip.

Around noon, Tom heard a lawnmower start up outside. He moved to the window, glancing down to see Bob pushing a mower across their backyard.

"Bob's mowing the lawn," Tom called to Jess, who was folding clothes in their bedroom.

"That's nice of him," she replied, appearing in the doorway. "We didn't ask him to do that, did we?"

"No," Tom confirmed. "But the yard did need it."

They watched together for a moment, Bob oblivious to their observation. There was something disconcerting about the normality of it, their tenant performing basic yard maintenance as if yesterday's confrontation had never happened.

"Should we offer to help?" Jess asked.

Tom tensed involuntarily. The thought of facing Bob again, of forced casual conversation after everything that had passed between them, made his stomach clench.

"Sure," he managed.

They made their way down to the yard, Tom steeling himself for Bob's reaction. But when the older man spotted them, he simply waved, shutting off the mower as they approached.

"Afternoon," Bob called, his tone casual, friendly, utterly devoid of the intimate knowledge that had colored yesterday's conversation. "Figured the yard could use a trim."

"You didn't have to do that," Jess said, though her smile showed her appreciation. "But thank you."

"No trouble," Bob replied, wiping sweat from his forehead with a forearm. "Good to stay busy." His eyes moved to Tom, offering a nod that could have been interpreted a dozen different ways. "Nice day for it."

Tom searched Bob's face for some sign, some acknowledgment of what had passed between them, but found nothing beyond neighborly pleasantness. It was as if Bob had compartmentalized yesterday's conversation, tucking it away until it became useful again.

"Need any help?" Tom asked, forcing casualness into his voice.

"Almost done with the mowing," Bob said. "But if you wanted to edge along the fence line, that'd be appreciated."

For the next hour, the three of them worked together in the yard. Jess collected fallen branches and debris, piling them neatly for disposal. Tom handled the edging, the buzz of the trimmer filling his ears, drowning out the thoughts that had plagued him since yesterday. Bob finished the mowing, then moved on to pruning the rosebushes he'd weeded earlier in the week.

The physical labor provided Tom with a welcome distraction, a way to channel his nervous energy into something productive. By the time they finished, the yard looked

better than it had in years, the hedges neatly trimmed, the grass evenly cut, the flower beds free of weeds.

"Looks good," Bob observed, surveying their work with evident satisfaction. "Amazing what a few hours can do."

"It does look great," Jess agreed. "Thanks for getting us motivated, Bob. We've been neglecting the yard."

"Happy to help," Bob replied. "Think I'll grab a shower. Getting too old to be out in this heat all day."

With a final nod, Bob left for his downstairs unit, leaving Tom and Jess alone in the yard.

"That was nice," Jess commented, gathering her gardening gloves. "Working together like that."

"Yeah," Tom agreed automatically, though his mind was elsewhere, still trying to reconcile Bob's current behavior with yesterday's confrontation. Was this the man's strategy? To act as if nothing had happened, to maintain the appearance of the helpful tenant while positioning himself for whatever came next?

The remainder of Sunday passed with quiet domesticity. They prepared dinner together, dicing vegetables side by side at the counter, moving around each other in their kitchen. The conversation flowed easily, touching on work, friends, plans for the coming week. If Tom occasionally fell silent, lost in his thoughts about Bob's offer and its implications, Jess didn't comment.

That night, when they went to bed, Tom found himself reaching for Jess with unexpected urgency. Whether driven by the need to reaffirm their connection or simply to lose himself in physical sensation, he couldn't have said. But when their bodies joined, when Jess's breath quickened against his neck and her nails dug into his shoulders, Tom was present, focused entirely on the woman beneath him, on her pleasure.

No fantasies intruded, no shadow of Bob's influence darkened the moment. It was just them, husband and wife, finding comfort and release in each other's bodies. When they finished, both breathless and satisfied, Tom held Jess close.

"I love you," he murmured as sleep began to claim him.

"Love you too," Jess replied, her voice already soft with approaching dreams.

Monday shattered Sunday's peaceful rhythm. Tom's alarm blared at an ungodly early time, dragging him unwillingly from sleep. The Meridian implementation loomed like

a thundercloud on his professional horizon, promising a week of long hours and complex problem-solving.

Beside him, Jess stirred but didn't fully wake, merely burrowing deeper into the blankets as Tom slipped from bed. He showered quickly, dressed in his usual business attire, and made coffee, leaving a mug on Jess's nightstand before pressing a gentle kiss to her temple.

"Have a good day," she murmured, half-asleep.

"You too," Tom replied. "See you tonight."

The drive to work provided space for reflection, his mind wandering away from the upcoming day's challenges to Bob's words from Saturday morning. These feelings you're having, Tom? They're normal. More common than you'd think. But they need to be handled carefully."

What exactly had Bob meant by "handled carefully"? The question lingered, forcing Tom to acknowledge that despite his initial revulsion at Bob's offer, some part of him understood the older man's point. These desires, watching Jess with other men, finding arousal in others wanting her, hadn't diminished since he'd first acknowledged them. If anything, giving them voice had only intensified their hold on him.

The week unfolded with punishing intensity at Davis & Associates. The Meridian implementation continued to present complex challenges, each solved problem revealing three more in its wake like a hydra. Tom found himself working late every night, often not reaching home until around 8 PM, exhausted and mentally drained.

Jess maintained her own busy schedule, dividing her time between the office on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and working from home on Tuesday and Thursday. They passed like ships in the night, exchanging updates over quick dinners or late-night texts. The intimacy of the weekend seemed a distant memory by Wednesday, eroded by professional demands and physical exhaustion.

On Tuesday evening, as Tom warmed leftover pasta for a late dinner, Jess mentioned casually, "I chatted with Bob today."

Tom's hand paused, spoon suspended above the pot. "Oh?" he managed, striving for casual interest.

"He was working in the garden during my lunch break," Jess explained, pouring them both a glass of water. "I sat on the balcony, and we talked for a bit."

"What about?" Tom asked, resuming his stirring with forced casualness.

"Nothing important," Jess said. "Mostly about plants. He's quite knowledgeable, actually. Told me all about these native perennials he's thinking of planting along the back fence." She took a sip of her water. "I wasn't flirting or anything," she added, a hint of something, defensiveness? reassurance? coloring her tone. "Just being friendly. Like we agreed."

"Right," Tom nodded, surprised by the flicker of disappointment that accompanied her clarification. Despite everything, his careful suggestion to pause their exploration, his own conflicted feelings about Bob's offer, some part of him had hoped she might test those boundaries, might recapture the intriguing energy of their earlier conversations.

"He's easy to talk to," Jess continued, seeming not to notice Tom's reaction. "In that 'grandfather sharing wisdom' kind of way."

Tom handed her a plate of reheated pasta. The comparison of Bob to a grandfather should have been reassuring, should have alleviated the complicated tangle of emotions Bob's presence evoked. Instead, it intensified Tom's internal conflict. If Jess saw Bob as a harmless older man, a grandfatherly figure, then perhaps Bob's offer had merit. Perhaps he truly could serve as a "safe" outlet for the fantasies that continued to resurface despite Tom's attempts to suppress them.

The thought disturbed and intrigued him equally.

Thursday brought a similar report from Jess about another casual conversation with Bob during her lunch break. Again, she was careful to clarify that there had been no flirting, nothing that crossed the boundaries they'd established on Saturday. And again, Tom felt that unexpected twinge of disappointment, that silent wish that she might have pushed just a little, tested the waters despite his stated desire to pause their exploration.

As the day progressed, Tom found his thoughts returning with increasing frequency to Bob's offer, examining it from new angles, finding elements that made a perverse kind of sense. Perhaps there was something to Bob's claim of experience with these dynamics, something valuable in his warning about maintaining clear boundaries.

The memory of Thursday night's phone call with Jess, with her fake story about Chris Webb, kept surfacing in Tom's mind. The intensity of his arousal when he'd believed she might be with another man hadn't diminished with the revelation that the story was false. If anything, his fantasies had grown more vivid, more persistent, demanding outlet or acknowledgment.

By Friday morning, Tom had to admit, if only to himself, that his attempt to pause their exploration had been at least partly motivated by fear, not just of Bob's

manipulation but of his own desires. The days since their Saturday morning conversation had provided perspective, allowing Tom to separate his reaction to Bob's knowledge of his voyeurism from the underlying truth of what Bob had said about his fantasies.

These feelings weren't going away. Pretending otherwise was simply delaying the inevitable, postponing a conversation that needed to happen between him and Jess.

Friday afternoon found Tom at his desk, focusing on final preparations for the weekend handoff of the Meridian project, but his mind was elsewhere. Tonight's dinner with Jess loomed ahead, a commitment he'd made when he still believed that pausing their exploration was the right approach. Now, he wasn't so certain.

What would he say to her? How could he explain his evolution from wanting to pause everything to considering a careful, bounded exploration? Would she see it as weakness, as surrender to desires he should be able to control? Or would she understand, would she share some version of the curiosity that continued to pull at him despite his best efforts to ignore it?

His phone chimed with a text.

Jess: Looking forward to tonight.

Tom stared at the message. They needed this reconnection, this chance to talk openly without the immediate pressure of professional demands. Whether that conversation led to a continued pause or a cautious resumption of their exploration remained to be seen.

With a sigh, Tom turned back to his work, forcing himself to focus on the Meridian implementation. Each minute seemed to crawl by with excruciating slowness as his mind continually drifted to the evening ahead.

By 5 PM, he'd made enough progress to justify leaving, citing dinner plans when his team lead raised an eyebrow at his early departure. The drive home provided time to organize his thoughts, to prepare for the conversation ahead.

What did he want, really? The question was both simple and impossibly complex. He wanted Jess, of course. Her happiness, her trust, her love. But he also wanted to explore these newly acknowledged desires without surrendering control to Bob's manipulation or risking their marriage.

There had to be a middle ground, a path that acknowledged these feelings without giving them undue power or exposing Jess to unnecessary risk. Finding that path would require honesty, with himself and with Jess.

As Tom pulled into their driveway, he spotted Bob in the front yard, watering the newly planted flowers along the walkway. Their eyes met briefly as Tom emerged from his car, and Bob offered a casual nod, as if their Saturday conversation had been nothing more than a neighborly chat about lawn care.

"Evening," Bob called. "Flowers needed a drink in this heat."

"Thanks," Tom replied, genuine gratitude in his voice. Whatever Bob's motivations, the yard did look better for his attention.

"You folks have plans tonight?" Bob asked, shutting off the water and coiling the hose neatly. "Friday night and all."

"Dinner," Tom said, the single word revealing nothing of the evening's significance.

"Sounds like fun," Bob nodded.

The casual exchange felt surreal given everything unspoken between them, yet somehow appropriate, a tacit agreement to maintain surface civility while deeper currents flowed beneath.

As Tom headed inside, he realized that whatever happened next, with Jess, with their marriage, with these complicated desires, would be their choice, not Bob's. The older man might have inserted himself into their dynamic, might have accelerated Tom's acknowledgment of his fantasies, but he couldn't dictate their response. That remained firmly in Tom and Jess's hands.

Tom's fingers fidgeted with his collar as he waited for the Uber to arrive. The crisp white shirt felt suddenly restrictive against his throat despite having worn identical shirts countless times before. He checked his watch, then glanced toward their bedroom where Jess was putting the finishing touches on her makeup.

"Almost ready!" Jess called from the bedroom.

Tom checked his watch again. The Uber was two minutes away according to the app. He'd booked it slightly early, anticipating Jess would need extra time to finish getting ready. A small, unnecessary insurance against being late for their 8 PM reservation at Vesper, the upscale restaurant downtown that had required Tom to call in a favor from a client to secure a table on short notice.

"Our ride's almost here," he called back.

When Jess emerged from the bedroom, Tom froze. The emerald dress she'd worn to the Skyline launch hugged her body like it had been painted on, accentuating every curve while maintaining an air of sophistication that prevented it from appearing

explicitly sexual. Her blonde hair was styled to fall over one shoulder in loose, elegant waves, and a pair of modest diamond earrings, his gift for their second anniversary, glinted whenever she moved her head.

"You look..." Tom began, but the words died in his throat. Gorgeous felt inadequate. Stunning, too generic. Beautiful, too expected.

Jess smiled, understanding the silence. "Thank you," she said, moving toward him with a smile.

Tom had chosen his navy Tom Ford suit, the one he saved for important client meetings and special occasions. He wore a white dress shirt with a black tie and his black Italian leather oxfords gleamed with a fresh polish. He'd even taken extra time with his hair.

"I figured since you missed seeing me in this dress the first time, the least I could do was make it worth the wait," Jess said, reaching up to straighten his already-perfect tie.

"It was definitely worth the wait," Tom replied. He let his hands settle at her waist, feeling the smooth fabric of the dress beneath his palms. "If we didn't have a reservation..."

Jess laughed. "Later," she promised, her eyes holding a mischief that made his heart rate accelerate. "After dinner."

His phone buzzed, the app alerting him that their Uber had arrived. Tom reluctantly broke contact. "Shall we?" he asked.

Outside, the evening was pleasantly warm with just enough breeze to make the temperature comfortable. Their driver, a middle-aged woman with short gray hair, greeted them with politeness, confirming their destination before pulling away from the curb.

Tom watched as Jess settled into her seat, the slit in her dress revealing a tantalizing glimpse of thigh. The driver's eyes flickered to the rearview mirror, her gaze drawn naturally to Jess's beauty before returning to the road.

"Vesper, huh?" the driver commented, breaking the silence. "Special occasion?"

"Just a date night," Jess replied. "It's been a busy week."

"Well, you two look fantastic," the driver said. "That green is your color, honey."

Jess smiled, the compliment clearly appreciated. "Thank you."

Tom's hand found Jess's in the space between them, their fingers intertwining automatically. Despite the complications that had arisen since his return from San

Diego, despite Bob's manipulation and the unresolved tension of their "pause," this connection remained, solid and grounding.

"I'm looking forward to tonight," Tom said, his voice low enough that only Jess could hear. "Just us. No distractions."

"Me too," she replied, squeezing his hand gently.

The rest of the short drive passed in comfortable silence, both of them watching Austin's skyline grow more prominent as they approached downtown. The Uber pulled up to the restaurant's entrance, a discreet glass door beneath an understated sign illuminated by tasteful copper fixtures.

Tom helped Jess from the car, her heels clicking against the pavement as they approached the entrance. Inside, the restaurant exuded quiet luxury. Wood tables spaced far enough apart to ensure privacy, soft lighting from crystal chandeliers, and floor-to-ceiling windows offering views of the city lights. The hostess, a poised woman in a black dress, greeted them with a warm smile.

"Mr. and Mrs. Marshall," she said, checking her tablet. "Your table is ready. Please follow me."

As they moved through the restaurant, Tom was acutely aware of the glances they attracted. Jess in that emerald dress was impossible to ignore, drawing appreciative looks from both men and women. Each gaze sent that familiar pulse through Tom's body, pride mingling with something darker, something more complex.

Their table was positioned near the windows, offering a spectacular view while maintaining enough distance from neighboring tables to allow for private conversation. Tom held Jess's chair. He settled across from her, accepting the leather-bound menus from the hostess.

"Your server will be with you shortly," the hostess said before departing.

Alone at last, Tom found himself momentarily at a loss for words. All week, he'd rehearsed various openings for this conversation, different approaches to bridge the gap between their Saturday morning agreement to pause their exploration and his evolving thoughts on the matter. But now, faced with Jess across the table, radiant in emerald, all his carefully prepared phrases evaporated.

"This place is beautiful," Jess said, filling the silence as she glanced around. "How did you manage to get a reservation on such short notice?"

"Remember Jeremy Collins from Wilton Media? The client whose daughter is getting married next spring? I helped him secure a venue when everything was booked solid. He knows the owner here."

“The networking never stops,” Jess teased, though her smile held genuine appreciation.

Their server appeared, a tall man in his thirties with a discreet earpiece marking him as part of the restaurant’s staff. “Good evening,” he greeted them. “My name is Wilson, and I’ll be taking care of you tonight. May I start you with something from the bar?”

Tom glanced at Jess, who nodded slightly, a silent agreement to their usual dining ritual. “We’ll start with a bottle of wine,” Tom said. “Do you have the 2012 Gold & Silver Cabernet?”

“We do, sir. Excellent choice.”

“Perfect. We’ll take that,” Tom confirmed.

Wilson departed to retrieve their wine, leaving them alone again. Jess opened her menu, eyes scanning the offerings. “Everything looks amazing,” she commented. “What are you thinking of getting?”

“Probably the Beef Wellington,” Tom replied, though his attention was more on Jess than the menu. In the soft lighting, she seemed to glow. “How about you?”

“The lamb is calling my name,” Jess said, closing her menu decisively. She looked up, catching Tom’s gaze. “What?” she asked, a small smile playing at the corner of her lips.

“Nothing,” Tom said, returning her smile. “Just appreciating the view.”

A slight blush colored Jess’s cheeks, visible even in the dim lighting. After six years together, four of them married, he could still make her blush. It was one of the countless small wonders that continued to surprise him about their relationship.

Wilson returned with the wine, presenting the bottle for Tom’s inspection before uncorking it. He poured a small amount for Tom to taste, then, at Tom’s nod of approval, filled both their glasses.

“Are you ready to order?” Wilson asked.

They placed their appetizer and dinner orders, and the server disappeared once more, leaving them to their wine and conversation.

Tom lifted his glass. “To date night,” he said, offering a simple toast.

“To date night,” Jess echoed, touching her glass to his with a delicate clink.

The wine was excellent, rich and full-bodied with notes of dark fruit and hints of oak. Tom took a second appreciative sip, allowing the alcohol to warm his throat and settle some of the nervous energy that had been building all day.

"So," Jess began, setting her glass down. "How's the Meridian implementation going? Any progress this week?"

"Better than last week," he replied. "We've resolved most of the critical issues. The rest is just cleanup and documentation." He paused, considering how much detail to go into. "Davis seemed pleased with the progress. He mentioned he's back-channeling with the CEO directly. I think he's trying to position me for that Senior Consultant role we talked about."

"That's great, Tom," Jess said, her enthusiasm genuine. "When do you think he'll make it official?"

"Probably after the final implementation review if everything stays on track." Tom took another sip of wine. "What about you? Any updates on the Houston or Savannah projects?"

"Chen sent over the preliminary briefs for Houston yesterday," Jess said, her professional passion evident in the way she leaned forward slightly. "It's going to be challenging but exciting. They're looking at mid-century modern influences but with some Asian design elements mixed in. Right up my alley."

As Jess elaborated on the Houston project, Tom found himself relaxing into their conversation. This was the foundation of their relationship, genuine interest in each other's work, shared ambitions, mutual support. Whatever else was happening between them, this solid core remained.

Their appetizers arrived, a chilled seafood tower they'd decided to share. The elaborate presentation momentarily shifted their focus, both of them admiring the artful arrangement of fresh oysters, jumbo shrimp, and lump crab.

"This looks incredible," Jess said, selecting an oyster.

Tom watched as she tilted her head back slightly, letting the oyster slip from its shell into her mouth. The simple act carried an unintentional sensuality that sent a pulse of desire through him.

The wine continued to flow, each glass softening the edges of the week's stress, creating a buffer between their daily lives and this evening's sanctuary. By the time their main courses arrived, they'd settled into a comfortable rhythm of conversation that meandered between work anecdotes, family updates, gossip about mutual friends, and light-hearted debates about movies they wanted to see.

Beneath this surface normalcy, Tom could feel the weight of unspoken topics hovering between them. Jess occasionally glanced at him with that perceptive look that suggested she was waiting for him to broach the subject they'd both been avoiding. The wine had loosened his tongue just enough to make the prospect less daunting, but he still hesitated, uncertain how to begin.

"This lamb is perfect," Jess said, offering him a bite from her fork. The gesture was casual, intimate, a routine they'd established years ago of sharing tastes from each other's plates.

Tom accepted the bite. "That is good," he agreed. "Want to try the beef?"

Jess nodded, and he cut a small piece, raising his fork to her lips. Their eyes met as she took the offered bite, and something in her gaze, a knowing warmth, an invitation, gave him the courage he'd been seeking.

"Jess," he began, setting down his fork. "There's something I want to talk about."

Her expression shifted subtly, her eyes focusing more intently on his face. "I'm listening," she said.

Tom took a deep breath, then another sip of wine for good measure. "Remember last Saturday when we agreed to pause our... exploration? To take a step back and focus just on us for a while?"

Jess nodded, her fingers unconsciously playing with the stem of her wine glass. "I remember," she said.

"Well, I've been thinking about it all week, and I'm not sure that's really what I want." The words came out in a rush, as if he feared losing his nerve if he spoke too slowly.

Something flickered across Jess's face, not surprise, exactly, but recognition. "I suspected as much," she said quietly.

"You did?"

Jess nodded, taking a sip of her wine. "The way you responded to my story about Webb on the phone... that wasn't the reaction of someone who wants to pause anything, Tom. And when I mentioned my conversations with Bob this week, I could see it in your face. You were disappointed that I wasn't flirting with him."

Tom felt heat rise to his cheeks, caught off guard by her perceptiveness. "I didn't realize I was so transparent."

"Only to me," Jess assured him. "I've known you for years, Tom. I can read your expressions better than you think." She leaned back in her chair slightly, studying him.

“So, what changed? You were pretty adamant about taking a step back when you got home from San Diego.”

It was a fair question, one that required an honest answer. Tom chose his words carefully, aware of the delicate balance between truth and discretion. He couldn’t tell her about Bob’s confrontation, not without revealing the voyeurism that had started all of this, but he could explain the evolution of his thinking.

“I think I panicked,” he admitted. “After our phone call Thursday night, when you made up that story about Webb... the intensity of my reaction scared me. The fact that I was aroused by the thought of you with another man, that I said I’d be okay with it happening for real... it felt like I was losing control of something I didn’t fully understand.”

Jess listened attentively, her expression open and free of judgment. The knot in Tom’s chest loosened slightly at her receptiveness.

“So, I withdrew,” he continued. “I convinced myself that we needed to pause everything until I could sort out my feelings. But the truth is, all week, I’ve been thinking about it. These... desires, these fantasies, they’re not going away just because I decided to ignore them.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?” Jess asked, her tone careful but not dismissive.

Tom took another sip of wine, gathering his thoughts. “I’m not sure, exactly. I just know that pretending these feelings don’t exist isn’t the solution.”

Jess nodded slowly, absorbing his words. She was quiet for a long moment. Finally, she spoke, her voice steady but serious.

“I hear you, Tom. And I appreciate your honesty. But if we’re going to explore this further, whatever ‘this’ is, I need something I didn’t have before.”

“What’s that?”

“Concrete boundaries,” Jess replied firmly. “Real, specific rules that we both agree to and stick to, no matter what. The whole ‘do whatever feels right’ approach puts too much pressure on me and leaves too much room for misinterpretation.”

Tom nodded, relief washing over him at her apparent willingness to continue their exploration. “That makes sense,” he said. “What kind of boundaries are you thinking of?”

Jess glanced around, ensuring no one was close enough to overhear their conversation. “Before we get into specifics, I want to be clear about something. I’ve told you before, but I want to tell you again. There are aspects of this exploration

that… intrigue me. The feeling of being desired, the sense of power in knowing the effect I have on men, the excitement of pushing boundaries in a controlled way..."

Tom's pulse quickened at her admission.

"But," she continued, raising a finger in warning, "I'm also worried about the potential consequences. What if your feelings change after fantasy becomes reality? What if our relationship dynamic shifts in ways we're not prepared for? What if someone outside our marriage figures out what we're doing, and it becomes embarrassing or impacts our professional lives?"

"Those are all valid concerns," Tom acknowledged, recognizing the careful consideration she'd given the subject.

"I'm glad you see that," Jess said. "Because these aren't hypothetical worries, Tom. They're real risks we'd be taking with our marriage, with our lives together. And that's not something I'm willing to gamble with carelessly."

Tom found himself grateful for her pragmatism, her ability to see beyond the immediate allure of fantasy to the practical considerations they needed to address.

"You're right," he said. "We need boundaries. Clear ones."

"Exactly," Jess nodded. "I suggest we create a list of rules. Non-negotiables that apply no matter what happens, even for something as seemingly innocent as flirting."

"I'm all for that," Tom agreed, eager to demonstrate his willingness to approach this more methodically. "What did you have in mind?"

Jess sat up straighter, her expression shifting to something more businesslike despite the intimate nature of their conversation. She looked like she was about to present at a client meeting, organized and prepared.

"First," she began, "I need to state upfront that I'm not interested in having sex with anyone else. I'm open to pushing some boundaries, to exploring the fantasy to a certain degree, but I don't want you to keep pushing me toward that endpoint. That needs to be clear from the start."

Tom nodded, a complex mixture of slight relief but major disappointment washing through him. "Understood," he said. "No pressure toward sex with others."

"Good," Jess said, taking a sip of wine. "Now, as for the rules themselves. I think they need to cover a few key areas. Communication, veto power, privacy, and emotional boundaries."

Tom reached for the wine bottle, refilling their glasses as Jess continued.

"Rule one, communication," she stated. "Nothing happens without prior discussion and mutual agreement. Full disclosure about all interactions, no secrets or surprises. If I flirt with someone, you know about it beforehand, and I tell you everything afterwards."

"Agreed," Tom said immediately. "Complete transparency."

"Rule two, veto power," Jess continued. "Either of us can stop anything immediately, no questions asked. If at any point either of us becomes uncomfortable, saying 'stop' or 'I'm done' is enough to end whatever's happening without discussion or negotiation in the moment."

Tom nodded again. "Absolutely. Safety valve for both of us."

"Rule three, privacy," Jess said, her tone growing more serious. "This stays completely private between us. No sharing with friends, no matter how close." She gave him a pointed look. "Not even Madi gets details from me, and none of your work friends hear about this from you. And no friends or coworkers as potential partners, either. That's just asking for trouble."

Tom thought of Miles and his frequent comments about Jess's appearance. "Definitely agreed on that one. Professional and social circles are off-limits."

"And finally," Jess said, "rule four, emotional boundaries. No dating, no separate emotional relationships, no romantic connections outside our marriage. This is not about opening our relationship in the traditional sense."

"Makes perfect sense," Tom agreed. "No emotional relationships."

Jess seemed to relax slightly, shoulders loosening as they established these guidelines. "Those are the big four," she said. "We can add more specific ones as situations develop, but I think those cover the core principles."

Tom absorbed the rules, appreciating the clarity they provided. The structure felt right, necessary, a framework within which their exploration could occur without threatening the foundation of their marriage.

"I think these are excellent," he said sincerely.

Jess nodded, looking relieved at his easy acceptance of the boundaries. "The rules apply no matter what, Tom. We discuss it beforehand, we both agree, we share all details afterward, and we maintain veto power at all times."

"I understand," Tom assured her. "And I think it's the right approach. This is uncharted territory for both of us. Having clear guidelines makes sense."

Their server appeared to clear their plates and inquire about dessert. The interruption provided a natural break in their intense conversation, allowing both of them to collect their thoughts. They agreed to share the restaurant's famous chocolate soufflé, and Wilson departed to place their order.

When they were alone again, Jess took a long sip of her wine, studying Tom over the rim of her glass. "Can I ask you something directly?" she said, setting the glass down.

Tom nodded, though something in her tone made him wary. "Of course."

"Do you want me to flirt with Bob?"

The directness of her question made him acutely aware of how she knew nothing about his interaction with Bob, about the older man's offer of "guidance."

"I..." Tom started, then stopped, searching for the right words. "It's complicated," he admitted finally.

"Complicated how?" Jess pressed, her eyes never leaving his face.

"I'm attracted to the idea," Tom said carefully. "The fantasy of you flirting with him, of him wanting you, that definitely has a... certain appeal." He paused, weighing his next words. "But there are practical concerns too. He's our tenant. He lives in our house. If things became awkward or uncomfortable..."

"We'd still be stuck with him," Jess finished the thought.

"Exactly," Tom nodded, relieved at her understanding. "I think I need more time to think about the Bob situation specifically. Can I get back to you on that one?"

Jess studied him for a long moment, as if trying to read something beneath his words. Finally, she nodded. "That's fair. Take the time you need. We don't have to decide everything tonight."

Their soufflé arrived, perfectly timed. The server placed it between them with two spoons, then disappeared again, clearly sensing the private nature of their conversation.

Tom broke the soufflé's chocolatey crust with his spoon, releasing a cloud of steam. "This looks incredible," he said.

They each took a bite, the rich, warm chocolate providing a brief distraction. The dessert was objectively excellent, but Tom found himself more focused on Jess, on the way her lips closed around her spoon, on the slight furrow between her brows that suggested she was still processing their conversation.

"So," Tom ventured after a few bites of dessert, "assuming we're moving forward with this exploration, but with these new rules in place... where do we start?"

Jess considered the question. “I’m not sure,” she admitted. “Maybe we need a test run of sorts. Something controlled, with clear boundaries, to see how we both really feel when fantasy meets reality.”

Tom’s mind raced with possibilities. The wine had lowered his inhibitions just enough to make him bold. “What if we started tonight?” he suggested, leaning forward slightly.

“Tonight?” Jess echoed, surprise evident in her voice. “What did you have in mind?”

“After dinner,” Tom said, “we could go to Domino, that upscale nightclub. We could go for a drink, see how it feels for you to interact with other men. Nothing serious, just a test of the waters.”

Jess glanced down at her emerald dress. “I’m not exactly dressed for a nightclub, Tom.”

“You’re gorgeous,” Tom countered immediately. “And Domino isn’t your average nightclub. It’s high-end, sophisticated. That dress would be perfect.”

He could see her weighing the suggestion, considering potential scenarios. “I don’t know,” she said finally. “It feels like jumping in the deep end. Maybe we should start with something smaller, more controlled.”

“Fair enough,” Tom conceded, not wanting to push too hard. “It was just a thought. We can take this at whatever pace feels right for you.”

Jess took another bite of the soufflé, her expression thoughtful. “Actually,” she said after a moment, “maybe you’re right. Maybe a nightclub is the perfect starting point. Anonymous, no real stakes, just a chance to see how it feels for both of us.”

Tom’s heart rate accelerated at her reconsideration. “Really?”

“Really,” Jess nodded, a new determination in her eyes. “But with the rules in place. We discuss exactly what’s allowed beforehand, I tell you everything after, either of us can call it off at any point, and this stays between us.”

“Absolutely,” Tom agreed quickly. “We’ll define the boundaries clearly before we even get there.”

Jess raised her wine glass. “To new adventures, then,” she proposed, a hint of nervous excitement coloring her voice.

“To new adventures,” Tom echoed, touching his glass to hers.

As they finished their dessert and wine, the conversation shifted to the practical details of their impromptu nightclub plan. They agreed that Jess would be free to dance with other men, to accept drinks, though she would be careful about consumption, to

engage in light flirtation. Physical contact would be limited to dancing, nothing beyond what would be considered socially acceptable in a crowded nightclub.

Tom would remain nearby, observing rather than hovering, giving her space to interact naturally while ensuring her safety. They established a signal, Jess touching her right earring, which would indicate she wanted him to intervene.

By the time Wilson returned with their check, they had constructed a tentative framework for the evening ahead. Tom handed over his credit card, the substantial bill barely registering compared to the significance of the conversation they'd just had.

While they waited for Wilson to process the payment, Jess reached across the table to take Tom's hand. "Are you sure about this?" she asked, her voice soft but serious. "It's one thing to fantasize, another to actually see me..."

Tom squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I'm sure," he said, though the flutter of nervous anticipation in his stomach suggested a more complicated truth.

Wilson returned with the credit card slip, which Tom signed with a generous tip. The formalities completed, he stood and moved around the table to hold Jess's chair. As she rose, several nearby diners glanced their way, drawn to the movement, to Jess's undeniable presence.

Tom offered his arm, which she took with a smile that contained equal parts nervousness and excitement. Together, they made their way through the restaurant, past the hostess stand, and into the warm Austin night. As they stepped onto the sidewalk, waiting for the Uber Tom had already summoned, a group of well-dressed men exiting a bar down the street turned to stare openly at Jess.

The familiar thrill coursed through Tom's body, that complex mixture of pride and arousal, of possession and anticipation. Tonight, for the first time, he would allow that feeling room to breathe, to evolve beyond the confines of private fantasy into something visible, if carefully controlled.

Jess's hand tightened on his arm, her body leaning slightly closer. "Still sure about this?" she murmured, clearly having noticed the men's attention.

Tom looked down at her, at the woman who had been his center for six years, who understood him better than anyone else in the world, who was willing to explore his deepest fantasies despite her own hesitations. In that moment, he loved her more fiercely than ever before.

"I'm sure," he replied, pressing a kiss to her temple. "As long as we're together."

Jess's smile deepened, a hint of her own excitement breaking through her careful composure. "Together," she agreed. "Always."

Their Uber pulled up to the curb, its headlights briefly illuminating them in a wash of white light. Tom opened the door for Jess, watching as she gracefully folded herself into the backseat, the emerald dress riding up slightly to reveal more of her toned thighs. He followed her in, giving the driver their new destination.

As the car pulled away from Vesper, Tom felt as though they were leaving behind not just the restaurant but a version of their relationship, a known configuration that had served them well for years. What lay ahead was uncertain, uncharted, potentially dangerous in ways neither of them could fully anticipate.

The city lights blurred past the window, Austin's nightlife awakening as evening deepened. Next stop, Domino. The first test of fantasy against reality, of theory against practice. Tom's heart pounded with anticipation, with fear, with desire. Beside him, Jess's profile was illuminated by the passing streetlights, her expression a fascinating mixture of determination and vulnerability.

Whatever the night held, one thing was certain, they were venturing into this new territory hand in hand, bound by rules of their own making, guided by a shared commitment to honesty and mutual care. It might not be enough to protect them from every potential pitfall, but it was a beginning, a framework within which they could explore the shadows of desire while keeping sight of the light they'd built together.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 09

Tom's eyes cracked open to the insistent throb of a headache. The bedroom was flooded with daylight, not the gentle morning glow that usually filtered through their curtains, but the unforgiving brightness of late morning. He squinted at the bedside clock.

11:17 AM. Jesus Christ.

His mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton and there was a dull pressure behind his eyes that suggested he was still halfway drunk.

Beside him, Jess lay sprawled on her stomach, blonde hair fanned across her pillow. The comforter had slipped down to reveal her bare back, a canvas of smooth skin interrupted by the red marks left there last night. After the club, after watching men's hands on her body.

The memory triggered a confusing mixture of arousal and something darker. Images flickered through his mind. Jess on the dance floor, the crowd of bodies around her.

He rubbed his face, willing the foggy memories to organize themselves into something coherent. They'd gone to dinner at Vesper first, had the conversation about boundaries, established rules. Then they'd decided to test those boundaries at Domino, a high-end nightclub downtown.

It had seemed like such a controlled way to explore his fantasies, a public place where nothing too extreme could happen, where they could dip their toes in the water without risking the deep end.

But they'd miscalculated.

Tom slid out of bed carefully, trying not to wake Jess. His head protested the vertical position, and he steadied himself against the nightstand. The floor was littered with their clothes, tossed aside in their frantic rush to get at each other when they'd returned home. He vaguely remembered the Uber driver glancing into the rearview mirror as they'd kissed and groped with escalating urgency in the backseat.

He put on a fresh pair of boxers, then padded to the bathroom. The face in the mirror looked like it belonged to someone else. Eyes bloodshot, hair sticking up at odd angles, a shadow of stubble darkening his jaw. He splashed cold water on his face, then reached for the bottle of Advil in the medicine cabinet.

Two pills later, Tom made his way to the kitchen, driven by an urgent need for caffeine. He filled the coffee maker with grounds, hit the brew button, and leaned against the counter while it gurgled to life.

The coffee maker finished with a final sputter. Tom poured himself a mug and took a cautious sip, wincing as the hot liquid hit his dry throat. Better. Not great, but better. He poured a second mug for Jess, added the splash of cream and sugar she preferred, and carried both back to the bedroom.

Jess was stirring when he returned, one arm flung across her face to block out the light. Tom set her mug on the nightstand and perched on the edge of the bed beside her.

"Hey," he said softly. "Brought you coffee."

Jess made a sound somewhere between a groan and a word, then slowly lowered her arm. Her eyes, when they finally opened, were as bloodshot as his.

"What time is it?" she rasped.

"About eleven-thirty," Tom replied. "How's your head?"

"Like someone's using it as a drum." She pushed herself up to sitting, clutching the sheet to her chest in a gesture that struck Tom as oddly modest given what they'd done mere hours ago. "Is that coffee?"

"Your favorite morning after cure." He handed her the mug, which she accepted gratefully.

"You're a saint," she murmured, blowing on the surface before taking a sip.

They sat in silence for a few moments, each nursing their coffee. Tom wanted to dive straight into analysis. What did she think? How did she feel? What lines had they crossed? but he held back, recognizing that Jess needed time to fully wake up, to gather her thoughts.

"Hungry?" he asked instead.

"Starving, actually," she admitted. "But not sure my stomach's ready for anything complicated."

"Eggs and toast?" Tom suggested.

That earned him a smile. "Eggs and toast sounds perfect."

Tom waited while Jess gathered enough energy to get out of bed. She slipped into her robe and ran a hand through her tangled hair.

"I look like hell," she muttered, glancing at the mirror.

“You look beautiful,” Tom replied automatically, because it was true. Even hungover, with smudged makeup and pillow creases on her cheek, she was still the most stunning woman he’d ever seen.

Jess rolled her eyes, but he caught the hint of pleased color that rose to her cheeks. Together, they made their way to the kitchen, moving with the careful slowness of the truly hungover.

Breakfast preparation became a shared task, silent but synchronized. Tom handled the eggs while Jess popped bread in the toaster and set the table.

“So,” Jess said finally, breaking the comfortable silence. “That was... a night.”

Tom couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped him. “That’s one way to put it.”

“I don’t think I’ve been that drunk in years,” Jess admitted, settling into her chair as Tom brought the eggs to the table.

“The tequila shots were probably overkill,” Tom agreed, taking the seat across from her.

“Probably?” Jess raised an eyebrow. “You mean definitely. I lost count after the third one.”

Tom spread butter on his toast, searching for the right words, the right approach. There were so many angles to what had happened, so many layers to unpack.

“It wasn’t just the shots, though,” he ventured. “There were all those drinks guys kept buying you.”

“God, yes,” Jess groaned, pressing a hand to her forehead. “I have a vague memory of someone ordering a round of something blue for everyone at the bar.”

“That would explain why your tongue was blue when you finally found me,” Tom remarked, the memory surfacing through the haze. “You looked like you’d been sucking off a Smurf.”

Jess snorted, nearly choking on her coffee. “Tom! That’s disgusting.”

“But true,” he insisted, grinning.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, both clearly sorting through the jumbled memories of the previous night. Finally, Tom decided it was time to broach the more serious aspects of their experience.

“So,” he began tentatively. “I think we made some big mistakes last night.”

Jess looked up from her plate. “Yeah,” she agreed. “We definitely did.”

"The drinking, for starters," Tom said. "We both went way over our limits."

"Especially me," Jess acknowledged. "I shouldn't have accepted all those drinks. I guess I got caught up in the... experience of it all."

"I should've intervened," Tom admitted. "I saw how much you were drinking, but I was caught up too. In watching you. In seeing how those guys reacted to you."

Jess nodded, setting down her coffee mug. "We also didn't check in with each other enough. We only talked once the whole night."

"When you came to find me at the bar," Tom said. "Around midnight?"

"I think it was closer to one," Jess said. "Everything's a bit blurry, to be honest."

Jess had emerged from the crowd, slightly breathless, her face flushed from dancing, her tongue blue. He'd asked if she was okay, if she was enjoying herself. She'd admitted to feeling self-conscious. That's when he'd told her to let loose, to forget he was there, to fully embrace the experience they'd come for.

And she had. After that brief conversation, she'd returned to the dance floor with a new abandon, allowing men to press closer, to whisper in her ear, to slide their hands lower on her hips and back.

"And then there was Morgan," Tom said, the memory of bumping into his coworker causing a fresh wave of anxiety. "That was... unexpected."

Jess winced. "Right. I forgot about that. You said you told him I was in the bathroom?"

"Yeah," Tom confirmed. "Said we were just leaving. But who knows if he believed me. Or if he saw you dancing with those guys."

Morgan wasn't a close friend, but he was well connected at Davis & Associates. If he'd seen anything, if he started asking questions or, worse, spreading rumors...

"That could have been a disaster," Jess said, voicing his thoughts. "Still could be if he recognized me."

"Do you think he did?" Tom asked, pulse quickening.

Jess considered this, her brow furrowing. "I don't know. We've only met a few times at company events. And the club was dark. I was in a big crowd..."

"But still," Tom said, "it highlights the risk. We didn't think that through at all."

"No," Jess agreed. "We didn't." She pushed her plate away, her appetite apparently gone. "What if it had been someone from my firm instead? Or a client? The emerald dress isn't exactly forgettable."

Their careers, their reputations, everything they'd worked for could be compromised by a single night's exploration, a few hours of reckless boundary pushing in a public space.

"So that's mistake number three," Tom summarized. "Too much drinking, not checking in enough, and not considering the public exposure, the risk to our professional lives. Public means we can't control who sees us."

Jess nodded. "It was naive to think we could just blend into the crowd, especially in Austin. It's not that big a city."

They fell silent again, both processing the implications of these realizations.

Finally, Jess spoke again, her voice softer now, more thoughtful. "But besides all that... parts of it were... interesting."

Tom looked up, meeting her eyes across the table. "Interesting how?"

"Being desired," she said simply. "Feeling that power again. It reminded me of modeling, that rush of knowing people are looking at me, wanting me. But this was more... immediate. More primal, I guess."

Tom swallowed. "Tell me about that."

Jess hesitated, a faint flush spreading across her cheeks. "It's hard to explain. It's like... when you're working, you're just you. Professional, focused on the task at hand. But last night, I was seen differently. Like purely sexual. Like something to be pursued."

"And you liked that feeling," Tom said, not a question but an observation.

"Parts of it," she admitted. "The attention was kind of… intoxicating. But I also didn't like feeling out of control. The alcohol, all the strangers... it was overwhelming at points."

Tom nodded, understanding. "I felt something similar, watching you. It was like... every time a guy approached you, I felt this surge of... I don't know. It's what I mentioned before, almost like possessiveness but mixed with this crazy arousal. The jealousy and the turn on were all tangled up together."

"And that was... good?" Jess asked cautiously.

"It was fucking intense," Tom said. "Seeing men want you, seeing their hands on you, their mouths close to your ear, and at the same time knowing they couldn't take you home. I was so goddamn hard the whole night, Jess. And when we finally got home..."

"Yeah," she breathed. "That was... pretty spectacular."

They'd barely made it through the front door before Tom had her against the wall, his hands everywhere, his mouth hungry on hers. They'd made it to the bed eventually, but not before a frenzied encounter in the hallway, clothes half-removed, inhibitions completely abandoned.

"Speaking of which," Tom began. "When we were... you know, after we got home, you mentioned something about those guys on the dance floor. About feeling them... get hard against you."

Jess's flush deepened, but she didn't look away. "Yes," she confirmed. "A few of them. Especially that tall guy in the blue shirt. He was... very enthusiastic about dancing close."

"Tell me about it," Tom urged, leaning forward slightly.

Jess took a sip of coffee, then set the mug down. "It was strange, actually. Exciting but also... impersonal? They didn't know me, not really. They just saw something they wanted."

"How did they touch you?" Tom asked.

"Different ways," she replied, her own voice matching his in intimacy. "Some were a bit unsure at first, just hands on my waist. Others were more... assertive. Hands sliding lower, pulling me closer."

"And you could feel them? Against you?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Especially when they'd pull me back against them. I could feel them hard through their pants, pressing against my ass or my lower back. A couple of times, it was... very obvious what they wanted."

Tom's pulse quickened, imagination filling in the details her words sketched. "Did they say things to you? While you were dancing?"

Jess nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "They'd lean in close, use the music as an excuse to put their mouths near my ear. Some of it was just compliments, how beautiful I was, how sexy I looked in that dress."

"But not all of it," Tom pressed, sensing the hesitation in her voice.

"No," she confirmed. "Some of it was... what they wanted to do to me. Where they wanted to take me."

"And that turned you on," Tom stated, remembering her gasped confessions from the night before, when she'd admitted to being wet on the dance floor, aroused by the attention.

“Yes,” Jess said softly. “More than I expected. It was like... I wasn’t Jessica Marshall, professional interior designer, Tom Marshall’s wife. I was just a random woman dancing in a club.”

“You were incredible to watch,” Tom told her, honesty raw in his voice. “The way you moved, the way you responded to them without ever quite giving in completely.”

“I was always aware of you,” Jess admitted. “Even when I was trying to pretend I wasn’t. I kept thinking about how it would look to you, what would be too far, what would hurt you versus what would excite you.”

“None of it hurt,” Tom assured her, reaching across the table to take her hand. “I mean, the jealousy was real. Seeing their hands on you, watching them lean in to try to kiss you... it did something to me. But it didn’t hurt, Jess. It was the opposite. It was the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever experienced.”

Jess’s fingers tightened around his, her expression softening. “Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“Really,” Tom confirmed. “Last night just confirmed it. The jealousy, the possessiveness, it amplifies the excitement, the thrill.”

Jess nodded slowly, processing this. “I felt something similar,” she confessed. “Knowing you were watching, knowing what it was doing to you... that was a huge part of the turn on for me. It wasn’t just being wanted by all these strangers. It was being wanted by them while you watched.”

The honesty between them felt raw, exposed, but also cleansing. They were finally putting words to the complex dynamics that had been building between, naming the forces that had shifted the landscape of their marriage.

“So,” Tom said after a moment. “Where does that leave us? Last night proved this isn’t just fantasy. But it also highlighted the risks.”

Jess sighed, withdrawing her hand to run it through her hair. “I think we need to be more careful. Anything in public is risky. Morgan was a close call. Next time could be worse.”

“And the alcohol,” Tom added. “That was a huge mistake. It made us careless.”

“Exactly,” Jess agreed. “Plus, public means dealing with unpredictable strangers.”

“Not to mention the total lack of privacy,” Tom continued. “The whole point was to explore the fantasy in a controlled way. But a crowded nightclub isn’t exactly controlled.”

“No,” Jess said thoughtfully. “It’s not.”

They fell silent again. The risk was too great, the settings too unpredictable, the potential consequences too severe.

"So public exploration is off the table," Tom summarized. "But that leaves us where, exactly?"

Jess set her mug down and looked directly at him, her expression serious but not closed off. "What about what we discussed before? About... Bob?"

Tom's mind flashed to his conversation with Bob, to the older man's matter of fact assessment of Tom's desires, to his offer of "guidance" based on his own experiences with his ex-wife.

"I'm suggesting that I'm in a unique position here. I'm not a friend whose friendship you'd risk. I'm not a colleague whose gossip could damage your career. I'm not a complete stranger who might turn out to be dangerous. I'm just Bob, your tenant, with a clear understanding of what's at play and the experience to navigate them safely."

The words echoed in Tom's memory, taking on new significance in light of their realization about public exploration. Bob represented a controlled environment, a known quantity, someone who lived in their house and whose discretion was guaranteed by his own self interest.

But Bob also knew Tom's secret. Had seen him that night, watching through the window, had already leveraged that knowledge to initiate this very discussion.

"Tom?" Jess prompted when he remained silent. "What do you think?"

Her expression was open, curious, but not pressuring. She was genuinely seeking his opinion, unaware of the tangled web of complications that Bob's involvement would bring.

The smart thing, the safe thing, would be to shut it down immediately. To suggest they find another avenue or perhaps acknowledge that some fantasies were better left unexplored.

But the image of Jess on that dance floor, desired, pursued, touched, remained burned into his brain. The memory of their frantic coupling afterward, the intensity of his arousal, her responsiveness, the raw honesty of their whispered confessions in the dark, all of it testified to a deeper truth he couldn't deny.

These feelings, these desires, weren't going away. Bob had been right about that much, at least.

"Bob," Tom repeated. "You really think that might be the best approach?"

Jess hesitated. “I think it’s an option worth considering, given the risks we’ve with exploring this in public. He’s someone we know, in our home, with no connection to our professional lives. There’s a containment factor.”

Her language had shifted, becoming more analytical, more measured, the professional interior designer evaluating options rather than the wife discussing potential boundary explorations with her husband. Tom recognized the shift for what it was, a protective mechanism, a way to distance herself emotionally from a suggestion that carried significant weight.

“Containment,” Tom echoed, finding the term oddly appropriate given the volatile nature of what they were discussing. “That’s one way to look at it.”

“It’s not the only thing,” Jess added quickly. “There are others. The tenant-landlord relationship, the awkwardness if things go bad...”

“The age difference,” Tom contributed, watching her face. “The fact that he lives in our house, literally beneath our feet.”

“Yes,” Jess agreed. “All valid. But compared to the risks we saw last night...”

She left the sentence unfinished. Compared to potential professional scandal, to unpredictable strangers, to the complete loss of control that came with public exploration, Bob represented a known quantity. A contained risk.

Tom’s mind raced, calculating angles, considering possibilities. If he said no, would Jess press for the reason? Would she sense his evasion, his omission of the critical information about his interaction with Bob? But if he said yes, he’d be entering into an arrangement founded on deception, on a power dynamic that Bob had already manipulated to his advantage.

The sensible choice seemed obvious. Shut it down, find another way, protect Jess from Bob’s manipulations. But another part of Tom, a part he wasn’t particularly proud of at the moment, couldn’t help wondering what it would look like. Jess flirting with Bob, Bob’s hands on her while Tom watched.

“What if we just invited him for drinks in the yard?” Jess suggested, filling the silence. “Like when he moved in. Just a casual evening to see how it feels. No pressure, no expectations.”

“Drinks,” Tom repeated, the seemingly innocent suggestion igniting a cascade of potential scenarios in his mind.

“A toe in the water,” Jess clarified, leaning forward slightly. “We’d be in control, in our space, and we can end the evening at any point if it feels wrong.”

Her reasoning was sound. It was exactly the kind of thoughtful exploration of boundaries they'd discussed at Vesper, the kind of controlled experimentation they'd tried to achieve at Domino but failed due to the public setting and the alcohol.

"Just drinks," Tom said, testing the idea. "Just conversation. Just... seeing."

"Exactly," Jess confirmed. "If it feels awkward or forced or just... wrong, then we thank him for the evening and move on, no harm done."

"And if it doesn't?" Tom asked, unable to stop himself. "If it feels... right?"

Something flickered in Jess's eyes, a combination of uncertainty and curiosity. "Then we see where it goes. But slowly, carefully, with the boundaries we've established."

The four Rules. Communication, veto power, privacy, and emotional boundaries. The framework they'd constructed at Vesper, the guidelines meant to protect their marriage from the potentially destabilizing forces they were deliberately inviting in.

Tom knew he should answer. Should give Jess some indication of where his thoughts were trending, of how he was processing her suggestion. But the implications stacked upon implications, the secrets upon secrets, made any straightforward response impossible.

"Tom?" Jess prompted again, her expression growing more concerned at his prolonged silence. "What are you thinking?"

The question was deceptively simple yet impossibly complex. What was he thinking? That Bob had manipulated him masterfully. That he was contemplating an arrangement based on a foundation of half-truths and omissions. That despite all that, despite the ethical gymnastics required to justify it, the thought of seeing Jess with someone else still sent a jolt of arousal through him so potent it was difficult to concentrate on the risks.

"I'm thinking," Tom began carefully, "that we need to consider all the implications before we make any decisions. Bob isn't just anyone. He's our tenant. He lives in our house."

"I know," Jess acknowledged. "That's what makes it both ideal and a problem."

"Exactly," Tom nodded, grateful she understood without him having to elaborate. "It's not a decision to make lightly."

"No," Jess agreed. "It's not." She studied his face, her gaze searching. "But what do you want, Tom? What does your gut tell you?"

What did his gut tell him? It told him that Bob was manipulative, a potential threat to their marriage. But it also told him that the thought of Jess flirting with the older man was undeniably arousing.

His imagination supplied the scene with vivid clarity. The three of them in the yard, wine flowing, conversation growing more intimate, Jess deliberately pushing boundaries under Tom's watchful eye. Bob's hand finding her knee, her waist, her hair. Tom giving silent permission with a nod, a look, watching as another man wanted what was his, even touched what was his, but could never truly have what was his.

The fantasy collided with reality, with the memory of Bob's smile, his casual confidence as he outlined Tom's own desires to him with unsettling accuracy.

"The fantasies you're having, Tom? They're normal. More common than you'd think. But they need to be handled carefully. With respect for the marriage, with clear boundaries."

Had Bob been manipulating him? Absolutely. But had he also been right? That was the question Tom couldn't escape, the paradox he couldn't resolve, the reason his answer to Jess remained suspended between yes and no.

He looked at his wife across the table, at her patient expectation, her willingness to explore these complex desires despite her own reservations, her trust in him to guide them through potentially treacherous waters. The thought made it difficult to breathe, to think clearly, to separate desire from danger.

"I want..." Tom began, then stopped, searching for words that could encompass the contradictory impulses warring within him. "I want to explore this with you, safely. I want to see where these feelings lead without risking what we have. I want..."

He trailed off, the truth too complex, too multilayered to express in a simple statement of desire. What did he want? Everything and nothing. To watch Jess with another man and to keep her completely to himself. To explore the depths of his fantasies and to protect their marriage from any threat. To be honest with her and to hide his own complicity in Bob's machinations.

The contradictions paralyzed him, leaving him suspended between conflicting imperatives, unable to give Jess the clear answer she deserved.

"I think," Tom said finally, "that we need to really consider whether Bob is the right... avenue for this. Whether the potential benefits outweigh the risks."

Bob rubbed his eyes and leaned back in his chair, the artificial glow of the laptop screen the only light in his office. His notebook lay open beside the keyboard. A half-empty mug of coffee had gone cold, forgotten as he'd focused on the feed from the camera hidden in the Marshalls' bedroom.

He'd spent the night watching, waiting for them to return. When they finally stumbled through the door just after 2 AM, it had been immediately obvious they were drunk. Not tipsy, not buzzed, but proper shit faced drunk.

The night's surveillance had yielded mixed results. The positioning of the camera, his amateurish mistake from the initial installation, still restricted what he could see. Mostly feet, the edge of the bed, glimpses of movement when they passed through the frame. But while the visual had been lacking, the audio had been educational.

Bob rewound the footage for the third time, stopping at the point where they'd burst into the bedroom, already half-undressed. The rustling of clothes, a zipper, Jess's breathless laugh as she fell onto the bed.

"Tell me again," Tom's voice, hungry, demanding. "Tell me what it felt like when they touched you."

"So many hands," Jess had replied, her voice slurred but unmistakably aroused. "Kept pulling me against them, grinding on me."

"And you got wet." Not a question. A statement.

"Yes." Her admission was breathless. "One guy kept pressing against my ass, whispering these filthy things..."

"Like what? Tell me exactly what he said."

"That he wanted to take me to the bathroom, bend me over the sink."

Bob grimaced at the memory of what followed, the wet sounds of kissing, of frantic movement. Tom's voice growing rougher.

"Were you thinking about letting him? About following him to the bathroom?"

"No... maybe... I don't know. It was just hot to hear, to feel how hard he was for me."

Then the creaking of bedsprings, the rhythmic sound of sex, punctuated by Tom's continued questions, each more explicit than the last, and Jess's increasingly uninhibited responses.

Bob stopped the playback. They'd gone fucking clubbing. After all his careful groundwork, after the perfectly executed confrontation with Tom, after planting the seeds about safe exploration in controlled environments, they'd gone to a goddamn nightclub to explore their mutual fantasies with strangers.

He reached for his notebook, flipping back through the pages to the entry from last night.

"Friday evening. T arrived home from work. Intercepted him as he walked to front door. Casual conversation. T mentioned he and J were "going out tonight." J emerged wearing green dress (formal/cocktail). T in suit. Definitely special occasion."

He flipped forward, to the observations he'd made after their late-night return.

"Arrived home 2:13 AM. Both visibly intoxicated. J unsteady on heels, T supporting her as they entered. Clothes disheveled. Immediate sexual activity upon entry to bedroom. Context of conversation suggests nightclub environment. Multiple references to "dancing," "the club," "other guys." J apparently engaged in physical contact with multiple men while T observed. They're actively exploring T's voyeuristic tendencies in public settings. This presents both obstacle and opportunity."

Bob tapped his pen against the page, considering the implications. On one hand, their public exploration indicated that Tom had fully embraced his desires, had moved past the initial shock and shame of Bob's confrontation. Good. The seeds were germinating.

On the other hand, if they found satisfaction in anonymous nightclub encounters, his careful positioning as their "safe guide" through these waters might become irrelevant.

"Fuck," Bob muttered.

He stood and moved to the kitchen, retrieving a beer from the fridge. He popped the beer open and took a long pull, mind working through scenarios, evaluating options. Should he manufacture some reason to interact with them today? Create an opportunity to observe their post-club dynamic? No, that risked appearing too eager, too present. Better to maintain the careful distance he'd established all week.

After the confrontation with Tom last Saturday, Bob had deliberately played the long game. On Sunday, he'd convinced the couple to help with garden work, creating a shared activity where he'd been nothing but pleasant, never once hinting at the explosive conversation he'd had with Tom the day before. The stunned look on Tom's face had been worth every bit of restraint it took to pretend nothing had happened.

The rest of the week had followed the same pattern. When Jess worked from home on Tuesday and Thursday, he'd made sure to be visible, tending the garden during her lunch breaks. Their conversations had been friendly, casual, completely innocent. Just a harmless older man sharing gardening tips with a pretty young landlord.

Bob took another drink of beer, mind shifting back to the problem at hand. The Marshalls had gone clubbing. They'd tested their boundaries in public. Jess had danced with strangers while Tom watched.

"Amateurs," he scoffed, though there was more frustration than derision in the word.

The beer was cold and sharp in his throat as he pictured Jess on a dance floor, moving against strangers, letting them put their hands on her body. The image ignited both arousal and irritation. That should have been his hands. His opportunity. He'd laid the groundwork so carefully, had shown such patience.

But perhaps this was a necessary step. A testing of waters that would ultimately lead them back to the controlled environment he'd suggested. After all, nightclubs were notoriously unpredictable. Crowded, chaotic, filled with drunken strangers and potential disaster.

The Marshalls were smart people. They'd recognize the risks eventually. Might already be recognizing them, judging by how late they'd slept. Hangovers and regrets often went hand in hand.

He returned to his office, settling back into his chair and opening his notebook to a fresh page. At the top, he wrote: "NEXT STEPS."

Under this heading, he began to list options, potential moves in the intricate game he was playing.

"1. Maintain distance. Allow them to process their clubbing experiment without interference. Patience. Let them come to their own conclusions about the risks of public exploration.

2. Create casual interaction opportunity to gauge mood, current relationship dynamic. Garden work? Home repair issue?

3. More aggressive approach. Direct reminder to T about our conversation. Risk appearing too eager, pushing too hard."

Bob studied the options, weighing each against his understanding of the Marshalls' psychology, their current situation, the balance of power and desire he was attempting to manipulate.

Option 1 felt safest. They'd come home drunk, had impulsive sex fueled by their clubbing experiment. They needed time to process, to discuss, to evaluate. Pushing now might create resistance. Better to be present but peripheral, available but not eager.

He closed the notebook and finished his beer, mind settled on a course of action. Patience was his strongest asset. He'd waited decades for a woman like Jess. He could wait a bit longer.

He leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, and allowed himself to imagine the various paths this situation might take. Perhaps they'd eventually decide clubbing was too risky, too public. Perhaps they'd recognize the wisdom in his suggestion to Tom, a controlled environment, a known quantity, a safe space to explore dangerous desires.

Perhaps, in trying to distance themselves from his influence, they'd walked directly into the scenario that would ultimately lead them back to him.

Bob smiled at the ceiling. He'd played his hand well last Saturday, had planted the seeds carefully, had maintained discipline throughout the week. Now it was just a matter of waiting for those seeds to bear fruit.

Bob stood, stretching muscles stiff from hours in the chair. He would do yard work today. Something visible, productive. He would wave if he saw them, exchange pleasantries if the opportunity arose, but otherwise maintain respectful distance. The friendly neighbor. The helpful tenant. For now.

Sunday afternoon, Jess racked the barbell with a satisfying clang, feeling the pleasant burn in her quads that signaled a workout well done. Sweat trickled down as she stepped away from the squat rack, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. Four sets of heavy squats had left her legs trembling slightly, but the physical exertion had accomplished exactly what she'd hoped, drowning out the noise in her head.

The gym had become her sanctuary today, a place where the only conversations that mattered were between her muscles and her mind. No analysis of Friday night's club experiment. No breakfast discussions about Bob. No lingering questions about boundaries or jealousy or desires. Just iron, sweat, and the simple goal of pushing her body to its limits.

She'd left Tom at home, withdrawn in his office, catching up on work. They'd both needed the space, she suspected, time to process everything separately before coming back together. The weekend had been intense, to say the least, and sometimes the best way forward was a temporary step back.

Jess checked her watch. She'd completed her strength routine right on schedule, which left her thirty minutes for her usual treadmill finisher. She grabbed her water bottle and towel, scanning the cardio area for her favorite machine, the one positioned

perfectly to see the entire gym floor while remaining somewhat removed from the main traffic areas.

Finding it unoccupied, she quickly claimed it, programmed her usual interval routine, and began her warmup jog. The steady rhythm of her feet hitting the belt created a meditative backdrop, allowing her thoughts to drift into neutral territory. Work projects. The landscaping Bob had started in their backyard. Whether she should try that new vegan restaurant Madi had been raving about.

Twenty minutes in, Jess had found her stride, maintaining a comfortable pace that kept her heart rate elevated without pushing into the red zone. Her playlist shifted to an uptempo track, and she increased her speed slightly, matching the beat. The endorphins were flowing now, creating that particular high that only came from pushing through physical discomfort into the sweet spot beyond.

She was so focused on her run that she didn't notice Brandon until he was practically beside her treadmill, his imposing frame suddenly occupying her peripheral vision. He was wearing a fitted black tank top that seemed specifically designed to showcase his sculpted shoulders and arms, and compression shorts that left little to the imagination. His dark hair was damp with sweat, suggesting he'd been at the gym for a while already.

"Well, look who decided to grace us with her presence," Brandon announced, loud enough to be heard over the music playing through her earbuds. "I was starting to think you'd found another gym, Jess."

Jess pulled out one earbud, reducing her pace slightly to accommodate the conversation. "Not all of us have time to live at the gym, Brandon," she shot back, but her tone was playful rather than dismissive.

"And here I thought you were avoiding me." Brandon leaned against the adjacent machine. "Haven't seen you in what, a month?"

"Some of us have actual jobs that require more than just looking pretty and talking fast," she replied, referencing his career selling luxury cars. "I've been coming after work. And skipping weekends."

"Until today."

"Until today," she confirmed. "Tom's buried in work, so I figured I'd get out of the house."

Brandon's eyes made a journey down her body, lingering on her legs before returning to her face. "Those leggings should be illegal in at least thirty states. I have to keep telling you, Jess, you're going to cause an accident."

Jess rolled her eyes but couldn't quite suppress the small flicker of pleasure his attention triggered. Brandon's flirtation had always been so blatant, so unapologetic. She'd always dismissed it as just Brandon being Brandon, harmless but ultimately meaningless. But now, through the lens of Tom's confessions and their recent explorations, it felt different. Charged. Significant.

A thought slipped through her defenses. What would Tom think if she flirted back? If she leaned into Brandon's attention, then went home and told her husband all about it?

She pushed the idea away almost as quickly as it formed. Brandon was Tom's friend. They had history, connections, overlapping social circles. Brandon wasn't some anonymous stranger in a nightclub. He was a fixture in their lives, someone they'd have to face repeatedly.

Not to mention his friends with benefits arrangement with Madi created another layer of complication. The whole thing was a tangled web of potential consequences.

"How's business?" she asked, steering the conversation toward more neutral territory. "Sell any overpriced midlife crisis mobiles lately?"

Brandon's laugh was genuine, a deep rumble that always seemed to start in his chest. "As a matter of fact, I'm having my best quarter ever. Just last week, I sold a Bentley Continental GT to some tech kid who came in wearing flip-flops and a hoodie."

"Let me guess, he paid cash?"

"Better. Didn't even blink at the price tag. Three hundred grand might as well have been pocket change. Called his assistant right in front of me and had them wire the money. No financing, no haggling, just 'I want the blue one with the cream interior.'"

Jess chuckled, imagining the scene. "Must be nice."

"I mean, the commission alone..." Brandon trailed off, letting her imagination fill in the blanks. "But enough about my brilliance in separating rich guys from their money. How's life treating you?"

"Been busy with work. I've got these new projects in Houston and Savannah that are taking up all my mental bandwidth."

"Savannah, huh? Haunted mansions and Spanish moss? Sounds right up your alley."

"Boutique hotel conversion of an 1850s mansion," she clarified, impressed he'd remembered her professional interests so specifically. "It's a dream project, honestly. Tons of creative freedom, huge budget."

"And Tom? How's he holding up with you being so in demand?"

“He’s been traveling himself,” she replied. “San Diego last week for a client emergency. We’re both just... busy.”

Brandon nodded, his expression suddenly more thoughtful than flirtatious. “That’s the hustle, I guess. Chase those careers.”

“Says the man who practically lives at the dealership.”

“Different when you’re building something for yourself,” he countered. “All those hours translate directly to my bottom line. Corporate warriors like you and Tom, though...” He shook his head. “Always working for someone else’s dream.”

“I love what I do,” Jess defended, increasing her pace slightly.

“Never said you didn’t. Just wondering if the balance is worth it.” Brandon’s eyes met hers with unexpected directness. “When was the last time you two actually had fun?”

Friday night at Domino had been many things, exciting, boundary-pushing, illuminating. But “fun” wasn’t exactly the right word. It had been an experiment, a deliberate exploration of complicated desires.

“We manage,” she said finally. “Everyone’s busy these days.”

“Which is exactly why Madi’s been bugging me to set up a double date night,” Brandon replied, shifting back to his more typical lighthearted tone. “Dinner, drinks, maybe hit up that new place on Sixth Street that has the arcade games.”

“She mentioned that the other day,” Jess acknowledged. “Just haven’t had time to coordinate schedules.”

“Make time,” Brandon suggested. “Life’s too short to just work and sleep. Plus, I haven’t had a chance to properly harass Tom in weeks.”

Jess laughed, grateful for the lighter turn. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Part of my charm.” Brandon’s smile shifted to something slightly more intimate. “Speaking of which, have I mentioned how especially stunning you look today? Something about the whole sweaty, endorphin high thing really works for you.”

“I bet you say that to all the married women you harass at the gym,” Jess countered, but there was no bite to her words.

“Nope, just the ones I’ve had a crush on for years.”

“Yes, Brandon, I know. You’ve told me approximately a hundred times now.”

“And I’ll keep telling you until you finally admit there’s something between us.”

“There’s definitely something between us,” Jess agreed. “It’s called boundaries.”

Brandon clutched his chest. “That hurts, Jess. And after I’ve been nothing but a perfect gentleman.”

“Perfect gentleman?” Jess scoffed. “The last time we talked, you were practically writing an ode to my ass.”

“I call it like I see it,” Brandon shrugged unapologetically.

“How’s Madi?” Jess asked, changing the subject. “Besides wanting to set up double dates?”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Brandon wagged a finger. “You don’t get to deploy the Madi card just when the conversation gets interesting.”

“I’m not deploying anything. I’m genuinely curious about my best friend.”

“She’s good,” Brandon conceded. “Busy with some charity gala she’s planning. You probably know more than I do, honestly. You two are practically joined at the brain.”

“We talk,” Jess confirmed.

“About me, I hope,” Brandon’s cocky grin returned full force. “All good things, right?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Jess retorted.

Brandon leaned slightly closer, his voice dropping to a more intimate register. “I would, actually. Very much.”

Jess felt a small thrill at his persistence, at the unabashed way he made his interest known. There was something refreshing about his straightforwardness, his comfort in his own skin. Brandon Steele knew exactly who he was and made no apologies for it.

“I’m sure your ego is robust enough without my contribution,” Jess replied.

“My ego’s just fine,” Brandon agreed. “But a man likes to know where he stands.”

“You stand precisely where you’ve always stood, Brandon. As Tom’s friend who enjoys playing the harmless flirt.”

“Harmless?” He raised an eyebrow. “Is that what you think?”

“Isn’t it?” Jess challenged, matching his gaze.

Brandon’s smile shifted, becoming something more genuine, almost vulnerable. “Maybe not entirely,” he admitted. “But I know the score. You’re Tom’s wife. I respect that, even if I occasionally enjoy testing the boundaries.”

Usually, their exchanges remained firmly in the realm of playful banter, never acknowledging the undercurrent that sometimes flowed beneath. This moment of honesty created an unexpected intimacy that made her slightly uncomfortable.

"Well, now you've gone and made it weird," she said lightly.

Brandon laughed, the moment passing as quickly as it had arrived. "Can't have that, can we? Let me try again." He cleared his throat dramatically. "Damn, Jess, those leggings make your ass look like…"

"Much better," Jess interrupted, joining his laughter. "Now you're back to being the Brandon I know how to handle."

"Handle, huh? Interesting choice of words."

"You know what I mean."

"I do," he conceded. "But seriously, about that double date. You should talk to Tom. It's been too long since we all hung out."

"I'll mention it," Jess promised. "Once things calm down a bit with work."

"Don't make me put Madi on you," Brandon warned. "You know she'll be relentless."

"Trust me, she already is." Jess checked the time on the treadmill display. "I've only got a few minutes left on this run."

"Perfect timing. I was about to hit the showers anyway." Brandon straightened, stretching his arms overhead in a movement that showcased his impressive physique. "Unless you'd care to join…"

"Don't push your luck, Brandon," Jess cut him off.

"Can't blame a guy for trying." He stepped back, giving her space. "You'll talk to Tom about getting together?"

"I said I would."

"Good." Brandon's smile became genuine again. "Text Madi when you guys figure out a date that works."

"Will do."

Brandon offered a small salute before turning to leave. "See you around, Jess. Try not to break too many hearts on your way out."

"Goodbye, Brandon," Jess called after him, shaking her head slightly as she watched him walk away.

The treadmill beeped its one-minute warning, and Jess returned her focus to finishing strong. As she pushed through the final interval, she found herself replaying the conversation with Brandon, examining it from different angles.

What would Tom think of their exchange? Would hearing about Brandon's persistent flirtation trigger that same complex mixture of jealousy and arousal that the club had inspired?

The final beep sounded, and the treadmill began its cool-down cycle. Jess slowed to a walk, her breathing gradually returning to normal as she contemplated the complicated web of relationships, desires, and boundaries that seemed to be growing more intricate by the day.

Her phone chimed with a text as she headed toward the exit.

Tom: Finished most of my work. Thinking about grilling for dinner. How's the gym?

Jess smiled, typing a quick reply.

Jess: Just finished. Bumped into Brandon. Same old Brandon. Steaks sound perfect. Be home in 20.

She hesitated, then added a message.

Jess: Love you.

His response was immediate.

Tom: Love you too. See you soon.

Jess slipped her phone into her bag and pushed through the gym doors into the bright afternoon sunlight.

Tom pulled into the driveway at 8:10 PM on Tuesday, tires skidding slightly on the pavement in his haste. He'd been held up by unexpected traffic, a fender bender on the highway that had cost him nearly twenty minutes of sitting in gridlock, inching forward while checking the clock every thirty seconds.

Twenty minutes that felt like an eternity, especially today.

He grabbed his laptop bag and nearly sprinted to the front door, fumbling with his keys for a moment before managing to get the door unlocked. Tom took the stairs two at a time, his heart racing with anticipation.

"Jess?" he called, emerging into their living room slightly breathless.

"In the kitchen," she called back, her voice casual, betraying nothing.

Tom crossed to the kitchen entrance, where he found Jess in front of the stove, stirring something that smelled like garlic and herbs. She wore simple gray leggings and an

oversized sweatshirt she'd stolen from him years ago. Nothing unusual. Nothing that indicated... anything.

"Hey," she smiled over her shoulder. "You're just in time. Dinner's almost ready."

"How was your day?" Tom asked, trying and failing to keep his voice neutral. It came out too eager, too quick.

Jess's eyes flickered to his face, a slight smile playing on her lips. She knew exactly why he was rushing, why he was almost vibrating with curiosity. "My day was fine," she replied, turning back to the stove. "The usual Tuesday. How was yours?"

"Fine. Good. Busy." The details of his work day seemed impossibly trivial right now, not worth the breath it would take to recount them. "Did you, uh, work from home?"

"Mmhmm," Jess hummed, removing a baking dish from the oven. Lasagna, Tom noted absently. One of his favorites. "Got a lot done on the Savannah project. They loved the preliminary concepts I sent over."

Tom watched her move around the kitchen, searching for any hint, any clue. "That's great," he said automatically. "Did you... take any breaks? Go outside at all? It was nice out today."

Jess's smile widened slightly as she set the lasagna on a trivet. "I did, actually. Took advantage of the sunshine."

"Yeah?" Tom prompted, moving closer, his hands finding her waist. "How'd that go?"

Jess turned in his arms, her expression amused. "Tom Marshall, are you fishing for details about something specific?" she asked, her tone light and teasing.

"Maybe," he admitted, not even bothering to deny it. "After our conversation yesterday..."

"Right," Jess said, her eyes meeting his directly. "That conversation."

Their long, intimate talk the night before, when they'd discussed boundaries again, when they'd mapped out potential next steps in this exploration of his fantasies, when Jess had surprised him with her receptiveness to his suggestions.

"So?" Tom pressed. "Did you...?"

"All in good time," Jess replied, gently disentangling herself from his arms. "Let's eat first. I'm starving, and I put a lot of effort into this lasagna."

Tom groaned, equal parts frustrated and amused. "You're killing me here."

“Patience is a virtue,” she sang, placing a hand on his chest and gently pushing him toward the table. “Food, then talk.”

“Fine,” Tom conceded, allowing himself to be guided to his chair. “But just so you know, this is torture.”

“So dramatic,” Jess laughed, bringing the lasagna to the table. “It’s just dinner, Tom.”

But they both knew it wasn’t just dinner. There was a charge in the air, an electric anticipation. Tom tried to focus on the food, which was delicious as always, but his mind kept skipping ahead, imagining possibilities, constructing scenarios based on Jess’s cryptic hints.

Had she actually followed through on what they’d discussed? Had she taken that step? And if so, how had it felt for her?

“You’re not even tasting that, are you?” Jess observed as Tom hastily forked another bite of lasagna into his mouth.

“What? No, it’s great,” Tom insisted, forcing himself to slow down and actually savor the food. “Really good.”

“Sure,” Jess said skeptically, though her smile remained. “You’ve had the same expression on your face for the past five minutes, and it’s not your ‘wow this lasagna is amazing’ look.”

“I just... I can’t stop thinking about...”

“I know,” Jess said softly, reaching across the table to take his hand. “And I promise we’ll talk about it. In detail. Just let me feed you first, okay?”

There was something in her tone, a combination of tenderness and anticipation, that helped Tom rein in his impatience. He squeezed her hand, then focused on enjoying the meal she’d prepared, asking about her work projects, sharing a few highlights from his own day.

Finally, after what felt like hours but was probably only fifteen minutes, they finished eating. Jess stood to clear the plates, but Tom jumped up.

“I’ll get those,” he said quickly. “You cooked.”

“Such a gentleman,” she teased, though she didn’t protest as he gathered the dishes and deposited them in the sink.

“Living room?” Tom suggested, and Jess nodded, leading the way to their couch.

She grabbed the remote as they settled in, turning on Netflix and scrolling through options with apparent casualness, as if they were just having a normal Tuesday

evening. Tom watched her with impatience while also enjoying the torture of anticipation.

"So," he finally said when he couldn't stand it any longer. "Are you going to tell me about your day, or do I have to guess?"

Jess lowered the remote and bit her lower lip, her expression shifting from casual to something more intimate. She turned to face him, tucking one leg beneath her on the couch.

"Well," she began, her voice soft. "You know how we talked yesterday about maybe... testing things?"

Tom nodded. "It was just yesterday. I remember."

"And you suggested that maybe words weren't the best starting point. That something more..." she paused, searching for the right word, "...visual might be a clearer signal of intent."

"Yes," Tom managed, his pulse quickening as she confirmed what he'd been wondering all evening.

Jess's eyes held his, a slight flush spreading across her cheeks. "I thought about what you said. A lot, actually. And today, when I took my lunch break, I decided to... experiment."

Tom leaned forward, unable to help himself. "What did you do?"

A small, almost shy smile curved Jess's lips. "Well, it was such a beautiful day. Sunshine, blue skies, hot enough that the pool looked inviting."

"Go on," Tom prompted when she paused.

"I put on my red swimsuit," Jess continued, watching his reaction. "You know the one. The one-piece that looks like something out of Baywatch. I figured... why not take a quick dip while Bob was working in the yard?"

Tom's heart was hammering in his chest. The red swimsuit. The one that displayed her long legs to perfection, that dipped low enough in front to show the upper curve of her breasts. It was devastatingly sexy on Jess.

"You went swimming? While Bob was outside?" Tom asked.

"I did," Jess confirmed, her eyes never leaving his face. "I went downstairs, said hello to Bob while he was pruning those bushes along the fence, and then I took a quick swim."

"And?" Tom pressed. "What happened?"

“Well,” Jess shifted slightly, her posture relaxing as she settled into the story. “Bob pretended he wasn’t watching me, but I could tell he was. I could feel his eyes on me while I swam. Nothing creepy, just... appreciative, I guess. When I came out, he had an iced tea waiting for me.” She laughed softly. “He said the heat must be making me thirsty.”

“Thoughtful of him,” Tom murmured, his mind filling in the visual. Jess emerging from the pool, water streaming down her body. Bob trying to be casual while offering her a drink.

“We sat on the loungers for a bit,” Jess continued. “He had a beer, I had the tea. Just chatting. About twenty minutes or so.”

“What did you talk about?” Tom asked, imagining the scene with vivid clarity.

“Nothing special,” Jess shrugged. “The weather, the yard, basic stuff. But the whole time, I could tell he was... affected. He kept shifting in his seat, crossing and uncrossing his legs. At one point, he actually dropped his beer when I stretched and had to scramble to catch it before it spilled everywhere.”

Tom couldn’t help the small surge of satisfaction that rushed through him at the image. “He was turned on,” he stated.

“Oh, definitely,” Jess confirmed, her smile widening slightly. “But he was trying so hard to be respectful, to not make it obvious. It was kind of sweet, actually. A bit shy, even.”

“Bob? Shy?” Tom raised an eyebrow, thinking of the man’s confidence in their private conversation.

“I know, right? But he was. He kept his eyes on my face most of the time, very deliberately. When they did wander, he’d catch himself and immediately look away, like he was scolding himself for looking.” Jess laughed softly. “It was almost endearing.”

“What did he say?” Tom pressed, fascinated by this glimpse of Bob through Jess’s eyes.

“He complimented me, said it was obvious I took care of my body. But he said it in this careful way, like he was trying to be respectful about it. So I told him about going to the gym and my yoga classes.”

Jess shifted on the couch, leaning closer to Tom. “He made this joke about how he’d be enjoying the pool more often now that the weather was nice. As if he wasn’t completely transparent.”

"Oh, and he did it again," Jess added, almost as an afterthought.

"Did what?" Tom asked, though he suspected he knew the answer.

"Called me 'princess' again," Jess replied. "When I was getting out of the pool. He said something like 'careful there, princess' when I almost slipped on the steps. It just... slipped out naturally, like he's used to saying it."

Tom felt his mouth go dry. "What did you say?"

"Nothing, really. I just smiled."

"And how did that make you feel?" Tom asked, studying her face. "Having him look at you like that?"

Jess caught her bottom lip between her teeth again, considering. "Powerful," she admitted after a moment. "Like I was in complete control of the situation. I knew exactly what I was doing to him, and I decided how much to give, how far to take it." She met Tom's eyes directly. "It was... exciting."

Tom swallowed hard, his body responding to her words, to the flush on her cheeks, to the memory of their conversation the day before when he'd suggested exactly this scenario. "And after? When you went back upstairs?"

"I finished my work," Jess said simply. "But I kept thinking about it. About the way he looked at me, about how obvious his reaction was." She leaned even closer. "And about how I would tell you about it later. That was the most exciting part."

Tom couldn't resist any longer. He reached for her, pulling her into his lap so that she straddled him. His hands found her hips, gripping them firmly as he looked up into her face. "You're incredible," he breathed. "Do you know that?"

Jess smiled, her hands resting on his shoulders. "I'm glad you think so. Because there's more."

Tom's eyebrows shot up. "More? What else happened with Bob?"

"Not Bob," Jess clarified, her fingers playing with the hair at the nape of his neck. "After work. I went to yoga."

"Oh," Tom said, momentarily thrown by the shift. "Right. It's Tuesday. Yoga day."

"Mmhmm," Jess confirmed. "And guess who was there? Still subbing for Amber while she's on maternity?"

"Derek," Tom supplied, the name sending a small jolt through him. Derek, the incredibly fit yoga instructor Jess had mentioned before. The one who'd given her those hands on "adjustments" to her posture.

"Exactly," Jess nodded, watching his reaction. "I haven't been to yoga in a couple of weeks, but there he was, still teaching the class and still offering that extra hour for advanced students afterward."

"And you stayed for the extra hour," Tom guessed.

"I did," Jess confirmed. "There were a few of us there."

Tom's hands tightened slightly on her hips. "And did Derek remember you?"

"Oh, he remembered me," Jess said, her voice slightly teasing. "He made a point of coming over to help with my postures."

"Did he now?" Tom tried to keep his voice neutral, but a hint of jealousy tinged arousal slipped through.

"He's very hands on with his teaching," Jess continued, clearly enjoying Tom's reaction. "While I was in Warrior II, he came up behind me and put his hands on my hips, rotating them to 'improve my alignment.' Then for the handstand, he spotted me, one hand on my waist, the other on my ankle."

Tom's imagination displayed the scene in vivid detail. Derek, with his athletic build and professional demeanor, standing close behind Jess, touching her body under the guise of teaching.

"After everyone else left, we talked for a bit," Jess added. "He brought up that conversation we had last time, about the deeper aspects of yoga. Energy flow and all that."

"Do you..." Tom hesitated, then decided to just ask directly. "Do you find him attractive?"

Jess's smile widened slightly, her eyes holding his. "Yes," she admitted frankly. "He's handsome, Tom. His body is like a sculpture, all lean muscle from years of yoga practice. And his skin is this incredible dark brown. When he demonstrates poses, it's like watching art in motion."

Tom's grip on her hips tightened further, his body reacting to her honest description. "Go on," he urged.

"He's tall, maybe six-three or six-four, and he has this presence. It's not like Brandon's cockiness. It's more... quiet confidence? Like he's completely comfortable in his own skin." Jess shifted slightly on Tom's lap, and he knew she could feel his growing arousal beneath her. "When he teaches, he barely has to raise his voice. Everyone just naturally pays attention to him."

"And he pays attention to you," Tom noted, a statement rather than a question.

“He does,” Jess confirmed, her hands sliding from Tom’s shoulders to his chest. “The way he looks at me is different from how Bob looked at me today, or how Brandon looks at me at the gym. It’s less obvious but more... intense somehow. Like he’s seeing right through me.”

Tom’s hands moved from her hips to her waist, slipping under the hem of her sweatshirt to find warm skin. “And that... affects you?” he asked, searching her face.

“It does,” Jess admitted softly. “But then I came home, thinking about how I’d tell you all of this. How I’d watch your reaction.” She leaned closer, her lips brushing his ear as she whispered, “Do you know what I’ve realized, Tom? I’ve had three different men look at me with open desire in the past three days. Brandon at the gym on Sunday, Bob today at lunch, Derek tonight at yoga.”

Tom held his breath as her words sank in. “And?” he managed.

“And if we’re really serious about exploring this... whatever this is between us,” Jess continued, “it wouldn’t be very hard to find willing participants.”

Something about her phrasing, about the directness of her statement, sent a jolt of both arousal and apprehension through Tom. This was no longer hypothetical, no longer just a fantasy to whisper about in the safety of their bedroom. Jess was acknowledging real possibilities, real people who desired her, who might act on that desire given the opportunity.

“Since you brought all this up,” Jess said, pulling back slightly to look into his eyes, “I can’t stop noticing it. The way men look at me. The way they react to me. And I can’t help wondering what it would be like to... explore that. To flirt back. To let them think they might have a chance.”

Her hands moved down to the hem of Tom’s shirt, slipping underneath to touch his bare skin. “But we need to be so, so careful,” she added. “There’s a lot of ways this could go wrong. That’s why we set those rules, those boundaries. No friends, no colleagues, no emotional connections. Complete honesty with each other.”

“I know,” Tom agreed. “I know the risks.”

“Do you really?” Jess pressed, her fingers tracing patterns on his chest. “Because once we open this door, Tom, I’m not sure we can close it again. Not completely.”

Her words were sobering despite the charge of arousal still crackling in the air. She was right. They were venturing into territory that could change them, change their marriage in ways they couldn’t fully anticipate.

“I want this,” Tom said, his voice steady despite the doubt lingering at the edges of his mind. “I want to explore it with you. Whatever it is. Wherever it leads us.”

“Even if it means another man’s hands on me like at Domino?” Jess asked.

Tom’s heart continued to hammer against his ribs, a physical manifestation of the conflict within him. Fear and desire, jealousy and arousal, all tangled together in a knot he couldn’t begin to unravel.

“Especially then,” he said.

Jess studied his face for a long moment, searching for something. Whatever she found seemed to satisfy her, because her expression softened, her body relaxing against his.

“Okay,” she whispered, her hands moving up to frame his face. “Then we’ll explore it together. Carefully. Following our rules.”

Tom nodded, unable to form words. Instead, he pulled her closer, his lips finding hers in a kiss that was both tender and desperate. Her response was immediate, her body melting against his as her mouth opened to deepen the kiss.

What had begun as conversation shifted seamlessly into something more primal. Tom’s hands moved beneath Jess’s sweatshirt, finding the clasp of her bra, unfastening it.

Jess broke the kiss long enough to pull the sweatshirt and bra off, revealing her bare torso. Tom’s hands moved to cup her breasts, his thumbs brushing over her nipples, drawing a soft gasp from her lips.

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” Tom admitted. “About Bob watching you come out of the pool, all wet in that red swimsuit. About Derek putting his hands on you during yoga.”

“And that turns you on,” Jess observed, grinding her hips down against his obvious arousal. “Knowing they want me. Knowing they can look but not touch. Not the way you can.”

“God, yes,” Tom groaned, his hands moving to her ass, gripping firmly through the thin material of her leggings. “Tell me more about Bob. How did he look at you when you came out of the pool?”

Jess smiled. “Like he was dying of thirst and I was the last drop of water on Earth,” she said. “His eyes went so wide when I climbed out of the pool. I could practically hear his thoughts.”

“What do you think he was thinking?” Tom asked, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her ass.

“That he wanted to peel that wet suit off me,” Jess whispered, her breath hot against his ear. “That he wanted to feel if I was as wet underneath it.”

Tom's hips bucked involuntarily, his cock straining against the confines of his pants. "Were you? Wet underneath?"

"Maybe a little," Jess admitted, her smile turning wicked. "From the way he looked at me, from knowing I'd be telling you all about it later."

Her confession ignited something in Tom. He surged forward, kissing her more passionately, his hands moving to the waistband of her leggings. Jess lifted her hips, allowing him to pull them down, along with her underwear, until they tangled around her knees.

"And Derek?" Tom asked between kisses, his fingers finding her pussy. "Did he make you wet too?"

"Yes," Jess gasped as his fingers slipped through her folds, finding her already slick. "The way he touched me during poses, so professional on the surface but there was something else..."

Tom's thumb found her clit, circling it. "Something like what?" he prompted, watching her face contort with pleasure.

"Like he knew exactly what he was doing to me," Jess managed, her hips rocking against his hand. "Like every adjustment was an excuse to touch me, to see how I'd respond."

"And how did you respond?" Tom pushed two fingers inside her, feeling her inner walls clench around them.

"I..." Jess's voice faltered as his fingers curled, finding that spot inside her that made her gasp. "I let him. I leaned into his touch. I might have... mmm... moaned a little when he pressed deeper."

The image seared itself into Tom's brain, feeding the fire already burning in his veins. Jess, in her tight yoga clothes, responding to another man's touch with a sound of pleasure he knew intimately.

"Show me," Tom demanded, his fingers working her with increasing urgency. "Show me how you sound when he touches you."

Jess's head fell back, exposing the long column of her throat. The sound that escaped her lips was soft but unmistakably erotic, a breathy moan that sent blood rushing to Tom's already painfully hard cock.

"Fuck," he growled, his free hand fumbling with his belt, desperate now to feel her around him. "I need to be inside you."

Jess hopped off, her fingers unfastening his pants and pushing them down along with his boxers. His cock sprang free, hard against his stomach. She got back on top, positioning herself above him, her eyes locked on his as she slowly sank down, taking him in inch by exquisite inch.

"Oh god," Tom breathed as she enveloped him completely, her heat and wetness nearly unbearable in their intensity. "You feel so fucking amazing."

Jess began to move, rocking her hips in a slow, deliberate rhythm.

Tom moved his hands to her waist, guiding her movements.

For a long moment, they moved in sync, both enjoying the exquisite sensation provided by their life partner.

"Tell me," Jess urged, her voice breathy as she rode him. "Tell me what you're thinking right now."

"I'm thinking about how fucking beautiful you are," Tom managed. "About how lucky I am that you're mine, that you come home to me, even when so many other men want you."

"I'll always come home to you," Jess promised, her pace increasing. "No matter who looks, who wants, who touches, I'm yours, Tom."

The combination of physical pleasure and the emotional reassurance exactly what he needed. "Mine," he agreed, thrusting up to meet her downward movements. "Even when you're with someone else, you're still mine."

His words, the acknowledgment of her "with someone else" added another layer of intensity to their connection.

Jess leaned forward, changing the angle so that her clit ground against him with each movement.

Tom's hand moved between them, fingers finding her clit again, circling it with firm pressure. "Come for me," he urged. "Come on my cock while you think about all of them wanting you."

That seemed to do the trick. Moments later, Jess cried out, her body tensing then shuddering as waves of pleasure radiated out from her pussy. Tom felt her inner walls pulsing around him, drawing him toward his own release. But not yet. Not quite yet.

As her orgasm subsided, Jess slumped forward, her forehead resting against his for a moment as she caught her breath. Then, with a smile that was both tender and wicked, she climbed off him and slid to her knees between his thighs.

“My turn,” she murmured, her hand wrapping around his cock, still slick with her juices.

Tom’s head fell back against the couch cushions as Jess’s mouth enveloped him, warm and wet and perfect. Her tongue swirled around the head of his cock before she took him deeper.

“God, Jess,” he groaned, one hand tangling in her hair. “That feels... fuck...”

She pulled back slightly, her eyes lifting to meet his as she continued stroking him with her hand.

“Now what are you thinking about?” she asked. “When you’re close like this, what’s in your mind?”

“You,” Tom managed, his breathing ragged. “Always you.”

“Just me?” she pressed, her tongue darting out to tease the sensitive spot just beneath the head of his cock. “Or me with someone else?”

The directness of her question, combined with the physical sensation of her mouth and hand, pushed Tom dangerously close to the edge.

“You...” he started, but lost his train of thought as she took him deeper again. “God, I’m picturing you sucking on Bob’s huge cock.”

The words left his mouth before he could stop them. Tom froze, horror flooding through him at what he’d just revealed. Jess paused for a fraction of a second, then continued, her rhythm barely faltering.

“Is that what you want?” she asked as she pulled back. “To see that?”

“I…” Tom swallowed hard, trying to recover. “Yeah. One of many fantasies.”

She smiled up at him, seemingly accepting his explanation as she lowered her mouth over him again.

Tom exhaled shakily, both from the physical sensation and relief that she hadn’t questioned how he knew about Bob’s size. Jess’s movements became more focused now, more deliberate. Tom’s hands found her hair, not guiding but simply holding on, anchoring himself as pleasure built.

“I’m close,” he warned, his hips jerking involuntarily. “Jess, I’m going to-”

She didn’t pull away. Instead, she looked up, meeting his gaze directly as she took him to the root, her throat relaxing to accommodate his full length. The sight of her, on her knees, eyes locked on his, lips stretched around his cock, undid him.

Tom came with a shout, his whole body tensing as he came. Jess stayed with him through it, swallowing every last drop, her eyes never leaving his face.

When the last tremors subsided, she finally pulled back, a smile playing on her lips as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Tom reached for her, pulling her up into his lap again, wrapping his arms around her in a tight embrace.

"You're incredible," he murmured against her hair. "I love you so fucking much."

"I love you too," Jess replied, her voice soft against his neck. "No matter what happens, no matter where this goes, that won't change."

They stayed like that for several minutes, simply holding each other, catching their breath, processing not just the physical connection they'd shared but the emotional implications of their ongoing exploration.

Eventually, Jess shifted, pulling back slightly to look at his face. "We should get cleaned up," she suggested with a small smile. "And maybe finish watching something on Netflix like a normal couple."

Tom laughed, releasing her reluctantly. "Normal. Right."

As Jess disappeared into the bathroom, Tom sat back on the couch, his mind replaying the events of the evening. Jess in her red swimsuit, Bob's barely concealed desire, Derek's "adjustments" during yoga, all of it now woven into the fabric of their shared experience, their evolving dynamic.

And his slip-up about Bob's "huge cock." Would she question that later? How would he explain knowing something so intimate about their tenant? The thought made his stomach tighten with anxiety, but for now at least, she seemed to have accepted it as just another facet of his fantasy.

Questions surfaced in his mind. Should he talk to Jess about his conversation with Bob? Should he talk to Bob himself? Acknowledge what was happening, address the older man's manipulations directly?

The thought of admitting to Jess that he and Bob had already discussed her filled Tom with a sense of dread. What could he possibly say? If he revealed Bob's approach, Jess would rightfully be furious at both of them. If he tried to establish some kind of ground rules with Bob without telling Jess, he'd be perpetuating the very deception he was trying to avoid.

No, Tom decided as Jess returned, her face freshly washed, her smile soft and genuine. For now, the best approach was to simply follow the path they'd begun to map out together. Bob was a complication, yes, but one they could navigate if they stayed focused on each other.

Jess settled beside him on the couch, curling into his side as she reached for the remote. "So, what are we watching?" she asked, as if they were just any other couple on a Tuesday night, as if they hadn't just crossed another threshold in their relationship.

"You choose," Tom replied, pressing a kiss to her temple. "I trust your judgment."

And he did. Despite the complexities they were navigating, despite the risks inherent in their exploration, despite his own conflicted feelings, Tom trusted Jess completely. Whatever came next, they would face it together, step by careful step, finding their way through this uncharted territory they'd chosen to explore.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 10

Jess stood in her walk-in closet, fingertips trailing across the row of swimsuits neatly hung alongside her summer clothes. The collection, accumulated over years of pool parties and beach vacations, offered a rainbow of options. Two days ago, she'd gone with the red one-piece, reserved by comparison to some of her other options, yet still striking enough to catch Bob's eye and give Tom something delicious to think about later.

Today called for something different.

She pulled out a black bikini with gold hardware connecting the pieces, holding it against her body as she considered her reflection in the full-length mirror. The top would showcase her cleavage nicely, the bottoms cut high enough to emphasize her long legs while still offering reasonable coverage.

Too safe, she decided, returning it to the rack.

Her hand paused over a white string bikini, the one Tom had bought her for a weekend in Cabo three years ago. Barely there, it had taken considerable coaxing from him for her to wear it even on their private hotel balcony. The memory of his face when she finally emerged wearing it brought a smile to her lips. She'd felt sexy, desirable, powerful in a way that went beyond her usual confidence.

Jess pulled the hanger free, considering the tiny scraps of fabric. As a test of boundaries, this would certainly qualify. But was it too much, too soon? The line between teasing and something more definitive felt paper thin, and she wasn't quite ready to blur it completely.

At the far end of the rack hung a turquoise bikini, one of her favorites. The halter top provided support while still showcasing her curves, and the bottoms struck a perfect balance between modest and alluring. More importantly, the vibrant color set off her tan and made her blonde hair appear even lighter by contrast.

Perfect, she decided, removing it from the hanger.

As she changed, Jess reflected on the past few days. Tuesday night had been incredible, Tom's response to her poolside interaction with Bob and yoga session with Derek exceeding her most optimistic expectations. The way his eyes had darkened as she recounted each detail, the barely contained desire in his touch as she'd straddled him on the couch, the intensity of their connection as they'd moved together, all of it had created something electric between them.

And instead of fading, that electricity had carried over into Wednesday. Tom had texted her throughout the day, little messages that might seem innocent to anyone else but carried layers of meaning for her. During dinner, his hand had found her thigh under the table, fingers tracing idle patterns that sent shivers up her spine. When they'd finally fallen into bed, their lovemaking had been neither frantic nor quick, but deep and almost reverent, punctuated by whispered "I love yous" that felt more meaningful than ever.

It struck her as almost painfully ironic that Tom's fantasies about other men were bringing them closer together. For months, they'd been drifting, not dramatically but noticeably. Sex had become less frequent, a casualty of busy schedules and the lingering tension from Tom's cryptocurrency investment disaster. His increasingly late nights at work had grated on her nerves, reading as indifference rather than dedication.

Now, those same late nights felt different. Tom working overtime wasn't avoiding her. It was providing for her, for them, for their future. The financial pressure had eased somewhat thanks to Bob's rent checks creating a reliable monthly cushion. And sex had become a source of connection rather than a chore to check off a relationship maintenance list.

Jess smiled at her reflection as she adjusted the turquoise top. There was light at the tunnel's end, and while she couldn't have predicted this particular path, she couldn't deny its effectiveness. She was having her cake and eating it too, exploring this playful, teasing side of herself with other men while coming home to a husband who not only accepted it but was actively turned on by it.

The bikini fit perfectly, showcasing the results of her consistent gym routine. Yoga and weight training had kept her body toned and strong. At twenty-seven, she felt more comfortable in her skin than she had at twenty, when she'd been modeling and constantly comparing herself to impossibly perfect women.

She turned, appraising herself critically. Her breasts filled the cups nicely. Her stomach was flat, with just enough definition around her obliques to show she took care of herself. Her legs had always been long, lean, shapely, and the high-cut bikini bottoms emphasized their length.

Yes, she looked good, and she knew it. Not in a conceited way, but with the confidence of a woman who fully understood her assets.

Jess grabbed a sheer white cover-up, slipping it over her shoulders but leaving it open in front. She added oversized sunglasses, gathered her hair into a loose ponytail, and stepped into simple white sandals.

In the kitchen, she filled a water bottle before moving to the balcony doors. Outside, the afternoon sun bathed their yard in golden light. And there, as she'd expected, was Bob, working on the flower beds along the back fence. He wore khaki shorts and a faded blue t-shirt that had seen better days, a wide-brimmed hat protecting his face from the sun.

Jess took a moment to watch him. Despite being in his mid-fifties, Bob moved with the casual strength of someone accustomed to physical labor. She could see why he'd been successful in his contracting business before the divorces took their toll.

She opened the balcony door and began descending the stairs to the pool area, making no effort to disguise her approach. The boards creaked slightly beneath her sandals, causing Bob to glance up from his work.

If she hadn't been watching for it, she might have missed the momentary widening of his eyes, the slight pause in his movements before he straightened and offered a casual wave.

"Afternoon," he called, his voice carrying easily across the yard. "Taking advantage of the sunshine again?"

"Thought I'd take another swim break," Jess replied, reaching the bottom of the stairs. "The pool's just sitting there looking inviting, and my brain needs a reset before my next call."

Bob nodded as if this made perfect sense, though his eyes briefly followed the movement of her cover-up as it fluttered in the light breeze.

"Smart move," he said, removing his gardening gloves and tucking them into his back pocket. "Nothing clears the head like water."

"How's the garden coming along?" Jess asked, approaching the pool's edge where she draped her cover-up over a lounger.

Bob gestured toward the flower beds. "I just planted some native perennials along the back fence. Minimal maintenance. They'll fill in nicely over the summer."

"You've transformed this space," Jess said.

"That's the advantage of my situation," Bob replied with a self-deprecating smile. "Plenty of time for projects like this."

There was something in his tone, not quite bitterness but a hint of resignation, that reminded Jess of his circumstances. From successful business owner to tenant in someone else's home. It must represent a significant adjustment.

"Well, we appreciate it," she said sincerely. "The yard's never looked better."

"Happy to do it," Bob assured her. "Gives me purpose, something constructive to focus on."

Jess nodded, then turned toward the pool. "I'm going to take a quick dip," she said. "Don't let me interrupt your work."

"Take your time," Bob replied easily. "I've been at it for hours. Probably due for a break myself."

She felt his eyes on her as she walked to the pool steps, but when she glanced back, he had already returned to his gardening, his attention seemingly focused on the flowers.

The water felt glorious against her skin as she slipped into the pool. Not too cold, not too warm, perfect for a hot summer afternoon in Austin. Jess glided through the water with strong, confident strokes, enjoying the sensation of weightlessness and freedom.

She didn't waste time, keeping her swim to just a few minutes, enough to cool off and feel refreshed without turning it into a proper workout. When she emerged from the pool, water streaming down her body, Bob was sitting at the patio table beneath the large umbrella, two drinks in front of him.

"Thought you might be thirsty," he called, holding up a glass of iced tea. "Same as Tuesday, if that's alright."

"That's perfect, thank you," Jess replied, grabbing a towel from the stack they kept in an outdoor storage box. She wrapped it around her waist loosely and made her way to the table.

Bob had positioned himself with his back to the sun, his face shadowed beneath his hat. He'd opened a beer for himself, condensation already forming on the bottle's surface. A respectable distance separated their chairs, close enough for conversation but not so close as to feel intrusive.

"Cheers," he said, lifting his beer as Jess took her seat.

"Cheers," she echoed, raising her iced tea. "To another beautiful day in Austin."

"Won't get any argument from me," Bob agreed. "Though it'll be hotter than hell soon."

"Don't remind me," Jess groaned, taking a sip of her tea. "I'm headed to Savannah for that project I mentioned. The humidity there makes Austin feel like a desert."

"When's that happening?"

"First trip is in a few weeks," Jess replied. "Then I'll be back and forth periodically after that. It's a major conversion project, so we're looking at about a year, though I won't be on-site that entire time."

"A big opportunity for you," Bob observed.

"It is," Jess confirmed. "So much history in those walls, so many architectural details worth preserving."

"Woodwork's probably the biggest challenge in those old places," Bob commented. "Moisture damage, termites, not to mention decades of paint layers hiding the original craftsmanship."

Jess looked at him with renewed interest. "That's exactly right. The preliminary assessment showed significant damage to some of the crown molding. The restoration will be a major undertaking."

Bob took a pull from his beer. "I've got some contacts in historical restoration. Craftsmen who specialize in period-accurate woodwork. Most are in Texas, but a few have national reach. Could put you in touch if that would be helpful."

"That would be amazing," Jess said, genuinely pleased. "The firm in Savannah has their own contractors, but additional resources never hurt."

"I'll dig through my old contacts list," Bob promised. "Even if my business days are behind me, those relationships still mean something."

"Thank you," Jess said. "That's really thoughtful."

Bob waved off her thanks. "Just paying forward some of the kindness you and Tom have shown me."

The conversation shifted to more casual topics, flowing easily despite their age gap and differing life experiences. Jess had heard parts of Bob's backstory before, but she listened with genuine interest as he filled in additional details.

"I was actually recruited by several D1 schools," Bob mentioned, taking a sip of his beer. "Football scholarships. Nebraska, Texas A&M, a few others."

"Really?" Jess perked up. "I had no idea you were that serious of an athlete."

Bob shrugged, a hint of pride breaking through his typically modest demeanor. "Offensive lineman. Six-three, two-ninety my senior year. Nobody could get around me."

"What position specifically?" Jess asked, finding herself genuinely curious.

"Right guard mostly." Bob smiled at the memory. "The weight room is where I really stood out though."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Bob nodded. "Only spent about three years seriously lifting, but I got my deadlift up to five hundred pounds by graduation."

Jess's eyes widened in genuine shock. "Five hundred? After just two years?" As someone who incorporated weightlifting into her own fitness routine, she understood exactly how impressive that was. Her own deadlift had taken years to build up to just over two hundred pounds, and she was considered strong among the women at her gym.

"Natural strength, I guess," Bob said, clearly pleased by her reaction. "My dad was the same way. It's why I turned down those scholarships, actually. Figured that kind of strength was better put to use in the family business than getting my brains scrambled on some football field."

Jess found herself reassessing the man across from her. The Bob she saw now, in his mid-fifties with his substantial but softer frame, still carried himself with that underlying power, but she hadn't fully appreciated the elite athlete he once was. It explained his surprising coordination and the efficient way he moved despite his size.

"So instead of going pro, you joined your father's plumbing business," Jess summarized, "then built your own contracting company, before the divorces..."

Bob nodded, the momentary light in his eyes dimming slightly as the conversation turned toward the less triumphant chapters of his life. "That's the condensed version. Traded one kind of glory for another, I suppose. Then lost that too."

There was something almost comforting about Bob's company. No pretension, no corporate doublespeak, just straightforward conversation grounded in real-world experience. It reminded her of talks with her own father.

The sun had shifted slightly, its rays now falling directly on the loungers. Jess glanced at her watch, noting she still had fifteen minutes before her next conference call.

A bold idea formed in her mind, sending a little thrill through her body. She thought of Tom's reaction when she'd told him about her previous interactions with Bob. How would he respond to this?

"I think I'll catch a few rays before heading back up," she said casually, standing and moving toward the nearest lounger. "Make the most of this sunshine."

Bob nodded, remaining in his seat. "Don't let me stop you."

Jess adjusted the lounger to a nearly flat position. Then, in a deliberate motion that she knew would capture Bob's attention, she removed the towel from around her waist and spread it over the lounger's surface.

She could feel Bob's eyes on her as she stretched out on her back, adjusting her sunglasses against the bright light. They sat in silence for a few minutes, Bob sipping his beer while Jess soaked up the sun.

Then, in a movement that felt both perfectly natural and electrically charged, she turned over onto her stomach.

"Bob, would you mind doing me a huge favor?" she asked, glancing back over her shoulder. "There's some sunscreen in that bag. Would you mind applying some to my back? I can't reach it properly."

The silence that followed seemed to stretch forever, though it probably lasted only seconds.

"Are you sure?" Bob asked, his voice carefully neutral.

"If it's not too much trouble," Jess replied. "I burn easily, and I don't want to be lobster-red for my video call later."

"No trouble," Bob said, setting down his beer and standing. "Let me wash my hands first. Been digging in the dirt all morning."

He moved to the outdoor sink they'd installed near the barbecue, thoroughly washing his hands before retrieving the sunscreen. When he returned, his movements were almost cautious.

"This might be cold," he warned as he squeezed some lotion onto his palm.

"I'm prepared," Jess assured him, resting her head on her folded arms.

The first touch of Bob's hands on her back made her inhale sharply. His fingers were broad and strong, but surprisingly gentle as they spread the lotion across her shoulders and upper back.

"Is the pressure okay?" he asked.

"It's fine," Jess replied, then decided to push further. "Actually, you could press a little harder. I'm pretty tense from sitting at my desk all day."

Bob's hands hesitated briefly before increasing their pressure, finding the knots of tension along her shoulder blades and working them with surprising skill. His thumbs pressed into the muscles bracketing her spine, drawing a small, involuntary sound of pleasure from her.

"Sorry," she murmured. "That just felt really good."

"Used to do this for Sarah," Bob said, his hands continuing their steady work. "She carried all her stress in her shoulders too."

The mention of his ex-wife was a reminder that Bob was a man with history, with experience, not just a means to Tom's fantasy fulfillment.

"You're good at it," Jess commented, allowing herself to relax into his touch. "Professional quality."

Bob chuckled, the sound warm and genuine. "Just one of those useful life skills. Like knowing how to change a tire or fix a leaky faucet."

His hands moved lower, working the muscles of her middle back with the same careful attention. Jess felt herself melting, the tension she hadn't even realized she was carrying dissolving beneath his touch.

"So the Savannah project," Bob said, his voice casual as if they were still sitting across from each other at the table rather than engaged in this far more intimate interaction. "Is Tom going with you on any of those trips?"

"Probably not," Jess replied. "His work schedule is even more packed than mine these days. And with the Meridian implementation, he can't really take time off."

"That's too bad," Bob commented. "Savannah's a beautiful city. Romantic too. All that history..."

"It is beautiful," Jess agreed. "Maybe once the project is further along and his schedule eases up a bit."

Bob's hands moved to the small of her back, fingers working just above the waistline of her bikini bottoms. Jess became acutely aware of the vulnerability of her position. Face down, practically half-naked, with Bob's large hands on her body. Yet she felt no fear, no real discomfort.

"I think that does it," Bob said, his hands finally lifting from her skin. "Should be fully protected from the sun now."

Jess turned her head to look up at him, offering a smile. "Thank you. That felt amazing."

Bob stepped back, recapping the sunscreen bottle. "Happy to help," he said. "Hate to see good skin damaged by the sun."

Jess glanced at her watch and sighed. "I should probably head back up. My call's in ten minutes, and I need to make myself presentable."

"Certainly don't look presentable now," Bob agreed with gentle teasing in his voice. "Far too relaxed."

She laughed, appreciating his ability to lighten the moment. "The hazards of an excellent back rub."

Sitting up, Jess reached for her cover-up and slipped it on.

"Thanks again for the tea," she said, standing. "And the conversation. And the sunscreen application."

"Anytime," Bob replied, then quickly amended, "I mean, the tea and conversation are always available. The rest is... well, whatever you're comfortable with."

There was something touching about his awkwardness, the way he tried to balance being friendly without overstepping. Whether that was genuine respect or deliberate restraint, Jess couldn't quite determine. Regardless, it created a space where she felt safe to explore without pressure.

"I'll see you around," she said, starting toward the stairs.

"Count on it," Bob replied, already turning back to his gardening. "Good luck with your call."

Jess climbed the stairs to the balcony, her mind racing with thoughts of how she'd describe this encounter to Tom later. The way Bob's hands had felt on her skin, strong and competent. The casual conversation they'd maintained throughout, as if massaging his landlord's nearly naked wife was the most natural thing in the world. The tension beneath the seeming normality of it all.

She wondered how far she could take this, how much further she could push the boundaries while still maintaining that crucial sense of control. Not for Bob's sake, but for Tom's, to see his eyes darken with that particular mix of jealousy and arousal.

Inside, Jess headed straight for the shower, needing to rinse off the sunscreen and chlorine before her call.

As Jess stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a towel, her phone chimed with a text message. She picked it up, expecting to see her work team reminding her about the upcoming call.

Instead, it was Tom.

Tom: Can't stop thinking about you today. Something tells me you've been up to no good. Can't wait to hear all about it tonight.

Jess smiled, her fingers typing a response.

Jess: Maybe. You'll just have to wait and see. Love you.

His reply came almost instantly.

Tom: Love you too. More than anything.

That's what mattered, ultimately. The foundation of trust and love that allowed them to explore these new territories together. Everything else was just… seasoning, adding spice to an already solid recipe.

Jess dressed quickly, transforming back into her professional self for the upcoming call. As she sat down at her desk and opened her laptop, her mind was already half-planning tonight's conversation with Tom, anticipating his reactions, the questions he'd ask, the details he'd want to hear.

With a few minutes still remaining before her call, Jess let herself remember the feeling of Bob's hands working the tension from her muscles, the surprising tenderness in his touch despite his size and strength. It had been a bold step forward in their exploration, crossing a physical boundary they hadn't previously approached.

Her laptop chimed, alerting her to the impending call. Jess straightened in her chair, adjusted her webcam, and prepared to dive back into the professional world of design challenges and client expectations. But a part of her mind remained fixed on the afternoon's encounter, carefully cataloging each sensation, each nuance, to share with Tom later.

She had a feeling tonight would be another memorable evening in what was becoming a remarkable new chapter in their relationship.

Tom leaned back in his office chair, fingers hovering over the keyboard as he squinted at the Meridian implementation spreadsheet on his monitor. The numbers were important to the strategy, but his concentration kept slipping away.

He glanced at his watch. 10:47 AM. Jess would be deep into brunch with Madi by now. Those brunches typically ran long, especially when Madi was in full storytelling mode. He had at least another hour, probably two, before Jess would return.

Plenty of time to focus on work. If only his mind would cooperate.

Instead, his thoughts kept circling back to the past week, replaying moments like favorite scenes from a movie. Tuesday night after Jess's swim and yoga class. Wednesday evening's unexpectedly tender lovemaking. Thursday's revelation about Bob applying sunscreen to her barely covered body. Yesterday's casual mention of Derek's "helpful" adjustments during her extended yoga session.

Tom saved the spreadsheet and pushed back from his desk. Who was he kidding? Work wasn't happening, not with these images filling his head.

The house felt different somehow. Quieter with Jess out with Madi, but also charged with something new, as if the walls themselves had absorbed the energy of their evolving relationship.

He moved to the window, gazing out at their backyard. The pool glittered in the late morning sunlight, the scene of so many recent developments. Tom could almost see Jess there in her turquoise bikini, Bob's broad hands spreading lotion across her back.

"He was so careful," she'd told him Thursday night. "Professional, almost. But I could tell it was affecting him. His breathing changed, and once or twice, his hands lingered just a little longer than necessary."

That image had fueled their intense sex, Tom taking her from behind while she described how Bob's hands had felt on her skin.

The sex had been incredible, yes, but it was more than that. It was the renewed connection, the heightened awareness of each other. Tom found himself noticing things about Jess he'd started taking for granted, the graceful way she moved around their kitchen, the unconscious habit she had of tucking her hair behind her ear when concentrating, the slight furrow between her brows when she was reading something challenging.

It was as if his senses had been recalibrated, tuned to a frequency that made everything about her more vivid, more present. She wasn't just his wife of four years, his partner of six. She was Jess Marshall, beautiful, desirable, coveted by other men yet choosing to come home to him each night.

The change was apparent in her too. She seemed more relaxed, more playful. The lingering tension from his cryptocurrency disaster had largely dissipated, replaced by a new energy that manifested in unexpected ways. She texted him throughout the day, little messages that might seem innocent to anyone else but carried layers of meaning for him. She'd taken to wearing lingerie to bed again, something that had fallen by the wayside in recent months.

And yesterday, Tom smiled at the memory, she'd casually mentioned that Derek had pulled her aside after yoga class, suggesting she might benefit from "personalized sessions" to deepen her practice.

"He said I have natural ability," Jess had told him over dinner, her eyes never leaving his face as she gauged his reaction. "That my body intuitively understands movement. He thinks with some personalized sessions, I could advance much faster."

"And what did you say?" Tom had asked, working to keep his voice neutral despite the immediate tightening in his groin.

“I told him I’d think about it,” she’d replied with a small smile. “That I’d need to discuss it with my husband first.”

The conversation had led to yet another night of passionate reconnection.

The doorbell’s sudden chime jolted Tom. He glanced at his watch again. 11:03 AM. Too early for Jess to be back from brunch, but maybe she’d forgotten something. Her wallet or phone.

He made his way downstairs, not bothering to check his appearance.

But when Tom opened the front door, it wasn’t Jess standing on their porch. It was Bob, dressed in cargo shorts and a faded University of Texas t-shirt, a baseball cap shading his eyes from the late morning sun.

“Morning,” Bob said with a casual nod. “Got a minute?”

Tom hesitated. With Jess out of the house, talking to Bob felt loaded with implications. Especially given their last private conversation and everything that had transpired since.

“Sure,” Tom replied, stepping back to allow Bob entry. “Jess is out with her friend if you were looking for her.”

“Actually,” Bob said as he stepped into the foyer, “I was hoping to catch you alone.”

There was something in Bob’s tone, a certain directness that cut through any pretense of casual neighborliness. This wasn’t a tenant issue.

Tom closed the door, keeping them in the foyer rather than inviting Bob upstairs. Something in him wanted to contain this conversation, to keep it separate from the spaces he shared with Jess.

“What’s on your mind?” Tom asked, aiming for casual but hearing the slight edge in his own voice.

“I wanted to talk about Jess,” Bob said. “About Tuesday. And Thursday.”

Tom crossed his arms, a defensive posture he recognized even as he assumed it. “What about them?”

“Look,” Bob began, “I just want to make sure we’re all on the same page here. After that day in the garden, when she first swam in the red suit, I wasn’t sure if it was just Jess being friendly or something more.”

Tom remained silent, waiting for Bob to continue.

“But Thursday,” Bob went on, “when she asked me to put sunscreen on her back... that felt like a clear signal. I just want to be sure you’re comfortable with where this is heading.”

“I am,” Tom replied, the words coming more easily than he’d expected. “Jess and I have discussed it.”

Bob nodded, as if this confirmed something he’d already suspected. “That’s good. Open communication’s important.” He shifted his weight, his massive frame somehow making the foyer feel smaller. “She’s quite something, your wife. Smart, beautiful, confident.”

“She is,” Tom agreed, unsure where this was going.

“She told me about the club,” Bob said suddenly, his eyes fixed on Tom’s face, watching for his reaction. “About how she got wet dancing with those guys. How she was so turned on she thought about following one of them to the bathroom.”

Tom blinked, a cold sensation spreading through his chest. Jess had told Bob about Domino? About getting aroused while dancing with strangers? They’d agreed to keep their exploration private.

“When did she tell you that?” Tom asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

“Thursday,” Bob replied. “While we were sitting by the pool, before the whole sunscreen thing. She mentioned you’d been to a nightclub.”

Tom’s mind raced back to that night, to their drunk, fumbling conversation on the way home, to Jess’s breathless confession as he’d taken her.

“One guy kept pressing against my ass, whispering these filthy things...”

“Like what? Tell me exactly what he said.”

“That he wanted to take me to the bathroom, bend me over the sink.”

“Were you thinking about letting him? About following him to the bathroom?”

“No... maybe... I don’t know. It was just hot to hear, to feel how hard he was for me.”

That wasn’t quite the same as what Bob was suggesting. Jess hadn’t said she was seriously considering following the guy to the bathroom. She’d been turned on by the attention, yes, but her answer had been tentative, uncertain, more about the thrill of being desired than actually acting on it.

Unless... she’d told Bob something she hadn’t told Tom.

The thought landed like a rock in Tom's stomach. What else might Jess have shared with Bob during their private poolside chats? What else might she have admitted to their tenant that she'd kept from her husband?

"She told you all that?" Tom asked, unable to keep the hint of disbelief from his voice.

Bob shrugged. "She did. I think she was trying to gauge my reaction, see if I'd judge her." He offered a small smile. "I didn't, of course. People are complicated. Marriages even more so."

Tom's mind was spinning, trying to reconcile Bob's revelation with what he thought he knew. Had Jess been more seriously tempted at the club than she'd admitted to him? Had she shared more intimate details with Bob than with her own husband?

"You look surprised," Bob observed. "She didn't tell you she'd mentioned it to me?"

"No," Tom admitted. "She didn't."

Bob nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful. "Remember what I said a few weeks back? Sometimes the person we fear judgment from most is the one we love most. Jess might have feelings, desires, fantasies she'd never express to you directly, not out of distrust, but to protect your opinion of her."

The words echoed in Tom's mind, uncomfortably resonant. He'd thought they were being completely open with each other now, sharing every thought, every desire, every boundary they explored. But what if they weren't? What if Jess was holding back, filtering her experiences through a lens of what she thought Tom could handle?

"All couples keep secrets," Bob continued, his tone almost philosophical. "Not necessarily harmful ones, but little pieces of themselves they hold back. It's natural."

"Have you told her about this conversation?" Bob asked abruptly. "About our talk that Saturday morning?"

The question caught Tom off guard. "No," he admitted. "I haven't."

"Probably for the best," Bob nodded. "It would only hurt her to know you and I had discussed her like that."

There was logic to Bob's words, a certain twisted sense that was hard to refute. Telling Jess now about that first conversation with Bob would open a Pandora's box of questions. Why hadn't Tom mentioned it immediately? What else was he keeping from her? It would create exactly the kind of doubt and suspicion he was now feeling about her.

“I think,” Bob said carefully, “that Jess feels comfortable telling me things she might not tell you. Not because she trusts me more, but because there’s less at stake. I’m just the tenant, not her husband. My opinion of her doesn’t matter the same way.”

Tom wanted to argue but found himself nodding instead. There was a certain logic there. The stakes were lower with Bob. Jess could test the waters of confession with him without risking Tom’s judgment.

“So where does that leave us?” Tom asked, the question directed as much at himself as at Bob.

“Well,” Bob replied, spreading his hands, “I guess that depends on what you want. If you’d prefer I keep my distance, create clearer boundaries, I can do that. Tell her I’m busy when she comes down to swim. Keep our interactions minimal.”

The offer sounded reasonable on the surface, but Tom sensed the implicit alternative hanging in the air. An unspoken “but” that Bob was leaving him to ask about.

“And the alternative?” Tom asked, knowing he was taking the bait but unable to stop himself.

Bob shrugged, the gesture casual but his eyes sharp, watching Tom’s reaction. “Or I could continue being a... I don’t know, a sounding board for her? A safe space to explore thoughts she might not be ready to share with you? And if you and I kept in touch, you’d know what she was thinking, feeling. You’d have insight into parts of her she’s not ready to show you directly.”

The suggestion was presented so reasonably, as if Bob were offering a service rather than proposing something fundamentally deceptive. Yet Tom couldn’t deny the appeal of the idea. To know what Jess was truly thinking, to have access to the unfiltered version of her thoughts...

“That sounds like spying,” Tom said, though his tone lacked conviction.

“I’d see it more as... creating a safe environment for her to explore. With your knowledge, if not hers.” Bob met Tom’s eyes directly. “Isn’t that better than wondering what she’s not telling you? What details she’s holding back?”

The question hit closer to home than Tom wanted to admit. He’d been so focused on the excitement of their new exploration that he hadn’t considered the possibility that Jess might be curating her experiences, editing them to what she thought he could handle.

“I’m not suggesting anything inappropriate,” Bob continued. “Just that we speak regularly. That you know exactly what happens, have input, versus wondering what details might be missing.”

Tom studied the older man, trying to see through to his motivations. There was something undeniably manipulative about Bob's approach, yet it was wrapped in such reasonable packaging that it was difficult to dismiss outright. And the seed of doubt had already been planted. What else had Jess told Bob that she hadn't shared with Tom?

"I'll think about it," Tom said finally, not committing but not refusing either.

Bob nodded, seemingly satisfied with this response. "That's all I'm asking. I just wanted to make sure we were all on the same page… but I should get going. Got some errands to run."

Tom opened the door, eager now to end the conversation before it ventured into territory he wasn't prepared to navigate. "Right. Thanks for... checking in."

"No problem," Bob replied, stepping outside. "Oh, and Tom?"

"Yeah?"

"Your secret's safe with me," Bob said. "About what you saw that night through my window. About our conversations. All of it."

Before Tom could respond, Bob was already heading down the walkway toward his truck, his broad shoulders squared, his stride confident.

Tom closed the door and leaned against it, his heart hammering in his chest. The simple statement had been a masterclass in subtle manipulation, a reminder that Bob held power over him. The power of knowing something Jess didn't.

He pushed off from the door and moved to the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of water with hands that weren't quite steady. As he drank, he replayed the conversation with Bob, looking for clues, for the manipulation he knew was there but couldn't quite put his finger on.

What if Bob had overheard them somehow? What if the walls between their units weren't as soundproof as they'd assumed?

He dismissed the thought immediately. Their bedroom was upstairs, far from Bob's apartment. And the specific details Bob had mentioned... those had been spoken in the privacy of their bedroom, late at night. There was no way Bob could have overheard.

Tom set the glass down. More likely, Jess had indeed shared those details with Bob, perhaps testing his reaction before deciding how much to share with Tom. Which raised its own set of uncomfortable questions.

Tom moved back to his office, his mind churning with conflicting thoughts. On one hand, he was disturbed by the possibility that Jess was sharing intimate details with Bob that she withheld from him. On the other hand, there was something undeniably arousing about the idea of Bob knowing, of this other man being privy to their private explorations.

And then there was Bob's suggestion, that they speak regularly, that Tom have "input" into whatever was developing between Bob and Jess. The implication was clear. Bob was offering to be Tom's proxy, a controlled environment for Jess to explore her desires while Tom remained informed, involved from a distance.

It was manipulative, yes. Deceptive toward Jess, absolutely. But wasn't it also exactly what Tom had been fantasizing about? A way to see his wife through another man's eyes, to witness her desires and reactions without the direct threat of being replaced?

Tom sat heavily in his office chair, the spreadsheet still open on his monitor, the numbers now even less significant than they'd been before. He checked his watch again. 11:08 AM. Jess wouldn't be home for at least another hour, probably longer.

An hour to decide how to handle this new development. Whether to confront Jess about what she might have told Bob. Whether to tell her about Bob's visit today. Whether to accept Bob's implicit offer of continued collaboration.

Or whether to simply let things unfold, to see where this path led without trying to control its direction.

Primrose Café buzzed with the particular energy of an Austin Saturday brunch, a carefully orchestrated chaos of clattering plates, enthusiastic conversations, and servers navigating the packed tables. Jess arrived five minutes early and managed to snag the last available table on the shaded patio.

She was halfway through her first mimosa when Madi's familiar voice cut through the ambient noise.

"There's my favorite married woman!" Madi announced, drawing glances from nearby tables as she approached. Her entrance was quintessentially Madi, confident, unapologetically loud, and impossible to ignore.

Jess stood to embrace her friend, immediately enveloped in Madi's signature scent of expensive perfume and whatever styling product kept her dark hair in those perfect waves. "You're late," Jess teased.

"Fashionably," Madi corrected, sliding into the chair across from Jess. She signaled a server with a casual flick of her wrist that somehow conveyed both entitlement and charm. "Traffic was a nightmare. Some farmers' market bullshit."

The server appeared at their table with impressive speed. Madi ordered a Bloody Mary, "extra spicy, double vodka," before even glancing at the menu.

"So," Madi said once the server departed, leaning forward, "it's been what, a couple weeks since I've seen your actual face? Tell me everything I've missed."

"We talked yesterday," Jess pointed out, laughing.

"Phone calls don't count. I need facial expressions, body language, the full Jessica Marshall experience." Madi reached for Jess's mimosa and took a sip without asking. "Oh, and that's flat. You deserve better."

Jess rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress her smile.

"Work's been intense," Jess offered, knowing this was the least interesting topic to Madi but the safest starting point. "The Savannah project is ramping up. I'll be traveling there in a few weeks for initial site assessment."

"Mmhmm," Madi hummed noncommittally, her eyes scanning the menu. "Skip the boring career stuff. How's Tom? Still working those ridiculous hours?"

"Better this week," Jess said. "He's still putting in extra time, but at least he's home for dinner most nights."

"Marriage," Madi sighed dramatically. "The slow death of spontaneity."

"Says the woman who's practically in a relationship with Brandon without the commitment," Jess countered.

"Speaking of my favorite non-boyfriend," Madi's eyes sparkled with sudden interest, "he mentioned running into you at the gym last weekend. Said something about having a fascinating conversation."

Jess groaned. "Let me guess, he told you I was wearing 'illegal' leggings and that we had some deeply meaningful exchange?"

"He might have waxed poetic about your ass for approximately ten minutes," Madi confirmed with a grin. "It was quite the soliloquy. Shakespeare would've been jealous."

"That man is hopeless," Jess said with a smile.

"That's part of his charm," Madi insisted as the server returned with her Bloody Mary and took their food orders. Once the server left, Madi continued, "Brandon's

insufferable, but he's consistently insufferable. You always know what you're getting."

"Unlike some men," Jess muttered before she could stop herself.

Madi's eyebrow arched with interest. "Trouble in paradise? Last we talked, you were telling me about Tom's little revelation. The whole 'gets turned on by other men wanting you' thing."

Jess shifted in her seat, uncomfortably aware of the other diners around them despite the relative privacy of their corner table. "It's not trouble, exactly. Just... unexpected."

"Unexpected how?" Madi pressed, her tone shifting from teasing to genuinely curious. She took a long sip of her drink, eyes never leaving Jess's face.

Jess hesitated. The rules she and Tom had established were clear. Privacy was non-negotiable, which meant not sharing details with friends, "no matter how close." But this was Madi, her best friend, who already knew about Tom's fantasies. Surely discussing the general concept without specific details wouldn't violate the spirit of their agreement?

"We went to Domino last Friday," Jess admitted, lowering her voice slightly. "After dinner at Vesper."

Madi's eyes widened. "Domino? That place is impossible to get into without connections. And it's definitely not Tom's scene."

"That's kind of the point," Jess said. "It was... an experiment."

"An experiment," Madi repeated, comprehension dawning on her face. "As in, testing Tom's fantasy in the wild? Holy shit, Jess."

"It was his idea," Jess clarified, feeling a strange need to defend both Tom and herself. "We had a really good talk at dinner about boundaries, about what we're comfortable with."

"And then went straight to a club where guys would inevitably hit on you," Madi finished. "That's quite the escalation from theoretical discussions."

Jess shrugged, aiming for casual though she suspected Madi could see right through the attempt. "We decided to start small. Public place, controlled environment."

Madi snorted. "Clubbing is your definition of 'starting small'? What would be a big step, a sex dungeon?"

"God, Madi," Jess hissed, glancing around to ensure no one had overheard. "It's not like that. We were just... exploring."

"And?" Madi prompted, leaning closer. "Don't leave me hanging. How did Mr. Corporate America handle watching his wife get hit on by strangers?"

"Better than expected, actually," Jess admitted. "Though we both drank way too much. The whole thing got a bit... intense."

"Define 'intense,'" Madi demanded.

Their conversation paused as the server returned with their food, avocado toast with poached eggs for Jess, chicken and waffles for Madi. Once they were alone again, Madi immediately picked up where they'd left off, undeterred by the interruption.

"So, intense how? Did you make out with someone? Give a stranger a lap dance? I need details, Jess."

"Nothing that dramatic," Jess said, though the memory of those hands on her body, those mouths close to her ear, made her cheeks warm. "Just dancing. But Tom was watching the whole time, and afterward..."

"Afterward?" Madi prompted, practically vibrating with curiosity.

"Let's just say we barely made it home," Jess said, taking a bite of her toast to avoid elaborating further.

Madi's delighted laugh drew more attention from nearby tables. "Jessica Marshall, look at you! All proper and professional on the outside, exploring kinky fantasies with your husband after dark."

"It's not kinky," Jess protested. "It's just... different."

"Honey, your husband gets turned on by watching other men want you. That's textbook voyeurism." Madi took a bite of her chicken and waffles. "Not that there's anything wrong with that. Brandon and I have explored all kinds of-"

"Please, spare me the details of your sex life with Brandon," Jess cut in quickly. "There are some things I prefer not to visualize."

"Your loss," Madi shrugged. "He's very innovative."

"So I've heard," Jess replied dryly. "About six thousand times."

They ate in comfortable silence for a few moments before Madi circled back. "So, this clubbing experiment. One-time thing, or are you planning a repeat performance?"

Jess hesitated, torn between her desire to share with her closest friend and her commitment to the rules she and Tom had established. "We're still figuring it out," she said finally. "The clubbing was educational, but maybe not the ideal approach."

"Too public?" Madi guessed.

"Exactly. Too many variables we couldn't control." Jess took a sip of her water. "We bumped into one of Tom's coworkers there. Nothing happened, but it could have been awkward."

"Yikes," Madi winced. "That's the problem with a city like Austin. Everyone knows everyone, or at least knows someone who knows someone. No such thing as true anonymity."

"That's what we realized," Jess agreed.

"So what's the alternative?" Madi asked. "If clubbing is too public, what's your next move?"

The question was weighted with implications Jess wasn't ready to discuss. Bob's name hovered at the edge of her consciousness, but sharing that particular development felt like crossing a line, even with Madi.

"We're not sure yet," she said instead. "Taking it day by day."

Madi studied her face for a long moment, her expression uncharacteristically serious. "Just be careful, okay?"

"Speaking from experience?" Jess asked, curious despite herself.

"Not personally," Madi clarified. "But in my line of work, I see a lot of marriages. The good, the bad, the about-to-implode. Some couples can handle exploration, some can't."

"We're being careful," Jess assured her. "Setting clear boundaries, checking in with each other. It's not just about the fantasy, it's bringing us closer in a weird way."

"That's good," Madi said, her expression softening. "As long as you're both on the same page."

"We are," Jess said, projecting more certainty than she actually felt. Were they completely on the same page?

Madi seemed to sense Jess's unspoken doubt but mercifully changed the subject. "So, about that double date Brandon mentioned. Are you and Tom free next Saturday?"

Jess mentally reviewed their calendar. "I think so. Tom hasn't mentioned any work obligations, and I don't have anything scheduled."

"Perfect," Madi grinned. "I was thinking dinner at that new place on East Sixth, The Copper House? Then maybe arcade games at Punch Bowl Social. Something fun and low pressure."

"Sounds great," Jess agreed. "I'll confirm with Tom, but I'm pretty sure we're free."

"Brandon will be thrilled," Madi said, her smile turning mischievous. "He's been asking about you."

"About me?" Jess raised an eyebrow. "Or about my ass?"

"Can't it be both?" Madi laughed. "You know he's had a thing for you since forever."

"A thing he expresses by being thoroughly obnoxious every time we interact," Jess pointed out.

"That's just how he flirts when he knows someone's off-limits," Madi explained. "It's like a kid pulling a girl's pigtails on the playground. He can't help himself."

"He's almost thirty, not eight," Jess said, though there was no real annoyance in her tone. Brandon's persistent flirtation had become such a constant in their social dynamic that it was almost comforting in its predictability.

"Chronologically, yes," Madi agreed. "Emotionally? Debatable."

Their conversation drifted to other topics as they finished their meals, Madi's latest event planning crisis for a demanding bride, mutual friends they hadn't seen in too long, the new yoga studio that had opened downtown that was supposedly better than Jess's current one.

The server appeared with their check, ending the conversation as they both reached for their wallets. After a brief argument about who would pay, which Madi won, citing the need to expense client meetings, they gathered their things and made their way to the exit.

Outside, the afternoon sun had intensified, the heat shimmering off the pavement in rippling waves. Jess slipped her sunglasses on as they said their goodbyes, promising to confirm the double date details once she'd checked with Tom.

"One last thing," Madi said, hugging Jess. "Whatever you decide to explore with Tom, just make sure it's what you want too. Not just what he wants, not just what you think will make him happy. What makes you happy."

The words followed Jess to her car, echoing in her mind as she navigated the Sunday afternoon traffic. What did she want? The question seemed simple but revealed complex layers the more she examined it.

Bob sat in the shade of the patio umbrella, pretending to read a book while actually keeping watch for the telltale creak of the balcony door. Thursday again. Three weeks and five days since Jess had first come down in that red one-piece that had kicked off

their poolside routine. Six times now they'd shared these lunch breaks, each one pushing the boundaries a little further.

He'd been patient. Strategic. The confrontation with Tom about the nightclub had been a risk, but it had paid off beautifully. Tom never confronted Jess about the supposed confession, exactly as Bob had predicted. The seed of doubt was planted, and now Tom lived with a gnawing uncertainty about what his wife might be telling Bob that she wasn't telling him.

Perfect.

The balcony door opened right on schedule. Bob glanced up casually, as if just noticing her presence. Jess stood at the top of the stairs. She wore a white bikini today, the most revealing one yet. The material was thin enough to border on translucent, held together with flimsy strings that tied at her hips and behind her neck.

"Look what the sun dragged out," Bob called up to her, marking his place in the book he wasn't actually reading.

Jess descended the stairs, carrying her usual water bottle and a small canvas bag. "It's too beautiful to stay inside," she replied. "I needed to clear my head before my afternoon meetings."

"The pool does seem to be calling your name," Bob agreed, watching as she set her things on the nearest lounger. After multiple encounters, they had established a comfortable pattern. She would swim first, then they'd chat, then sunbathe. The progression had become a ritual of sorts, the predictability of it making each small escalation seem natural, inevitable.

"How's the yard coming along?" Jess asked, gesturing to the flower beds where he'd been working earlier.

"Those native plants I put in last week are taking root nicely," Bob said. "Another month and they'll be blooming."

"I have to say it again," Jess said, pulling her hair into a high ponytail. "I can't believe how much better everything looks."

"Happy to do it," Bob replied. "Gives these old hands something useful to occupy them."

Jess smiled at the familiar exchange before turning toward the pool. She jumped in, causing a small splash. Bob watched her swim, the strokes of her arms, the kick of her legs propelling her through the water.

There was an undeniable athleticism to her movements that he'd come to appreciate over these weeks. Not just the aesthetic beauty of her body, though that remained a constant, almost painful source of desire, but the functional strength, the physical capability. He'd learned she did weight training three times a week and yoga twice, a regimen that showed in the definition of her shoulders and the lean muscle of her thighs.

After a few laps, Jess emerged from the pool via the steps, water streaming from her body. The white bikini clung to her skin, the material now almost transparent. Bob had already prepared their drinks, iced tea for her, beer for him, and set them on the small table between their usual chairs.

"Working up an appetite, princess?" he asked, the endearment now flowing naturally.

"Always," Jess replied, reaching for the towel she'd left on the lounger. She dabbed at her face and hair, not bothering to fully dry off in the heat. "That tea is exactly what I needed."

She took the seat across from him, the familiarity of their positions now comfortable rather than awkward. These meetings had evolved from tentative to easy, a shared ritual that existed outside the normal boundaries of tenant and landlord.

"How's the Savannah project coming along?" Bob asked, taking a sip of his beer.

"Making progress," Jess replied. "The preliminary designs were approved yesterday. I'm flying out next week for an on-site assessment."

"Next week already?" Bob raised his eyebrows. "Time flies. Remind me who the developer is on that one?"

"Chris Webb," Jess said, a subtle tension entering her voice. It was slight, but Bob caught it immediately. "Skyline Austin was his project too."

"Webb," Bob repeated, as if trying to place the name. "I think I've heard you mention him before. You two work well together?"

Jess took a long sip of her tea, clearly considering her response. "Professionally, he's brilliant. He understands good design and gives me a lot of creative freedom."

Bob noted what she didn't say. The qualifier, professionally, and the careful neutrality of her tone told him everything he needed to know. "But?" he prompted gently.

Jess looked at him, seeming to debate whether to elaborate. Their conversations had grown increasingly personal over the weeks, but Bob was careful never to push too hard, allowing her to set the pace of their increasing intimacy.

"But sometimes he can be..." she paused, searching for the right word.

"A man?" Bob suggested, with just the right amount of self-deprecating humor.

That earned him a small laugh. "Exactly. A certain type of man, anyway."

"The type who confuses professional admiration with personal interest?" Bob suggested.

Jess's eyes widened slightly. "How did you know?"

Bob shrugged. "Been around a long time, princess. Seen enough men like that. Guys who have everything, money, power, success, start to believe they deserve everything. Including women who aren't available to them."

Jess stared at her glass. "I overhead him at a party once," she said, her voice quieter now. "Him and some other investors. They were talking about me."

"Let me guess," Bob said, leaning forward slightly. "Not discussing your design skills."

"No," Jess confirmed. "Not my design skills."

"I'm sorry," Bob said, injecting genuine concern into his voice. "That must have been uncomfortable."

"It was," Jess admitted. "Especially because I have to keep working with him. This Savannah project is a huge opportunity."

"So what's your plan?" Bob asked. "For handling him on this trip?"

Jess sighed. "Keep it strictly professional. Bring my assistant to meetings when possible. Focus on the work."

"Good approach," Bob nodded. "Men like Webb respond to confidence. Don't let him see any uncertainty." He paused, then added, "And if he does try something? Be direct. A man who deals in real estate understands clear boundaries."

"That's good advice," Jess said, looking genuinely appreciative. "I've been overthinking it."

"You'll do fine," Bob assured her. "You're not just talented, princess. You're smart. Capable. The kind of woman who can handle herself in any situation."

The praise settled on her exactly as he'd intended, a small smile warming her features. He'd been systematic about this aspect of his approach, learning which compliments resonated most. Professional validation always landed more effectively than remarks about her appearance, though he sprinkled those in too. She'd grown up beautiful, heard about her looks her entire life. But acknowledgment of her intelligence, her skill, her capability, those words carried weight.

“Speaking of handling myself,” Jess said, draining the last of her tea. “I should probably put on some sunscreen before I turn into a lobster. The sun feels stronger today.”

“Can’t have that,” Bob agreed, watching as she reached into her bag for the bottle.

Three weeks ago, she’d first asked him to apply sunscreen to her back. The week after, she’d repeated the request, but with her bikini top untied for better coverage. Two days ago, she’d allowed his hands to drift lower, to the backs of her thighs. Each escalation small, each one feeling like a natural progression.

“Would you mind?” Jess asked, holding out the bottle.

“Happy to help,” Bob replied, taking the sunscreen. He moved to sit on the edge of her lounger as she stretched out on her stomach, untying her bikini top and letting the strings fall to the sides.

The sight of her bare back never failed to send a jolt through him. The elegant line of her spine, the slight indentations above her tailbone, the gentle curve where her waist flared to her hips. He squeezed a generous amount of lotion into his palm, warming it between his hands before placing them on her shoulders.

“Good pressure?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Perfect,” Jess murmured, her voice slightly muffled against the lounger. “You’re getting really good at this.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Bob replied, his large hands working the lotion across her shoulder blades. He took his time, thumbs pressing into the muscles bracketing her spine with just enough pressure to draw a small sound of appreciation from her.

“You’re carrying tension right here,” he observed, focusing on a knot beneath her left shoulder.

“Mmm,” Jess agreed, not bothering to lift her head. “That feels amazing.”

Bob worked his way down her back, noting how she relaxed more fully with each stroke of his hands. There was power in this, in feeling her respond to his touch. His hands moved lower, to the small of her back, thumbs pressing on either side of her spine just above the waistband of her bikini bottoms.

“The legs too?” he asked, though he already knew she would agree.

“Might as well be thorough,” Jess replied, the smile evident in her voice even with her face turned away.

Bob poured more lotion into his palm, then placed his hands on the backs of her thighs. The skin here was soft, warm from the sun and smooth against his calloused

fingers. He worked methodically, starting just below the curve of her ass and moving downward toward her knees.

"These legs will look great on magazine covers someday," Bob said. "When your Savannah project makes you famous."

Jess laughed, the sound lighter and more relaxed than when they'd first begun these encounters. "I'm not sure interior designers typically make magazine covers."

"You would," Bob insisted. "You've got star quality, princess. Anyone can see that."

She made a noncommittal noise, but he could tell she was pleased. Bob continued his work, moving past her knees to her calves. Here, he increased the pressure, using his thumbs to work the muscle with greater intent.

"Oh, that's good," Jess breathed. "You know, if the contracting thing doesn't work out, you could have a future in massage therapy."

"You trying to give this old dog a new career path?" Bob teased.

"Just appreciating your particular talents," Jess replied.

Bob let his hands linger on her calves, working the muscle with steady pressure. Then, after a moment's consideration, he moved his attention to her feet, taking one in his hands and pressing his thumbs into the arch.

The sound Jess made was between a gasp and a moan. "Oh god, that's amazing."

"Pressure points," Bob explained, continuing to work her foot. "Everything's connected. Release tension here, it helps your whole body."

"Keep doing that and I might fall asleep right here," Jess murmured.

Bob smiled to himself, switching to her other foot. "We can't have that. What would Tom think if he came home and found you passed out on a lounger with me massaging your feet?"

"He'd probably ask if you do house calls," Jess replied with a small laugh. She flexed her foot in his hands. "Seriously though, you're really good at this."

"Just applying the right pressure in the right places," Bob said. "It's like plumbing. Once you understand the system, you know how to make it work properly."

"Did you just compare my body to plumbing?" Jess asked, mock offense in her voice as she glanced back at him over her shoulder.

"In the most complimentary way possible," Bob assured her, giving her foot a final squeeze before releasing it. "I think that covers everything... except..." He deliberately paused.

"Except what?" Jess prompted.

"Well, you missed a spot," Bob said, gesturing to her bikini bottoms. "But I figure that's your territory."

Jess considered him for a moment, her expression unreadable. Then, to his surprise, she said, "Might as well be thorough, right? I can't exactly see back there myself."

Bob kept his expression neutral despite the rush of blood to his groin. "You sure?"

"It's just sunscreen," Jess replied with a casual shrug. "And it's not like you haven't seen a woman's ass before."

"Fair point," Bob agreed, reaching for the bottle again. He squeezed lotion into his palm, then hesitated, giving her one more chance to change her mind. "Ready?"

"Just don't get any ideas," Jess warned, though her tone remained light. "This is purely functional."

"Nothing but professional sunscreen application," Bob assured her, placing his hands on the rounded curves of her ass. The material of her bikini bottoms was thin, the skimpy cut leaving the lower half of each cheek exposed. He worked the lotion in, careful to maintain functionality despite the surge of desire flooding his system.

"I notice you're being especially thorough," Jess commented dryly.

"Just making sure there's complete coverage," Bob replied. "Wouldn't want any burnt spots."

"Of course not," Jess agreed, the humor in her voice telling him she saw right through him but was choosing to play along.

Bob finished his task, removing his hands with reluctance. "All done," he announced. "You're officially protected from UV rays on all possible surfaces."

"My hero," Jess said, sitting up and retying her bikini top. "What would I do without you?"

"Probably pay for professional massages like everyone else," Bob suggested.

Jess laughed, adjusting her top. "Why pay when I have you right here?"

"Happy to be of service," Bob said, returning to his chair. "Though I may need to renegotiate my rent if massage therapy becomes part of my tenant responsibilities."

"I'm sure we could work something out," Jess replied with a wink. She stretched out on her back now, arms above her head. "So about this Chris Webb situation. Any other advice for a woman traveling to meet with an overly confident developer?"

Bob considered the question. This was the opening he'd been waiting for, a chance to position himself as a protector, an ally against the potential threat that Webb represented.

"I've been thinking about that," he said. "Men like Webb, they're predictable. They go after what they want directly, and they're used to getting it."

"That's been my experience," Jess agreed.

"The key is to never let him get you alone outside of professional settings," Bob advised. "No drinks in his hotel room, no private dinners, nothing that could be interpreted as interest."

"That's definitely my plan," Jess said.

"But if he does try something," Bob continued, "don't hesitate. Be direct. 'I'm married and not interested.' Most men will back off rather than risk rejection or, worse, harassment allegations."

"And if he doesn't back off?" Jess asked, a hint of genuine concern in her voice.

"Then you walk away immediately and make sure you're never alone with him again," Bob said firmly. "But also, trust your instincts. Women have good radar for dangerous situations."

Jess nodded, seeming to absorb his advice. "It's frustrating sometimes," she admitted. "Having to navigate all this just to do my job."

"It's not fair," Bob agreed. "But from what I've seen, you handle yourself well. You're smarter than guys like Webb. They see a beautiful woman, and their brains go straight to their dicks. They miss all the other qualities that make you exceptional."

"Thanks, Bob," Jess said, her expression softening. "It's nice to know someone sees beyond the surface."

"I suspect Tom does too," Bob said, careful to include her husband in the conversation. "He seems like the kind of man who appreciates all of you."

"He does," Jess confirmed. "Actually, he said I should own my beauty, use it as an advantage rather than trying to downplay it."

Bob seized the opening. "He's right. There's power in embracing all your assets, including your appearance. No point pretending you're not stunning. It's like having a sports car and refusing to drive faster than a minivan."

Jess laughed. "That's a... unique analogy."

“What I mean is, you’re gorgeous, smart, and talented. Why apologize for any of those qualities?” Bob said. “Men like Webb, they’re going to look regardless. The power comes from controlling what happens after they look.”

“That’s almost exactly what Tom said,” Jess observed. “That I can use the fact that they notice my looks to showcase my talent.”

“Great minds think alike,” Bob replied with a smile. “Sounds like you’ve got two men looking out for you.”

Jess didn’t immediately respond, and Bob didn’t push, allowing the concept to take root naturally.

“I guess I do,” she said finally. “It’s nice, actually.”

“What is?” Bob prompted.

“Having people who see the whole picture,” Jess explained.

“That’s what friends are for,” Bob said simply. “And we are friends, aren’t we, princess?”

Jess smiled. “Yes, we are.”

Bob glanced at his watch. “Speaking of time, it’s almost one. Don’t you have a meeting soon?”

Jess checked her own watch and sighed. “I do. Conference call at one-fifteen.” She stood, gathering her things. “Thanks for the sunscreen application and the advice. Both much appreciated.”

“Anytime,” Bob replied, also standing. “Good luck with your meetings. And if you need any more advice before your Savannah trip, you know where to find me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jess said. She hesitated, then added, “Maybe Tuesday before I leave? One more swim break?”

“I’ll be here,” Bob assured her. “Same time, same place.”

Jess nodded, then headed up the stairs to the balcony. Bob watched her go, appreciating the view as she climbed the steps, the white bikini contrasting perfectly with her tanned skin.

When she disappeared inside, Bob allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. Three weeks and five days of careful groundwork, of patient, incremental advances, each so subtle that they barely registered as changes. From a casual swim to a back massage to having his hands on her ass, a progression that felt natural rather than orchestrated.

And now, with the Savannah trip approaching, a new opportunity presented itself. Jess would be away from Tom, away from home, dealing with a man who made her uncomfortable. The perfect situation for her to turn to Bob for support, for advice, for the comfort of a friendly voice who understood her situation.

He gathered his book and beer bottle, heading back to his apartment. Inside, he moved directly to his office, where he opened his notebook to a fresh page and began documenting the day's interactions. Every detail mattered, from the white bikini to her willingness to let him touch her ass to her agreement that they were friends.

Friends. Such a useful word, so innocuous yet so full of potential. Friends shared confidences. Friends offered support. Friends blurred boundaries in ways that landlords and tenants could not.

Bob closed the notebook and leaned back in his chair, allowing himself to savor the memory of her skin beneath his hands. Patience remained his greatest asset. Pushing too hard, too fast would undo weeks of careful work. Tuesday's swim would be another incremental step, another small escalation that she would hardly notice happening.

And then she would go to Savannah, away from Tom's watchful eye, away from the safety of her routine. She would face Chris Webb and remember Bob's advice. She would call home to Tom, who would ask certain questions, harbor specific doubts, all planted by Bob.

And when she returned? The foundation would be laid for the next phase of Bob's patient campaign. The image of Jessica Marshall stretched out on his bed rather than a pool lounger, her golden skin against his sheets rather than a white towel, her voice calling his name rather than thanking him for sunscreen application.

Soon, Bob thought. But not yet. Not quite yet.

He stood and moved to the kitchen, pulling a beer from the refrigerator. He had work to do in the yard, plants that needed tending, a design that was slowly taking shape. Like his plan for Jess, the garden required patience, careful attention, and the ability to see the final result long before it actually materialized.

Bob smiled as he twisted the cap off the bottle. "Two men looking out for her," he murmured to himself. "And only one of us sees the whole picture."

The Bad Tenant Ch. 11

Bob Caldwell nursed his third glass of Jack Daniel's. He adjusted the volume on his laptop, careful to catch every sound that came through the hidden smoke detector camera. The visuals remained frustratingly limited but the audio more than compensated.

"Goddamn amateur hour," Bob muttered, taking another sip of whiskey. Weeks since installation, and he still kicked himself for the botched camera angle. A professional wouldn't be squinting at the corner of a bed, trying to piece together what was happening from fragments of movement and disembodied voices.

Bob had already seen Tom climb into bed about ten minutes earlier. The man had looked tired, dark circles under his eyes from too many late nights at the office. Not that Bob felt any sympathy. Tom Marshall with his corporate title and college degree, sleeping next to a goddess like Jessica Marshall while Bob sat alone in the basement with only a hidden camera for company.

The whiskey burned pleasantly in his throat as he adjusted himself through his sweatpants. The memory of Jess by the pool that afternoon had kept him half hard all evening. That white bikini, little more than string and tiny scraps of fabric, had showcased every curve and smooth plane of her body. When she'd asked him to apply sunscreen, he'd been certain his heart would stop.

And her ass. Jesus Christ, her ass. The firm, perfect roundness of it beneath his palms. The way she'd barely flinched when he'd suggested covering the exposed skin there, instead giving that casual little shrug. "It's just sunscreen. And it's not like you haven't seen a woman's ass before."

The bedroom door opened on the video feed, and Bob straightened in his chair. Jess's voice carried clearly through his speakers.

"You still awake?"

"Mmm," Tom's groggy reply. "Yeah. Just resting my eyes."

"I've got a surprise for you."

Bob's pulse quickened. Her tone carried that particular playfulness he'd come to recognize over weeks of surveillance. Something was coming. Something worth staying up for.

When Jess stepped into frame, Bob nearly dropped his whiskey. She was wearing the white bikini from that afternoon, the one he'd spent hours fantasizing about removing

from her body. The tiny scraps of fabric were even more striking in the soft lighting of their bedroom than they had been in the harsh sunlight by the pool.

"Holy fuck," Bob breathed, setting down his glass and looking for the notebook that typically recorded his observations. But tonight felt different. The notebook could wait. His hand moved instead to the growing bulge in his sweatpants.

"What the…" Tom's voice came through the speakers, shock evident. "Is that what you wore at the pool today? With Bob?"

Jess laughed, the sound light and teasing. "Maybe."

"Jesus, Jess." Tom's voice had lost all traces of sleepiness. "You actually wore that for him?"

She stayed in frame just long enough for Bob to drink in the sight of her back, the perfect curve of her ass barely contained by the bikini bottoms, before she crawled onto the bed and out of view.

"I did," Jess admitted, her voice playful. "You should have seen his face when I came down the stairs."

"I can imagine," Tom replied, his voice tight with what Bob recognized as that peculiar mix of jealousy and arousal that characterized their dynamic.

Bob tugged his sweatpants down, freeing his cock. Precum already beaded at the tip, his body's eager response to the memory of Jess in that bikini and the knowledge that she'd worn it for him.

"Tell me about today," Tom urged. "What did you talk about?"

"Well," Jess began, "we discussed the Savannah project. I told him about working with Webb and-"

"Skip to the good part," Tom interrupted, his impatience palpable.

Jess laughed again, the sound sending a fresh pulse of blood to Bob's cock. "Aren't we demanding tonight?"

"Come on, Jess," Tom pressed. "What happened after the swimming? Did he touch you again?"

"He did," Jess replied, her voice dropping to a more intimate register. "I asked him to put sunscreen on my back, like last time."

"And?"

"And he was so... thorough," Jess said, the slight emphasis on the final word making Bob's hand tighten around his shaft. "His hands are huge, Tom. But surprisingly gentle."

Bob began stroking himself slowly, remembering the feel of her skin beneath his palms, the slight give of muscle as he'd pressed into the knots of tension along her spine. The way she'd relaxed under his touch, the small sounds of appreciation she'd made when he'd found just the right spot.

"He worked out all the tension in my shoulders," Jess continued. "Made me moan a couple of times. He kept going lower and lower..."

The mattress creaked, suggesting movement on the bed. Tom's voice came next, rougher now. "How low?"

"All the way down my back," Jess replied. "And then..."

"Then?" Tom prompted when she paused.

"Then I let him do my legs."

"Like last time?"

"Mmhmm." Another creak of the mattress. "But today I also let him do my feet. God, Tom, he's got magic fingers. The way he pressed into the arch of my foot... I nearly fell asleep right there."

Bob's strokes became longer, firmer as he remembered that moment, the way she'd gasped when he'd first pressed his thumbs into the sole of her foot, the near moan that had followed.

"Is that all?" Tom asked, clearly unsatisfied with this tame recounting.

"Not quite," Jess replied, her voice taking on that teasing quality again. "I might have let him put sunscreen somewhere else too."

A pause, then Tom's voice, almost choked. "Where?"

"My ass."

"You let Bob touch your ass?" The shock in Tom's voice was unmistakable.

"Just the sunscreen," Jess clarified, though her laugh undercut the innocence of the statement. "He pointed out I'd missed a spot, and I figured, why not?"

"Fuck, Jess." The mattress creaked again, more vigorously this time.

Bob's hand moved faster on his cock, his breathing growing heavier as he remembered how her ass had felt beneath his hands.

“Did you like it?” Tom asked. “Having his hands on you like that?”

“I did,” Jess admitted. “It felt good. Different from when you touch me. His hands are rougher from all that manual labor.”

A wet sound came through the speakers, unmistakably the sound of kissing. Then a soft moan that Bob immediately recognized as Jess’s. He’d remembered her sounds over weeks of surveillance, learning to distinguish between her gasp of surprise and her sigh of pleasure, between the short, sharp intakes of breath when Tom touched her just right and the longer, deeper moans when he entered her.

“Was he hard?” Tom asked. “When he was touching you?”

“So hard,” Jess confirmed. “I could see it through his shorts when I first came downstairs. That white bikini nearly gave him a heart attack.”

“Did he… ah! Did he try anything?” Tom’s question was punctuated by what sounded like Jess doing something that caught him by surprise.

“No,” Jess replied. “He was a perfect gentleman. Kept it professional even with his hands on my ass.”

“Professional my… oh god, do that again.”

Bob’s hand moved faster, matching what he imagined was happening on the bed above him. The limitations of the camera angle had never been more frustrating. He could only see the very edge of the mattress, not the activities taking place upon it.

“Like this?” Jess asked, followed by Tom’s groan of approval.

“Fuck yes,” Tom gasped. “Just like that.”

Bob closed his eyes, imagining the scene. Jess straddling Tom, still in that white bikini, grinding against him. Or perhaps she’d removed it already, was naked now, taking Tom inside her while they discussed her afternoon with Bob.

“Tell me more,” Tom urged. “Did you think about taking it further? Letting him do more than just apply sunscreen?”

“Maybe,” Jess teased. “What do you think he wanted to do to me?”

“Everything,” Tom replied immediately. “Every fucking thing, Jess. The way you describe how he looks at you... he wants you.”

The mattress creaked rhythmically now, the pace increasing. Jess’s breathing came faster, little gasps and moans punctuating whatever movements were happening on the bed.

“You think he… oh! You think he jerks off thinking about me?” Jess asked.

“Every night,” Tom replied. “Probably right now.”

Bob nearly choked at the accuracy of Tom’s statement. If only they knew how right they were, how their tenant sat beneath them, cock in hand, listening to their most intimate moments while remembering the feel of Jess’s skin beneath his palms.

“You’re so hard right now,” Jess observed, her voice breathy. “Thinking about him thinking about me.”

“Can’t help it,” Tom admitted. “The idea of him wanting you, touching you, while knowing you’re mine...”

“I am yours,” Jess confirmed. “No matter who looks, who touches. I always come back to you.”

The rhythmic creaking accelerated, accompanied by the wet sounds of sex and heavy breathing from both participants. Bob stroked himself faster, timing his movements to the sounds coming through his speakers, imagining himself in Tom’s place, Jess’s body moving above his, her breasts bouncing with each thrust.

“Jess, I’m getting close,” Tom warned after several minutes of increasingly urgent sounds.

“Wait,” Jess said. The creaking stopped. “I want to taste you.”

Bob’s cock throbbed in his hand at her words.

“Oh god,” Tom gasped after a moment. “Fuck, that’s good. Your mouth is incredible.”

Bob could hear the wet sounds of Jess’s mouth, the occasional muffled moan from her as she worked. He slowed his own strokes, not wanting to finish too soon, wanting to savor this unexpected gift of auditory voyeurism.

“Do you ever think about it?” Tom asked suddenly. “About blowing Bob?”

Bob’s hand froze on his cock, waiting for her answer.

Instead of responding directly, Jess asked a question of her own. “Would you like that? Seeing me sucking his huge cock?”

Bob’s heart nearly stopped. His huge cock.

“You know I would,” Tom replied. “You know what it does to me.”

“I remember,” Jess said, her voice thick with suggestion. “You admitted that already. And look how hard you’re getting just talking about it.”

The wet sounds resumed, indicating Jess had returned to her task. Bob's hand moved again, faster now, his breath coming in short pants as he processed what he was hearing.

Then she paused again. "Do you think I could take him all the way? Like this?"

A particularly wet, deep sound followed, suggesting she was demonstrating her deepthroating skills on Tom.

"Jesus, Jess," Tom gasped. "You'd probably need to practice more for him."

Jess chuckled, the sound causing Bob's cock to twitch in his hand. "I enjoy practicing," she said. "I did a lot of practicing in college before you came along."

"You're going to kill me," Tom groaned.

Bob's strokes became almost desperate as he listened to the wet, sloppy sounds of Jess pleasuring her husband while discussing the possibility of doing the same to him. The fantasy was too perfect, too precisely aligned with what he'd been imagining for weeks.

"You know," Jess said between audible licks, "He must be so lonely down there."

"Mmm?" Tom prompted, clearly having difficulty focusing on conversation.

"Two divorces, living in someone else's basement, spending all his free time working on our yard." Jess paused, a soft slurping sound suggesting she was still attending to Tom during these breaks. "And obviously attracted to me."

"Obviously," Tom agreed.

"He seems like he was probably a good husband," Jess continued. "The kind who provided for his wives, learned to give massages for Sarah."

"And got taken advantage of," Tom added.

"Exactly," Jess agreed. "So I was thinking... maybe a couple of blowjobs each week would do him good. Let him feel a woman's touch again. What do you think?"

Bob nearly climaxed at her words, having to grip the base of his cock tightly to hold back. The casual way she'd suggested it, as if it were a realistic possibility rather than just dirty talk, made the fantasy almost unbearably arousing.

"I think," Tom replied, his words punctuated by heavy breathing, "that's hot as fuck, Jess, but you're playing with fire."

"Maybe," she acknowledged. "But that white bikini nearly gave him a heart attack. Actually blowing him might end with me calling an ambulance."

Both laughed at this, the sound genuine despite the circumstances.

"Seriously though," Jess continued, "what would you think if I teased him a little more? Not necessarily... that, but just pushed the boundaries a bit further?"

"Do it," Tom encouraged.

"You're using me," Jess accused, though there was no real accusation in her tone. "Using me to act out your fantasies."

"Is that so wrong?" Tom countered. "Our sex life has never been better."

"No argument there," Jess conceded. The wet sounds intensified, suggesting she was focusing on bringing Tom to completion.

"Oh god, I'm close," Tom warned. "Jess, I'm going to…"

His words cut off in a groan, followed by muffled sounds as Jess presumably finished him with her mouth. Bob's hand moved frantically on his cock, his release hovering just out of reach as he strained to hear every nuance, every wet sound and muffled groan.

"Mmm," Jess hummed after a moment of silence. "You taste so good."

"Jesus," Tom panted. "That was incredible."

"I bet Bob tastes bitter," Jess mused. "From all that beer he drinks."

Bob couldn't hold back any longer. The image of Jess swallowing Tom's cum while speculating about his own taste sent him over the edge. His cock pulsed in his hand as he came, thick ropes of semen landing on his chest and stomach in powerful spurts. He continued stroking through his climax, milking every last sensation as Jess and Tom's post orgasmic conversation continued in his ears.

"You know I was only joking, right?" Jess asked, her tone more serious now. "About actually blowing Bob."

"I know," Tom assured her. "We were just playing. Fantasy stuff."

"Good. I just wanted to make sure we're on the same page."

"We are," Tom said. "But need I remind you that you never actually said blowjobs were off the table in our rules. You just said no sex."

"Tom!" Jess laughed, the sound bright and surprised. "You're still horny? After I just finished you?"

"You make me this way," Tom replied, his voice warm with affection. The sound of a kiss followed, then rustling as they presumably settled into sleeping positions.

"Good night," Jess murmured. "Love you."

"Love you too," Tom replied. A click plunged the room into darkness on Bob's screen.

Bob sat back in his chair, chest heaving, cooling semen drying on his skin. The echo of their conversation played in his mind, particularly the reference to his "huge cock."

Grabbing a tissue from the box on his desk, Bob cleaned himself before reaching for his notebook. He flipped back through the pages, scanning entries from previous weeks. There, from the day before Tom's second San Diego trip, Bob had noted an interaction.

"Overheard J telling T that she hugged B and could feel his arousal through his jeans. J described it as 'impressive.' T seemed aroused rather than angry about this."

That explained it. Jess had felt him when they hugged. Relief flooded through Bob. For a moment, he'd worried that Tom had told Jess about catching Bob masturbating that first night, about watching through the window. But if Tom had shared that, Jess would have reacted differently to Bob's presence, would have been disgusted rather than increasingly flirtatious.

Tom was still keeping that secret, still protecting both himself and Bob from the consequences of that night's voyeurism. The knowledge reinforced Bob's confidence in the hold he had over Tom. That carefully maintained leverage would continue to be useful, particularly with Jess's Savannah trip approaching.

Bob closed the notebook and leaned back in his chair, considering the evening's revelations. Jess's joke about giving him blowjobs might have been just that, a joke, playful dirty talk meant for Tom's ears only. But the seed had been planted. In her mind and in Tom's. And seeds, when properly tended, had a way of growing into something substantial.

His eyes drifted to the photo of Jess in the red one-piece that he'd printed and framed, keeping it on his desk like a talisman. Soon, perhaps sooner than he'd originally planned, that photo would be replaced by something more intimate, more real. The fantasies they'd shared tonight wouldn't remain fantasies forever. Bob would make sure of that.

He shut down the laptop. Above him, Tom and Jess slept, unaware of the man beneath them who had just witnessed their most intimate moments, who had come to the sound of Jess's voice discussing him in terms no tenant should ever hear from his landlord's wife. The predator's patience was about to be rewarded.

On Saturday morning, Tom stared at his monitor, the Meridian implementation data blurring as his hangover pulsed behind his eyes. The remnants of last night's wine and impromptu living room sex with Jess remained in his body. A slight headache, dry mouth, and the pleasant ache of muscles used enthusiastically.

He rubbed his temples, trying to focus. Just a few more weeks and the Meridian nightmare would be over. The projected completion date was finally within sight, and with it, his promotion to Senior Consultant. More responsibility, more stress, but crucially, more money. Money they desperately needed after his cryptocurrency disaster had decimated their savings. Money that would let them start the family Jess wanted. The family he wanted too, if he was being honest with himself.

The spreadsheet on his screen demanded attention, but Tom's mind kept drifting to Thursday afternoon, Jess in that white bikini, letting Bob apply sunscreen to her ass. The mental image sent an unwelcome surge of arousal through him.

Their sex life had never been better. That was the unavoidable truth at the center of this strange new chapter in their marriage. The more Jess pushed boundaries with Bob, the more intense their connection became. Thursday night had been proof of that. The way she'd described Bob's hands on her body while finishing Tom with her mouth... Christ.

The doorbell's chime jolted Tom from his thoughts. He checked his watch. 10:48 AM. Jess was at the gym and planned to go grocery shopping afterward. "Without me, you'd just order takeout the entire time I'm in Savannah," she'd teased, pressing a kiss to his temple before heading out.

Tom saved the spreadsheet and stood, stretching his back. Probably a package delivery for Jess. Or maybe she had forgotten her keys, though that seemed unlikely.

As he descended the stairs, an inexplicable certainty settled over him. Bob was at the door. A premonition so strong it felt like memory.

Sure enough, when Tom swung the door open, Bob Caldwell stood on his porch in cargo shorts and a blue polo shirt that stretched across his broad chest and shoulders. The older man offered a casual smile.

"Morning," Bob said, nodding as though this were a planned meeting rather than an unexpected Saturday morning visit. "Got a minute?"

Tom hesitated. "What's up, Bob? Something wrong with the apartment?"

"Nothing like that," Bob assured him. "Just checking in. Figured since you never followed up on our last conversation, you weren't interested in updates."

Tom's pulse quickened. Their last conversation, Bob's revelation that Jess had told him about the club, about getting aroused dancing with strangers, the implication that Jess might be sharing more with Bob than with her own husband.

"What did you need to check in about, exactly?" Tom asked.

Bob glanced over Tom's shoulder, then back at his face. "Mind if we talk inside? Just need a few minutes."

His instincts told Tom to say no, to maintain distance, to keep whatever Bob wanted to discuss outside the boundaries of their home but curiosity overrode his better judgment.

"Sure," Tom stepped back, holding the door wider. "Come in."

Bob entered and like the last time, Tom left them standing there, not inviting Bob further into the house.

"So," Tom prompted when Bob didn't immediately speak. "What's on your mind?"

Bob rubbed the back of his neck, the gesture almost sheepish. "Been meaning to talk to you about Jess. About the pool sessions."

"Pool sessions?" Tom echoed, though he knew exactly what Bob meant.

"Yeah, you know. Started with the red one-piece a few weeks back. Then she wore the black bikini a couple times, blue one a couple times, that turquoise one a couple times." Bob's eyes met Tom's. "Now the white one on Thursday."

Hearing another man catalog his wife's clothing choices felt invasive, even if Tom had encouraged the very interactions Bob was describing.

"What about them?" Tom asked.

"Just wanted to make sure you're... aware," Bob said. "In case she didn't tell you the details. The sunscreen applications have been escalating too. Started with just her back. Then legs. Now..." He trailed off, raising his eyebrows significantly.

"Jess and I talk about everything," Tom said firmly, the statement both defense and reassurance, to Bob or to himself, he wasn't entirely sure.

"Good," Bob nodded, looking genuinely relieved. "That's good. Communication's key in marriage."

Bob hesitated, breaking eye contact to study the floor tiles. When he looked up again, his expression had shifted to something Tom hadn't seen before, a mixture of reluctance and resolution, like a man preparing to deliver bad news.

“Look, there’s something else,” Bob began, voice dropping slightly. “Something I probably should have mentioned earlier, but... well, it felt private. Between Jess and me.”

Tom’s chest tightened. “What are you talking about?”

Bob sighed, shifting his weight as though physically uncomfortable with whatever he was about to say.

“Jess has been... confiding in me,” Bob said carefully. “Since I moved in. I think she sees me as a shoulder to lean on. Someone who’s helpful with advice, around the house. We’ve gotten close, in a friendly way.”

The statement should have been innocuous. Of course, Jess and Bob would develop some kind of rapport given the amount of time they spent together. Yet something in Bob’s tone, in the careful way he was building toward some revelation set alarm bells ringing in Tom’s mind.

“Our conversations have started getting more personal,” Bob continued when Tom didn’t respond. “She’s been telling me things. About you two. About what you want.”

“What things?” Tom managed.

Bob met his gaze directly. “That you want to see her be sexual with other men. And that she wants that person to be me.”

The statement landed like a gut punch. Not because it was false, but because Jess had apparently discussed it directly with Bob, violating their rule about privacy, about keeping their exploration between themselves.

“I’m surprised Jess talked to you about it.”

“She didn’t plan to,” Bob said quickly. “It sort of came out during one of our poolside chats. She seemed relieved, actually. To have someone to talk to. If that makes sense.”

It didn’t make sense, not really. Jess had been adamant about privacy, had insisted that their exploration stay between them.

“What exactly did she say?” Tom asked.

Bob rubbed the back of his neck again. “She said... Christ, this is awkward. She said she wants to... repay me. For being supportive, for helping around the house. By doing me a favor… giving me a blowjob.”

Tom’s entire body went hot, then cold. The image flashed in his mind, Jess on her knees in front of Bob, taking him into her mouth the way she’d taken Tom on Thursday night. Arousal mixed with confusion, with a strange sense of betrayal that

had nothing to do with the act itself and everything to do with Jess supposedly discussing it with Bob without mentioning it to Tom.

"She said you'd already given the green light," Bob continued, his tone suggesting disbelief. "But she's conflicted. Worried about ruining your marriage and your future. Changing the dynamics. Screwing everything up."

Tom tried to process what he was hearing. Jess wanted to give Bob a blowjob? Had told Bob that Tom approved? None of it aligned with their conversations, with the careful boundaries they'd established.

"She suggested she could test your reaction," Bob added. "By roleplaying it with you. Telling you afterward she was only kidding."

That detail, so specific, so precisely aligned with what had actually happened Thursday night, solidified Bob's account in Tom's mind. How could he know that particular exchange unless Jess had actually discussed it with him?

"I don't understand," Tom said, voicing the confusion swirling through his thoughts. "We've been so careful about this. About boundaries. About privacy."

"I know," Bob nodded. "That's why I hesitated to bring it up. But it felt... dishonest somehow. To have these conversations with her without you knowing."

Tom studied Bob's face but all he saw was apparent concern, an uncomfortable man trying to navigate a difficult situation.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Tom asked.

"Because I care about you two," Bob replied without hesitation. "About your marriage. I don't want to see you hurting each other."

The answer seemed genuine, aligned with the Bob who had offered wisdom based on his own failed marriages, who had warned Tom about the dangers of pushing too far too fast with exploration.

"Remember what I said a few weeks back?" Bob continued. "About secrets in a marriage being normal? This is what I meant. Small things couples keep from each other, not out of malice but out of love. To protect each other."

Tom nodded slowly, the memory of that conversation still vivid. "You also said it could lead to problems. To relationships breaking down."

"Exactly," Bob agreed. "And I'll be honest with you, Tom. If things get messy between you two, I might have to move out. And I really don't want that. I like living here. You've both been good to me."

The statement carried implications that Tom couldn't fully unpack in the moment. Was it a threat? A genuine concern? Both?

"You've been keeping things from her too," Bob pointed out. "To protect her. And she's doing the same, out of love. But at some point, the secrets start causing more harm than the truth would."

Tom leaned against the wall, suddenly feeling unsteady. "What do you think I should do?"

"That's not for me to say," Bob shrugged. "I just thought you should know. This isn't about Jess feeling guilty or you feeling betrayed. It's about clarity. About understanding what you both really want."

Tom nodded.

Bob glanced at his watch, then toward the door. "I should let you get back to your Saturday. I've said what I needed to say."

He turned toward the door and gripped the doorknob. He then paused and looked back at Tom, voice softening. "Something is going to happen, Tom. And you can decide whether you want to know about it or not. If you change your mind, just knock on my door."

Bob began to turn the knob, preparing to leave.

"Wait," Tom said.

Bob turned back, eyebrows raised in question.

"Fine," Tom said. "How do you want to do this?"

Something flickered across Bob's face, satisfaction, triumph, relief, too quickly to identify with certainty. Then his expression settled into something more measured, more thoughtful.

"Let's be clear about what 'this' is," Bob said, releasing the doorknob and turning fully toward Tom. "From what I understand, you want Jess to be sexual with other men and tell you about it. Jess wants to please you. And I'm the lucky man she's chosen."

Put so plainly, it sounded both perfectly logical and utterly insane. Tom found himself nodding despite the conflict raging inside him.

"She's been escalating from the beginning," Bob continued. "Smaller bikinis each week. Asking for back rubs, then leg rubs, now ass rubs. Testing the waters, step by step, trying to figure out her own feelings."

Again, that matched Tom's understanding of what had been developing over the past weeks. The progression had been gradual, each step building naturally on the one before.

"Here's the thing, though," Bob said, his tone shifting to something more cautious. "She's told me she wants to please me with a blowjob. But I think that's too big a leap right away."

Tom's eyebrows rose in surprise. This wasn't the direction he'd expected the conversation to take.

"Escalation should remain slow," Bob explained. "Would I be happy to receive a blowjob from your beautiful wife? Of course. Any man would. But I worry it would cause major unforeseen issues."

"Like what?" Tom asked, genuinely curious about Bob's concern given the older man's apparent interest in Jess.

"Like emotional complications," Bob replied. "Physical intimacy changes relationships in ways that are hard to predict. Jess needs to trust you as her husband to lead her, to guide her. To help her explore safely."

There was something oddly reassuring about Bob's caution, about his apparent concern for the potential ramifications of what Jess had supposedly suggested. It aligned with the man who had warned Tom about his own experience with Sarah, about how exploration had eventually led to the dissolution of his first marriage.

"What are you suggesting?" Tom asked.

"That you encourage her to take it further, but in a way that gives her more control," Bob said. "Let me manage things in reality, keep it slower than she thinks she wants."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"Instead of a blowjob, what if she got naked during our next massage?" Bob suggested. "Still a big step, but one that gives her time to adjust instead of rushing into something sexual."

The image flashed in Tom's mind, Jess stretched out on a lounger, completely naked while Bob's hands moved over her body. His cock twitched traitorously in his jeans.

"You'd need to initiate it," Bob continued. "Tell her that if she wants to get naked for Tuesday's massage, that would be absolutely okay with you. That it would even turn you on."

"And if she says no?" Tom asked.

"Then she says no," Bob shrugged. "Don't argue with her. Just plant the seed and leave it at that. Let her decide."

Tom considered the suggestion, turning it over in his mind. It felt manipulative, deliberately engineering a situation based on Bob's account of Jess's desires rather than direct communication between husband and wife.

"I know what you're thinking," Bob said, seeming to read Tom's hesitation. "It feels like we're manipulating her. But we're doing it together, for her safety, to ensure everything is done carefully."

"You're sure she wants this?" Tom asked, needing the reassurance despite the conflict twisting inside him.

"She wants to give a blowjob," Bob confirmed. "But this would be a better step to take. Safer."

The conviction in Bob's voice was persuasive, as was the apparent logic of his suggestion. A naked massage did seem like a more natural progression than jumping straight to oral sex.

"If you're not comfortable with it," Bob added, "we can go back to the way things were. I'll back off. Never reveal to Jess any conversations we've had."

The offer seemed genuine, another point in favor of Bob's apparent integrity. He wasn't pushing, wasn't demanding. Just offering possibilities and respecting Tom's agency in the decision.

"Think about how it's been between you two lately," Bob continued. "Jess has told me about the sex, the connection, the excitement. All because she's been pushing these boundaries, testing these waters. Imagine what happens when she feels truly free to explore."

The statement struck a chord. Their relationship had transformed over the past weeks, reconnecting in ways that had seemed impossible in the aftermath of the cryptocurrency disaster. The exploration had brought them closer, had reignited passion and communication when both had been fading.

"I don't want to hurt her," Tom said, the words emerging as more of a plea than a statement.

"Neither do I," Bob assured him. "That's why we go slow. Why we let her set the pace. Why we create a safe space for her to explore rather than sending her to nightclubs with drunk strangers."

The reference to the nightclub, to Domino, to that night of drunken dancing and potential disaster, reminded Tom that Bob knew about that expedition, that Jess had supposedly shared that experience with him. Another data point supporting Bob's account of their private conversations.

"What if she wants to stop halfway through?" Tom asked, still searching for reassurance.

"Then it stops immediately," Bob stated firmly. "No questions, no pressure. I back off, no hard feelings. This only works if she feels completely safe and in control."

"And after Savannah? What then?"

"We take it one step at a time," Bob replied. "See how this goes. See how she feels about it afterward. No rushing, no pressure."

The answer was reasonable, measured, focused on Jess's comfort and agency rather than Bob's desires. Tom found himself nodding slowly, the decision coalescing despite the warnings still echoing in the back of his mind.

"Okay," he said finally, the word surprisingly steady despite the magnitude of what he was agreeing to.

"Okay," Bob echoed, something like relief passing across his features. "I'll follow your lead on this, Tom. It's your marriage, your wife. I'm just here to help facilitate whatever you two want to explore."

Tom nodded.

"One last thing," Bob said, his hand returning to the doorknob. "Thank you for trusting me with this. I know it's not easy to let another man into your marriage, even in this limited way." He paused, eyes meeting Tom's directly. "She's an incredible woman. Smart, beautiful, talented. You're a lucky man, Tom. Never forget that."

With that, he opened the door and stepped outside, pulling it closed behind him with a soft click.

Tom stood in the foyer, pulse racing, mind reeling from the encounter. Had he really just agreed to encourage his wife to get naked for another man? Had Jess really been discussing giving Bob a blowjob without mentioning it to Tom?

None of it aligned with what he thought he knew about their relationship, about the careful boundaries they'd established. Yet Bob's account contained enough verifiable truth, the progression of swimwear, the escalating physical contact, the roleplaying during sex, that the parts Tom couldn't verify seemed credible by association.

He moved to the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of water and drinking it in long gulps. The house felt suddenly unfamiliar, as though the foundations had shifted beneath his feet while the exterior remained unchanged.

What was true? What was manipulation? The questions circled without resolution.

Tom set the glass down and leaned against the counter, trying to organize his thoughts. Bob's suggestion made a certain sense. If Jess truly wanted to take things further, a naked massage seemed like a natural next step, less overtly sexual than oral but still a significant boundary to cross.

And if she rejected the suggestion? No harm done. Just a husband expressing openness to his wife's exploration, leaving the decision entirely in her hands.

Yet something about the encounter left Tom unsettled, a persistent unease that couldn't be easily dismissed.

Tom pushed away from the counter, heading back to his office. The Meridian implementation still needed attention, still demanded his focus despite the turmoil swirling through his personal life.

As he settled back at his desk, Tom tried to concentrate on the spreadsheet, on the data points that would determine the success or failure of the project. But his mind kept circling back to Bob's revelation, to the suggestion of Jess naked under Bob's hands, to the larger question of what his wife might be hiding from him even as they explored these new territories together.

Trust was the foundation of their relationship, the bedrock upon which everything else was built. If that foundation was cracking, if Jess was confiding in Bob things she couldn't or wouldn't share with Tom, what did that mean for their future?

His thoughts spiraled through possibilities and implications. Would he really suggest to Jess that she get naked for Bob's next massage? The idea simultaneously aroused and disturbed him, tangling desire and unease into a knot he couldn't easily unravel.

Tom leaned back in his chair, gaze lifting to the ceiling as though he could see through it to some higher perspective, some clarity that eluded him at ground level.

He thought of Thursday night, of Jess describing Bob's hands on her ass while finishing Tom with her mouth. Of her joking about giving Bob blowjobs to let him "feel a woman's touch again." Had she really been testing Tom's reaction, gauging his response to a scenario she'd already discussed with Bob?

The unease lingered, but alongside it grew something else, anticipation, curiosity, a desire to see where this path might lead. Their exploration thus far had revitalized their marriage, had reconnected them in ways Tom hadn't thought possible after the

cryptocurrency disaster. Perhaps this next step, this boundary crossing, would deepen that connection further.

And if not? If it threatened rather than strengthened their bond? They could always step back, recalibrate, return to safer territories.

The spreadsheet beckoned, demanding his attention despite the distractions swirling through his mind. Tom forced himself to focus, to immerse himself in the data that would secure his promotion, their financial future, the family they both wanted.

By the time Tom heard Jess's Tesla pull into the driveway nearly two hours later, he had his answer. Whether it was the right one remained to be seen.

The front door opened, followed by the sound of grocery bags rustling. "Tom? I'm back! Come help with these bags!"

Tom saved the spreadsheet and stood, stretching muscles stiff from hours at his desk. He'd tackle the Meridian implementation later. For now, his wife needed help with groceries.

He'd made his decision. Whether it was truly his, or whether Bob had skillfully guided him toward it, didn't matter as much as what would happen next, what Jess would decide when presented with the suggestion, whether she'd cross that boundary or hold firm against it.

The future hung suspended between possibilities, between hope and fear, between the marriage they had built and the one they were becoming.

"Coming!" Tom called, descending the stairs to meet his wife, to help unload groceries, to continue the performance of normal married life while unseen currents pulled them toward uncharted waters.

Monday evening, Jess slid the roasting pan into the oven, the heat billowing against her face as she set the timer for sixty minutes. After shutting the oven door, she straightened up and wiped her hands on a kitchen towel, surveying the remaining prep work. The chicken would be the star, seasoned with herbs from the garden Bob had planted.

She moved to the counter where a half-chopped onion waited, her knife making quick work of it. The mindless task allowed her thoughts to drift to tomorrow's redeye flight and the three days that would follow.

A memory surfaced of Bob's advice by the pool. "Men like Webb, they're predictable. They go after what they want directly, and they're used to getting it." His words had

struck her as practical rather than judgmental, offered with the matter of factness of someone who'd seen enough of the world to understand its patterns.

"The key is to never let him get you alone outside of professional settings," Bob had continued. "No drinks in his hotel room, no private dinners, nothing that could be interpreted as interest."

Jess scooped the onion into a small bowl. The challenge with men like Webb wasn't that they wouldn't take no for an answer. Most weren't that stupid in the era of sexual harassment lawsuits and #MeToo. The real problem was navigating the subtle power plays without damaging professional relationships, especially when the man controlled a career defining project like Savannah.

She reached for a bottle of white wine, uncorking it. A glass now wouldn't hurt while she finished prepping.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Annie confirming their meeting time at the airport. Sam was already in Savannah, having flown out that morning to set up the temporary office space they'd use during the site assessment. Their team was small but effective, Jess as lead designer, Annie handling material specifications and vendor relationships, and Sam focusing on the technical aspects, ensuring their designs could actually be implemented within the constraints of a historical building.

Jess texted back a thumbs-up emoji before returning to her cooking, sliding chopped vegetables into a bowl and tossing them with olive oil, salt, and pepper. She'd need to add them to the roasting pan.

Her mind drifted back to Chris Webb. The man was brilliant at what he did, no question. His developments consistently pushed boundaries while remaining commercially successful, no small feat in an industry where innovative design often clashed with financial reality. If she could navigate his obvious interest without compromising herself, the Savannah project could propel her career to new heights.

And she would navigate it. Bob's advice had been helpful, but she'd been handling men like Webb her entire career. The combination of her looks and talent had always attracted a certain type of attention. She'd learned to deflect, redirect, and when necessary, firmly shut down advances while maintaining professional relationships.

The sound of the door opening interrupted her thoughts. Tom was home, his timing nearly perfect. Jess poured a second glass of wine and moved toward the stairs, warmth spreading through her at the thought of seeing him. Despite the complications of recent weeks, despite the strange new territories they'd been exploring, her love for Tom remained the bedrock of her life, steady and enduring.

He appeared, briefcase in hand, tie already loosened. The lines of fatigue around his eyes softened when he saw her.

"Hey, you," Jess greeted, extending the wine glass. "Perfect timing. Dinner's in the oven. Should be ready in about fifteen minutes."

Tom set his briefcase down and accepted the wine, taking a sip before leaning in to kiss her. "Smells amazing in here."

"Roast chicken with vegetables," Jess said, returning his kiss. "Figured we should have a proper dinner before I leave."

She wrapped her arms around him, feeling the familiar contours of his body against hers. Despite all the strangeness of recent weeks, the clubbing experiment, the poolside sessions with Bob, the heightened sexuality of their relationship, this simple connection remained unchanged.

"Go get comfortable," she urged, pulling back slightly. "I'll finish setting the table."

Tom nodded, taking another sip of wine. "I'll just change quickly. Be right back."

While Tom disappeared into their bedroom, Jess moved around the kitchen completing the dinner preparations. She set their usual places at the dining table, added a simple centerpiece of flowers from the garden, and checked the roasting chicken. Everything was progressing perfectly.

By the time Tom returned, now in jeans and a casual shirt, looking more relaxed, Jess was removing the perfectly browned chicken from the oven. The vegetables around it glistened with olive oil and herbs, caramelized edges promising depth of flavor.

"Can I help with anything?" Tom offered, refilling their wine glasses.

"Just sit," Jess directed. "Everything's ready."

Tom settled into his chair while Jess brought the food to the table, arranging it on the trivets she'd set out earlier.

"So," Tom said once they'd both filled their plates, "all packed for tomorrow?"

"Almost," Jess replied, cutting into a roasted carrot. "Just need to add my toiletries in the morning. I've got everything else ready."

"What time's your flight again?"

"Eleven PM," Jess said. "Redeye. We should land in Savannah around six Wednesday morning. Annie and I are meeting at the airport at nine."

Tom nodded, taking a bite of chicken. "This is delicious, by the way."

"Thanks," Jess smiled. "Bob's herbs from the garden made all the difference."

"So walk me through the schedule," Tom said. "What's the plan once you land?"

Jess set her wine glass down. "We'll check into the hotel. We're staying at the Gastonian, this gorgeous historic inn. I've been wanting to stay there for years, actually." She speared a Brussels sprout with her fork. "They let us check in early, so we can freshen up before heading to the site. Wednesday is the room by room walkthrough with the contractors and project managers."

"And Webb will be there?" Tom asked.

"He'll join us for part of it," Jess confirmed. "He's hosting a dinner Wednesday night with all the stakeholders. Investors, historical preservation committee, the mayor's office."

"Sounds like quite the production."

"That's Webb's style," Jess shrugged. "Everything's an opportunity to network, to solidify relationships. Thursday we'll focus on the kitchen and bar areas, which have special requirements. Those spaces need to feel authentic to the period while meeting modern commercial standards."

Tom topped off their wine glasses. "And Friday?"

"Friday is mainly team meetings to compile our findings, prioritize needs, establish the project timeline." Jess paused to take a bite of chicken. "At night there's a little cocktail party where they're officially announcing the hotel's new name, Magnolia House."

"Of course it is," Tom chuckled. "Could they pick anything more stereotypically Southern?"

"Hey, it tested well with focus groups," Jess defended playfully. "And it's better than the current name, the Weatherby Mansion, which sounds like a funeral home."

Their laughter mingled, the ease of their conversation a reminder of why they'd connected in the first place all those years ago in college.

"You excited?" Tom asked, his expression softening.

"Really excited," Jess admitted. "This project has everything I love and the exposure could be huge. The design blogs are already tracking Webb's progress on the building."

"You're going to kill it," Tom said with absolute certainty. "They're lucky to have you."

Jess felt a rush of gratitude for his unwavering support. Even when their marriage had hit rough patches, even after the cryptocurrency disaster that had decimated their savings, Tom had never wavered in his belief in her talent, her capability.

"Speaking of Webb," Tom said, his tone shifting slightly, "you feel ready to handle him? After what you overheard at that party..."

Jess straightened in her chair, remembering Bob's advice again. "Absolutely. I'm going in prepared. Keep everything strictly professional, maintain clear boundaries, never be alone with him outside of work contexts."

"Good plan," Tom nodded. "Though I imagine that's easier said than done when he's the client."

"I've dealt with men like Webb my entire career," Jess replied. "They're predictable once you understand what drives them." The words echoed Bob's assessment so closely that it gave her a moment's pause. "Besides, Annie and Sam will be with me most of the time. Webb might be bold, but he's not stupid enough to try anything with witnesses present."

Tom studied her over the rim of his wine glass. "You've thought this through."

"I have to," Jess said simply. "It's the reality of being a woman in a male dominated industry. You develop strategies."

"Well, for what it's worth, I think you'll handle him perfectly," Tom said. "Just like you handle everything else."

Jess smiled.

"I've been thinking about you all day," Tom confessed, the shift in conversation as natural as it was deliberate. "About Thursday night."

Heat bloomed in Jess's cheeks at the memory. Her in that white bikini, describing Bob's hands on her body while finishing Tom with her mouth. The intensity of his response, the depth of their connection.

"It's been like that all weekend," she admitted. "I've never felt so... I don't know. Seen? Present? Everything feels more vivid somehow."

"I know exactly what you mean," Tom agreed, reaching across the table to take her hand. "It's like we found a new frequency."

For all the complexities of their current exploration, the physical chemistry between them remained undeniable, perhaps even enhanced by the edges of danger they were flirting with.

They finished dinner with the comfortable silence of a couple who no longer needed constant conversation to feel connected. Together, they cleared the table, loaded the dishwasher, and stored the leftovers, moving around each other with the experience of years spent sharing the same space.

"I should finish packing," Jess said as they completed the kitchen cleanup. "Just a few more things to add to my suitcase."

Tom nodded, closing the dishwasher.

In their bedroom, Jess's suitcase lay open on the floor, nearly packed but still missing a few items. She moved to her dresser, pulling out the last few essentials while Tom settled on the edge of the bed.

"You're sure you've got everything you need?" he asked, watching her select pieces.

"Pretty sure," Jess replied, adding a few pairs of underwear to the suitcase. "Annie always overpacks, so if I forget anything, I can probably borrow from her."

Tom chuckled. "The Annie who brought two suitcases to the company beach weekend last year? Yeah, I think you're covered."

Jess smiled at the memory. "In her defense, she didn't know what the weather would do, and she wanted options."

"She had enough options to clothe a small village," Tom pointed out.

Jess laughed, folding the last few items into her suitcase. "There. Almost done. Just need to add my toiletries in the morning."

She zipped the suitcase and set it against the wall before turning back to Tom. "I'm going to grab a quick shower. Won't be long."

Tom nodded, settling back against the pillows. "Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

In the bathroom, Jess stripped and stepped under the warm spray, letting the water wash away the cooking smells and the day's tension. She took her time shampooing her hair, then conditioning it.

As she washed, her mind returned to their conversation about Chris Webb, about handling him. She'd meant what she'd said about being prepared, about keeping things professional. But there was also a confidence in her approach that hadn't been there before, a certainty that she could manage the situation on her terms.

Part of that confidence, she realized, stemmed from the past few weeks with Bob. As strange as it might seem, those poolside sessions had reminded her of a power she'd always possessed but sometimes forgot, the ability to command attention, to control

a situation through the deliberate wielding of her presence. It was a skill she'd developed during her modeling days and had subsequently downplayed in her pursuit of professional respect.

But Bob had seen it, had recognized it. "You're not just talented, princess. You're smart. Capable. The kind of woman who can handle herself in any situation." His words had affirmed something she'd always known but sometimes doubted, that her beauty and her brains weren't separate assets but complementary ones, tools in the same toolkit.

Jess rinsed the conditioner from her hair, then shut off the water. She toweled herself dry, wrapped her hair in a second towel, and moved to the sink to complete her skincare routine. The familiar rituals grounded her, preparing her both for the night ahead with Tom and, more distantly, for the challenges waiting in Savannah.

Instead of reaching for her usual sleep shirt, Jess opened a drawer where earlier she placed lingerie, a matching set in deep red, a push-up bra with lace trim and barely there panties. Tom had bought it for her birthday earlier in the year, but she'd only worn it once. Tonight felt like an appropriate occasion to bring it out again.

She slipped it on, adjusting the bra to emphasize her cleavage, then removed the towel from her hair, letting the damp strands fall around her shoulders. A quick check in the mirror confirmed the effect was as intended, sexy as hell, a wife making an effort for her husband before a business trip.

When Jess emerged from the bathroom, Tom was already in bed, scrolling through his phone. He glanced up at her entrance, his eyes widening as they traveled down her body and back up to her face.

"Wow," he breathed, setting his phone aside. "That's... unexpected."

Jess moved toward the bed slowly, enjoying the intensity in his gaze. "I thought we should make tonight special. We won't have another chance until I get back Saturday."

"What about tomorrow?" Tom asked, though his attention was clearly more on her body than her words.

"We both know how those days go," Jess replied, reaching the edge of the bed. "You'll get home late from work, I'll be rushing to finish packing and get to the airport on time..."

Tom reached for her, his hand settling on her hip, drawing her closer. "Then I'm very glad you thought of this."

Jess climbed onto the bed, moving to straddle him over the covers, the position putting her breasts at his eye level. Tom's hands moved to her waist, then slid up her sides to cup her breasts through the bra.

"You look incredible," he murmured, thumbs brushing over her nipples through the thin fabric. "Red is definitely your color."

Jess arched into his touch, letting her head fall back slightly. "I thought you'd appreciate it."

Tom leaned forward, pressing his lips to the swell of her breast above the lace. "I more than appreciate it," he said against her skin. "I'm already imagining taking it off you."

Jess shifted, grinding down slightly against him, feeling his hardening cock through the covers. The friction drew a low sound from Tom's throat, a growl of approval.

"I don't think you'll have to imagine for long," she whispered, her hands finding his shoulders for balance.

Tom's mouth continued its exploration, teeth grazing the sensitive skin of her throat, tongue tracing the line of her collarbone. One hand moved to the back of her bra, finding the clasp. The garment loosened, and Tom pulled it away, exposing her breasts.

"Beautiful," he breathed, cupping one breast while his mouth moved to the other, tongue circling her nipple before sucking it between his lips.

Jess moaned, pressing closer, her fingers threading through his hair to hold him against her. The sensation of his mouth sent electric currents through her body, centering in the growing wetness between her thighs.

Tom switched his attention to her other breast, his hand now free to slide down her stomach, fingers tracing the waistband of her panties. Jess shifted, encouraging his exploration, nearly desperate for his touch where she needed it most.

His fingers slipped beneath the lace, finding her pussy already slick. "So wet already," Tom murmured against her breast, his finger circling her clit with teasing lightness.

"Your fault," Jess gasped, rotating her hips to increase the pressure. "You and that mouth of yours."

Tom chuckled. "My mouth can do a lot more than this," he promised, sliding his finger inside her, then adding a second.

Jess rode his hand, the dual sensation of his fingers inside her and his mouth on her breast building a delicious tension low in her belly. But she wanted more, wanted to feel him properly, to connect completely before her trip.

She pushed back slightly, creating space between them. “Lay back,” she directed.

Tom obeyed, removing his hand from her panties and shifting to lie flat. Jess moved down his body, tugging the covers away to reveal his boxers, tented with his erection. She hooked her fingers in the waistband and pulled them down, freeing his cock.

“Now who’s eager?” Tom teased as she tossed his boxers aside.

“You complaining?” Jess asked, one eyebrow raised in challenge.

“God, no,” Tom replied, his smile fading as she wrapped her hand around his shaft, giving it a slow stroke. “That feels amazing.”

Jess continued the motion, enjoying the weight and warmth of him in her hand, the way his breathing changed when she twisted her wrist just so. She leaned down, maintaining eye contact as she licked a stripe up the underside of his cock, ending with a swirl around the head.

“Fuck,” Tom groaned, his hips jerking upward involuntarily. “You’re so good at that.”

“At what?” Jess asked innocently, her tongue flicking out to taste the precum beading at his tip. “This?”

She took him into her mouth then, sliding down until he hit the back of her throat, then slowly withdrawing, her cheeks hollowing with suction. Tom’s hands found her hair, holding, a connection point as she established a rhythm.

“Yes, that,” Tom managed, his voice strained. “Fucking hell, Jess, your mouth is incredible.”

The praise sent a thrill through her, a surge of power at reducing him to breathless wonder with just her mouth.

“If you keep this up,” Tom warned, “things are going to end way too soon.”

Jess pulled off with a final, deliberate suck. “We can’t have that,” she agreed, moving up his body to kiss him deeply, letting him taste himself on her tongue.

As they kissed, Tom’s hands moved to her panties, pushing them down her thighs. Jess helped, kicking them aside before settling back on top of him, his cock now pressed against her wet pussy, separated only by the thinnest barrier of will.

“Wait,” Tom said, breaking the kiss. “Let me taste you too.”

Before Jess could respond, he was maneuvering them, flipping their positions so she lay beneath him. He moved down her body, pressing kisses to her stomach, her hipbones, the sensitive skin of her inner thighs. Then his mouth was on her, his tongue parting her folds to find her clit.

“Oh god,” Jess gasped, her back arching off the bed. “Yes, right there.”

His hands gripped her thighs, holding her open as he alternated between broad strokes and focused attention on her clit.

The pleasure built quickly, a testament to both his skill and her arousal. Jess’s hands found his hair, her hips moving against his mouth, chasing the release hovering just out of reach.

“I’m close,” she breathed, her body tensing. “So close.”

Tom redoubled his efforts, adding his fingers to the mix, sliding two inside her while his tongue continued its relentless attention to her clit. The combination pushed her over the edge, her orgasm crashing through her in waves of intensity that left her breathless and trembling.

Before she could fully recover, Tom was moving again, repositioning himself. But instead of covering her body with his as she expected, he turned, presenting his cock to her face while his mouth returned to her still-sensitive pussy.

The position required some adjustment, but soon they found their rhythm, Jess taking him deep into her mouth while Tom’s tongue explored her folds, his fingers adding pressure in just the right spots. The dual sensation of giving and receiving pleasure simultaneously was intensely intimate, a perfect circle of connection.

“You’re so good at this,” Tom murmured against her. “Love the way you suck my cock.”

Jess moaned around him, the praise sending another surge of arousal through her body. She took him deeper, relaxing her throat to accommodate his length, using her hand to stroke what she couldn’t fit.

“That’s it,” Tom encouraged. “Take it deep, just like that.”

The dirty talk had always been a part of their sex life, but in recent weeks it had evolved, become more explicit, more raw. Jess found herself responding to it with increased enthusiasm, her own inhibitions falling away in the face of Tom’s obvious arousal.

“You love sucking cock, don’t you?” Tom asked, pulling back from her pussy to speak clearly. “Tell me how much you love it.”

Jess released him from her mouth, her hand continuing to stroke. “I love it,” she admitted. “Love the way you feel in my mouth, the way you respond.”

“Show me,” Tom challenged, thrusting lightly against her lips.

Jess opened for him, taking him in again, this time with renewed determination. She hollowed her cheeks, creating suction as she bobbed her head.

Tom groaned. “Fuck, that’s good. So fucking good.”

His mouth returned to her pussy, his tongue circling her clit before dipping lower, teasing her entrance. The stimulation was overwhelming, building her toward another peak even as she focused on pleasuring him.

Eventually, Tom pulled away from her, his breathing ragged. “Need to be inside you,” he managed, moving to reposition himself. “Need to feel you.”

Jess released his cock, shifting to accommodate his movement. Tom settled between her legs, the head of his cock pressing against her entrance, slick with her arousal and his saliva.

“Yes,” Jess urged, her legs wrapping around his waist. “Please, Tom. I need you inside me.”

Tom pushed forward, entering her in a thrust that drew moans from them both. He stilled for a moment, allowing her to adjust to the fullness, their eyes locked in a moment of connection.

“I love you,” Tom said.

“I love you too,” Jess replied, her hands finding his shoulders, feeling the muscles tense as he began to move.

Tom established a rhythm, slow and deep at first. Jess moved with him, her hips rising to meet his, taking him deeper with each stroke.

“Feels so good,” she breathed, her nails digging slightly into his skin. “So deep this way.”

Tom’s pace increased, and soon he was going in and out rhythmically.

“Are you going to tease Bob tomorrow?” Tom asked suddenly, the question so unexpected that Jess almost missed the shift in context. “During the massage?”

The mention of Bob sent a jolt of shock through her. They’d talked about him during sex before, especially after the white bikini incident, but the directness of Tom’s question caught her off guard.

“Yes,” she admitted, remembering their previous conversation. “Like you asked me to.”

Tom’s thrusts deepened, his expression intense. “And what will you wear?”

“The white bikini again,” Jess replied. “You seemed to enjoy that one so much.”

“I did,” Tom confirmed, his voice strained with the effort of maintaining his rhythm. “And if you want to do something with Bob, you can tell me.”

The phrasing struck Jess as odd, but in the heat of the moment, with Tom’s cock moving inside her, she assumed it was just part of the fantasy they were building together. Tom got off on the idea of other men wanting her, touching her, while knowing she ultimately came back to him.

“Maybe I’ll let him massage my feet again,” Jess teased, playing into what she perceived as fantasy talk. “His hands felt amazing last time.”

“Yeah?” Tom prompted, his pace quickening. “What else?”

“Maybe I’ll tell him my butt is sore from all those squats I did at the gym,” Jess continued, the words flowing more easily now that she understood the game. “Ask him to work out the tension there too.”

Tom groaned, his thumb pressing harder against her clit. “He’d love that. Getting his hands on your ass again.”

“He would,” Jess agreed, her own arousal building both from the physical stimulation and the taboo nature of their conversation. “He’s got such big hands. They cover so much area.”

“You should get naked for him,” Tom said, the words sending a shock through Jess’s system.

For a moment, she thought she’d misheard, but Tom’s expression was serious despite the pleasure etched on his features.

“What?” she asked, though she didn’t stop moving against him.

“You should get naked for Bob,” Tom repeated, clearer this time. “For the massage tomorrow.”

“You’d like that?” she asked, playing along. “If I let Bob see what no man but you has seen in years?”

“Yes,” Tom hissed. “God, yes.”

“Maybe I will,” Jess teased. “Maybe I’ll let him see everything. Spread my legs and let him see how wet I get when he touches me.”

The words felt scandalous leaving her mouth, a fantasy she had no intention of actualizing but that clearly drove Tom wild. His pace increased, the sound of skin slapping against skin filling the room.

Tom’s groan was almost pained. “Fuck, Jess.”

“Or maybe I’ll let him massage my tits,” she continued, encouraged by his reaction. “He always tries not to look at them, but I catch him glancing when he thinks I won’t notice.”

“Would you let him touch your pussy?” Tom asked, his voice tight with approaching climax. “If he asked?”

“Maybe,” Jess whispered, the fantasy taking shape in her mind, safe within the boundaries of their bedroom talk. “If you wanted me to.”

“I do,” Tom groaned. “I want you to.”

Jess felt her own orgasm building, the combination of physical stimulation and forbidden fantasy pushing her toward the edge.

Tom’s rhythm faltered, his control clearly slipping. “What about his cock? Do you want to suck it, Jess? Do you want to take Bob’s huge cock in your mouth?”

The dirty talk was reaching new levels, and Jess felt herself responding to it, her pussy clenching around Tom as the forbidden images flashed through her mind.

“Yes,” she breathed, lost in the fantasy. “I’d love to. I bet he tastes different from you. Stronger, maybe.”

Tom suddenly pulled out, his expression almost desperate. “Show me,” he demanded. “Show me how you’d suck his cock.”

Jess didn’t hesitate, quickly shifting down the bed and taking Tom into her mouth again. She hollowed her cheeks, sucking hard, her tongue working the sensitive underside of his cock. She looked up, meeting his eyes, letting him see the enthusiasm on her face.

“Like this,” she said, pulling back just long enough to speak before taking him deep again. “I’d make it so good for him.”

Tom’s hands tangled in her hair, guiding her movements. “Take it deeper,” he urged. “Show me how deep you could take him.”

Jess relaxed her throat, taking him until her nose pressed against his pelvis. She held him there for a moment before pulling back, gasping for air, saliva trailing from her lips to his cock in a thin, glistening strand.

“I’d swallow every drop,” she promised, stroking him with her hand while she caught her breath. “Just like I do for you.”

“Fuck, I’m close,” Tom warned. “Don’t stop.”

Jess lowered her mouth again, one hand cupping his balls. She could feel him tightening, his cock swelling slightly, the telltale sign of his impending release.

"Jess," Tom gasped, his fingers tightening in her hair. "I'm going to-"

His words cut off in a groan as he came, pulsing against her tongue. Jess didn't pull away, swallowing each surge until he was spent, his body relaxing beneath her. Only then did she release him, placing a final gentle kiss on the tip of his cock before moving up to curl against his side.

As they lay together afterward, a comfortable silence settled between them. Jess traced idle patterns on Tom's chest, her mind drifting between contentment and the looming Savannah trip.

"I wasn't joking, you know," Tom said suddenly, breaking the quiet. "About tomorrow."

Jess lifted her head to look at him, confusion furrowing her brow. "What about tomorrow?"

"About getting naked for Bob," Tom clarified, his expression serious despite the absurdity of the statement. "I want you to do it. And if you want to do more, you can tell me."

Jess stared at him, trying to process the shift from fantasy to apparent reality. "You're serious?"

"Completely," Tom confirmed, his expression earnest despite the gravity of what he was suggesting. "If you want to, that is. It's entirely your choice."

Jess sat up, pulling the sheet to cover herself instinctively, suddenly feeling exposed in a way that had nothing to do with her nakedness. "Tom, that's... that's a huge leap from flirting in a bikini."

"I know," Tom acknowledged, sitting up beside her. "But we've been moving in this direction for weeks, and it feels like a natural next step. Not sex, just... a bit further than we've gone before."

Jess tried to organize her thoughts, which were scattered by both the recent orgasm and the shocking turn in conversation. "I don't know," she said finally. "That feels like a lot."

"It's okay if you're not comfortable with it," Tom assured her, his hand finding hers atop the sheet. "I'd never want you to do something that made you uncomfortable. I just wanted you to know that if you want to take things further with Bob, I'm okay with it."

“But getting naked is a big step from wearing a bikini,” Jess pointed out.

“I know,” Tom agreed. “And if it doesn’t feel right to you, then absolutely don’t do it. But I wanted you to know that it wouldn’t change anything between us. It wouldn’t make me love you any less or think differently of you. In fact, it would make things hotter.”

Jess studied his face. All she saw was earnestness, genuine desire, and something like vulnerability.

“This really turns you on, doesn’t it?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” Tom admitted. “It’s like watching you come alive in a new way. I love seeing you embrace this side of yourself, the confidence you had during your modeling days.”

Her modeling career, brief as it had been, had awakened something in her, a comfort with being seen, admired, desired. She’d buried that part of herself as she’d pursued her design career, determined to be taken seriously for her mind rather than her body. But in recent weeks, with the poolside sessions and even the clubbing experiment, she’d reconnected with that aspect of herself, found a way to integrate it into her identity rather than suppressing it.

“You think I enjoy being seen that way,” Jess said, not quite a question.

“Don’t you?” Tom countered gently. “The white bikini is practically see through. Bob must have seen your nipples when you came out of the pool.”

Jess felt her cheeks warm at the reminder. “He probably did,” she acknowledged.

“And that excited you,” Tom pressed. “Being seen like that, knowing the effect you had on him.”

The truth of his observation couldn’t be denied. There had been a thrill in it, a power in knowing exactly how her appearance affected Bob, in controlling that interaction while maintaining the upper hand.

“It would be the same,” Tom continued. “Just... more. More intense. And if it doesn’t feel right, you can stop at any point.”

“What about the touching, though?” Jess asked, the practicality of the situation asserting itself. “Getting naked for a massage means his hands would be on my skin. All of my skin.”

“Has Bob ever been inappropriate during the massages?” Tom asked. “Ever tried to touch you sexually?”

"No," Jess admitted after a moment's consideration. "He's been professional, even when his hands were on my ass last time. Thorough, but not creepy about it."

"So you trust him to respect boundaries," Tom observed. "To not push further than you're comfortable with."

Put that way, it did seem less daunting. Bob had proven himself to be respectful, if clearly attracted to her. He'd never pushed, never assumed, had always let her set the pace of their interactions.

"You're secretly an exhibitionist," Tom teased, his tone lightening. "Admit it. You get off on being seen, having that power."

"I am not!" Jess protested, though without much conviction. "It's just... there is something about it. About knowing the effect I have, about controlling that interaction. It does make me feel powerful in a way."

"Exactly," Tom nodded. "And this would be an extension of that. Completely controlled, completely on your terms."

Jess bit her lower lip, considering. The idea was both terrifying and undeniably intriguing. To deliberately cross that boundary, to let Bob see her completely, to feel his hands directly on her skin...

"I'm not saying yes," she said finally. "But I'm not saying no either. I'll think about it."

"That's all I'm asking," Tom assured her, pulling her close again. "That you consider it. The decision is entirely yours."

Jess settled against him, her head on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. The conversation had taken an unexpected turn, opening possibilities she'd never seriously considered. But there was comfort in knowing that whatever she decided, Tom would support her, would still see her as the same person, would still love her regardless.

"You know I love you, right?" Tom murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "No matter what. Whether you decide to do this or not, whether we explore further or step back, that won't change."

"I know," Jess whispered. Despite the complications of recent weeks, despite the strange new territories they were exploring, her trust in Tom's love remained unshaken. "I love you too."

They lay together in comfortable silence, both processing the conversation, the implications, the potential paths forward. Eventually, Jess felt herself drifting toward

sleep, her body relaxed from their lovemaking, her mind quieted by Tom's reassurance.

On Tuesday afternoon, Jess stood in the walk-in closet, naked in front of the full-length mirror. Her reflection gazed back, lean, tanned, the product of disciplined gym sessions and yoga classes. She looked at the subtle definition of her obliques, the gentle curve where waist flared to hip, the long lines of thighs honed through countless squats and lunges. She turned, studying her backside critically. The firm roundness of her ass showed no dimpling, testament to her consistent commitment to fitness.

At twenty-seven, her body reflected the dual advantages of genetics and dedicated effort. She was one of those women blessed with a naturally athletic frame, but maintaining it required work, work she'd embraced as routine.

"A body worth showing off," she murmured, echoing Brandon's frequent, obnoxious compliments.

The white bikini lay on the dressing table beside her, impossibly small scraps of fabric connected by delicate strings. Tom had bought it for her years ago, for a weekend in Cabo where the beaches were private enough, exclusive enough, that wearing something so revealing wouldn't invite unwanted attention. Even then, it had taken considerable coaxing for her to wear it, and only on their hotel balcony, never on the actual beach.

But today she was wearing it again for Bob and possibly taking it off for him.

The thought sent a complex rush of emotions through her body, excitement, apprehension, guilt, curiosity, each feeling a distinct note in the conflicting symphony playing in her mind.

She picked up the top, sliding her arms through it and fastening it behind her back. The thin material barely contained her breasts, the fabric straining slightly against their weight. She adjusted it, ensuring maximum coverage while acknowledging that "maximum" in this case still revealed more than it concealed.

Last night's conversation with Tom replayed in her head as she worked the triangular pieces into position.

"You should get naked for Bob," he'd said, as he moved inside her. Not a suggestion but a directive, spoken with conviction. And later, after they'd finished, he'd confirmed it wasn't just heat of the moment dirty talk. "I wasn't joking. About tomorrow. About getting naked for Bob. I want you to do it."

Jess slipped into the bikini bottoms, pulling the strings high on her hips to elongate her legs. The back was little more than a thong, the front a small triangle that barely covered her pubic mound. She'd waxed yesterday in preparation for her Savannah trip, leaving herself completely bare beneath the thin fabric.

She turned again, examining herself from multiple angles. The white material contrasted sharply with her tan, making her skin appear even more golden. With the high-cut bottoms and the push-up effect of the top, she looked like she'd just stepped out of a high fashion swimwear catalog.

"This is insane," she told her reflection.

She reached for her phone, opening her text messages to Tom. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. What would she even say? 'Hey, just checking if you really want me to strip naked for our tenant?' The absurdity of the question made her set the phone back down. She already knew the answer. Tom had made his position abundantly clear. The decision now rested with her alone.

Jess moved to the bed, sitting on its edge. In less than twelve hours, she'd be on a plane to Savannah. This would be her last interaction with Bob before leaving, creating a natural "now or never" urgency that increased the stakes. Whatever boundary she chose to maintain or cross today would set the tone for what might follow when she returned.

She thought of the first time she and Tom had seriously discussed this topic, when he'd confessed his fantasy of her being with other men. The revelation had shocked her, then intrigued her, then awakened something she hadn't fully acknowledged in herself, a desire to be seen, admired, desired by more than just her husband.

And then there was the phone call. The one where she'd fabricated a story about going up to Chris Webb's hotel room, about him kissing her, about nearly staying the night. Tom hadn't reacted with anger or jealousy. Instead, he'd become aroused, had stroked himself as she spun out the details of an encounter that never happened.

Jess closed her eyes, remembering their conversation at Vesper, when they'd established their rules.

"I need to state upfront that I'm not interested in having sex with anyone else," she'd told him firmly. "I'm open to pushing some boundaries, to exploring the fantasy to a certain degree, but I don't want you to keep pushing me toward that endpoint."

Tom had agreed readily. "Understood. No pressure toward sex with others."

But wasn't that exactly what was happening now? The progression from flirting to bikinis to massage to... nudity. Where did it end? Would the goalposts keep moving?

After naked massages, what would come next? Bob's hands between her legs? His mouth on her breasts? Or perhaps what Tom had been fixated on last night, her mouth on Bob's cock?

She stood, too restless to remain seated. Their four rules echoed in her mind, a framework they'd built together to navigate these uncharted waters.

Communication. Nothing happens without prior discussion and mutual agreement. Full disclosure about all interactions.

They'd discussed it. Tom had made his position clear. If she chose to get naked for Bob, she would tell Tom everything afterward, holding nothing back.

Veto power. Either of us can stop anything immediately, no questions asked.

That power remained hers. If at any point during the interaction with Bob she felt uncomfortable, she could stop it. Put her cover-up back on. Leave.

Privacy. This stays completely private between us. No sharing with friends, no matter how close.

She'd maintained that boundary, despite Madi's persistent questions. Madi knew about Tom's fantasies but nothing about the specifics, nothing about Bob.

Emotional boundaries. No dating, no separate emotional relationships, no romantic connections outside our marriage.

This was the clearest line. What happened with Bob would be physical, not emotional. An exploration of boundaries, of desire, of this aspect of herself she'd suppressed for so long. Not a relationship. Not a romance. Just... experience.

Jess paced the room, her thoughts colliding and contradicting. On one level, the idea of stripping naked for Bob, a man nearly twice her age, a man who lived in their home, seemed absurd, inappropriate, reckless. On another, there was an undeniable thrill in it, a reclaiming of the exhibitionist tendencies she'd discovered during her modeling days, a kind of freedom in pushing against conventional boundaries.

But was it truly freedom if Tom was encouraging it? If her choice was shaped by external desires rather than internal ones?

Yet wasn't that oversimplifying? She did feel excitement at the thought of Bob seeing her naked, at the power such a revelation would give her. The thrill of being truly seen, completely exposed, yet remaining in control. Of knowing the effect she would have on him while deciding exactly how far the interaction would go.

Getting naked would be crossing a line, yes, but was it such a dramatic leap from where they already were? Bob had seen her in progressively smaller bikinis. Had

applied sunscreen to nearly every inch of her skin, including her ass. Had massaged her feet with such intimate attention that she'd nearly fallen asleep under his surprisingly gentle touch.

He'd been respectful throughout, never overstepping, never assuming. Even when she'd asked him to apply sunscreen to her ass, he'd hesitated, given her an opportunity to reconsider, proceeded with professional detachment despite the obvious effect it had on him physically.

She trusted him to respect her boundaries. She trusted herself to maintain them.

The question remained, what did she truly want? Not what Tom wanted. Not what Bob hoped for. What did Jess Marshall, beneath the layers of expectations and obligations and taboos, actually desire?

The answer came with surprising clarity. She wanted to explore this edge, to push against this boundary, to reclaim a part of herself she'd buried in pursuit of professional respect and conventional propriety. The part that had thrilled at being photographed in soaked white cotton lingerie, at commanding attention with nothing but her physical presence, at knowing the effect she had on men without being diminished by it.

Yet she didn't want to make that decision right now, in the safety of her bedroom. She wanted to let the interaction with Bob unfold naturally. If the moment felt right, if her instincts guided her there, she would cross that boundary. If not, she wouldn't. The choice would be hers, neither Tom's fantasy nor Bob's desire, but her own authentic response.

That thought steadied her. This wasn't about fulfilling Tom's fantasy or satisfying Bob's barely concealed longing. It was about her, about reclaiming a part of herself she had buried, exploring dimensions of her identity she had suppressed.

Jess glanced at her watch. Nearly noon. Bob would likely be in the yard by now, tending to the garden as he did most afternoons. She had a redeye flight to catch that evening, last-minute preparations to complete, a team to coordinate with. This was her last chance before Savannah to explore this particular boundary.

She reached for her cover-up, a sheer white piece that did little to actually cover anything but provided a thin veil of modesty. She slipped it on, leaving it open in the front, then grabbed her sunglasses, a water bottle, and the sunscreen.

From the dressing table, she picked up her phone, checking for messages. Tom had texted.

Tom: Thinking of you. Have a good afternoon. Love you.

Simple. Supportive. No explicit mention of what they'd discussed last night, but the timing made the subtext clear. He was thinking about her, about the decision she faced.

Jess typed a quick reply.

Jess: Love you too. Will call you later to let you know how the day went.

She set the phone aside, collecting her things. One last glance in the mirror confirmed what she already knew. She looked incredible, her body showcased to its best advantage in the white bikini.

Whatever she decided, whether to maintain this particular boundary or cross it, she would own the choice. She would be the one in control.

Jess moved through the bedroom and into the hallway, her steps lighter now that she'd settled into her decision, to decide in the moment, to follow her instincts, to reclaim her agency in this exploration.

In the kitchen, she moved to the sliding glass door that led to the balcony and stopped in front of it.

Jess took a deep breath, steadying herself, centering her thoughts. Then she slid the door open and stepped onto the balcony, the warm Austin air enveloping her immediately. The stairs led down to the backyard, to the pool, to Bob, to a choice she would make on her own terms, guided by her own desires rather than external expectations.

With her decision clear, to let the moment guide her, Jess began her descent to the yard below.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 12

Tom stared blankly at his monitor, the information on the spreadsheet barely registering. The clock in the corner of his screen read 12:23 PM. He'd just texted Jess and received her reply, and now his imagination was running wild with what might be happening at home.

Right now, this very moment, Jess might be stepping onto their balcony in that white bikini. She might be descending the stairs to the yard where Bob waited. Tom's knee bounced rapidly beneath his desk, a physical manifestation of the nervous energy coursing through him.

Would she do it? Would she actually get naked for Bob? The possibility sent a jolt through Tom's body that was equal parts arousal and anxiety.

He tried to focus on the spreadsheet, on the data points that would determine the success of the Meridian implementation, but his mind kept drifting back to last night, to Jess in that red lingerie set, to her mouth on his cock while they discussed Bob.

"You should get naked for Bob," he'd said, as he moved inside her. Not a suggestion but a directive, spoken with conviction. And later, after they'd finished, he'd confirmed it wasn't just heat of the moment dirty talk. "I wasn't joking. About tomorrow. About getting naked for Bob. I want you to do it."

Christ. Had he actually said those words? Had he actually encouraged his wife to strip naked for another man? The memory felt almost dreamlike, disconnected from reality.

But it had been real. And now Jess was at home, possibly contemplating that very suggestion. And he was here at work, unable to witness what might unfold.

Tom clicked aimlessly through tabs on his browser, pretending to work while his mind spun scenarios. What if she did it? What if, right now, Jess was revealing that white bikini to Bob? What if she was untying the strings, letting the tiny scraps of fabric fall away while Bob watched, his massive hands clenching with the effort not to reach for her?

Tom's cock stirred in his slacks at the images his mind conjured. Jess stretched out naked on a lounger, her golden skin on display, her nipples hard under Bob's gaze. Bob's hands on her bare back, moving lower, cupping the perfect roundness of her ass with no barrier between his palms and her smooth skin.

"Would you let him touch your pussy?" Tom had asked her last night. "If he asked?"

"Maybe," Jess had whispered. "If you wanted me to."

"I do. I want you to."

And he had meant it, in that moment at least. The heat of arousal, the forbidden nature of the fantasy, had overwhelmed any misgivings. The image of Bob's fingers slipping between Jess's thighs, finding her wet and ready, had nearly made Tom come on the spot.

But it was Jess's next words that had truly undone him.

"What about his cock? Do you want to suck it, Jess? Do you want to take Bob's huge cock in your mouth?"

"Yes. I'd love to. I bet he tastes different from you. Stronger, maybe."

The memory made Tom shift in his chair, his cock now fully hard. He'd pulled out, desperate for her mouth. "Show me. Show me how you'd suck his cock."

And she had. She'd taken him deep, hollowing her cheeks, looking up with enthusiasm that seemed entirely genuine. "Like this. I'd make it so good for him."

Then she'd told him "I'd swallow every drop. Just like I do for you."

Tom grabbed his water bottle, taking a long drink. His office suddenly felt too warm, too confined. He checked the time again. 12:27 PM. Four minutes had passed, yet it felt like hours.

What was happening at home? Had Jess made her decision?

The uncertainty was maddening. Tom considered texting her again but immediately dismissed the idea. She would tell him later, as promised. Interrupting now would only intrude on whatever was unfolding, might even disrupt the natural progression of events.

Tom's thoughts circled back to Bob, to their conversations over the past weeks. The first had been the most shocking, Bob confronting him about watching through the window that first night.

Tom had tried to deny it, but Bob had cut through his pretense. "Don't insult my intelligence. We both know what happened. I saw you that night, just like you saw me."

The memory still made Tom's stomach clench with shame. Being caught watching another man masturbate to photos of his wife. It should have been mortifying, should have been the end of any possibility of a normal tenant-landlord relationship.

But Bob hadn't reacted with disgust or anger. Hadn't threatened to tell Jess or demanded money for his silence. Instead, he'd offered understanding, even guidance.

"The fantasies you're having, Tom? They're normal. More common than you'd think. But they need to be handled carefully. With respect for the marriage, with clear boundaries."

Bob had positioned himself not as a blackmailer but as a mentor, someone who'd been down this road before and understood its pitfalls. He'd shared his experience with Sarah, his first wife, how their exploration had eventually led to the dissolution of his marriage.

The warning had seemed genuine, the concern real. And in the weeks since, Bob had proven himself to be respectful, patient, never pushing beyond what Tom indicated he was comfortable with. Even in their most recent conversation, when Bob had revealed Jess wanted to give him a blowjob, he'd suggested a more measured approach.

"She wants to give a blowjob," Bob had confirmed. "But this would be a better step to take. Safer."

A naked massage instead of jumping straight to oral sex. A natural progression, a controlled escalation. Bob had been thinking about their safety, about preventing the same mistakes that had cost him his marriage to Sarah.

And wasn't that exactly what Tom wanted? Someone who understood these complex desires, who could help navigate them without the risks of anonymous nightclub encounters?

Everyone would get what they wanted if Tom accepted Bob's offer of guidance. Tom would see his wife with another man, fulfilling a fantasy he'd only recently acknowledged even to himself. Bob would get Jess, an incredibly beautiful woman decades younger than himself showing him physical affection. And Jess would get to explore her sexuality with a man who respected her boundaries, who gave her advice about handling men like Webb, who made her feel safe.

She wouldn't leave Tom for Bob. That much was certain. Bob was old enough to be her father, a retired tradesman living in their basement apartment. Tom was her husband, her partner, the man she'd built a life with. What happened with Bob would be physical, not emotional. A safe exploration rather than a threat to their marriage.

Tom's phone buzzed, and he startled, half expecting it to be Jess. But it was a meeting reminder for the afternoon Meridian status call. Reality intruded, the responsibilities of his job momentarily overshadowing the sexual drama unfolding at home.

He needed to focus, needed to get through the workday without tipping off his colleagues to the turmoil in his mind. The promotion to Senior Consultant was nearly

within reach. Just a few more weeks of the Meridian implementation, and he'd secure the salary increase they desperately needed after his cryptocurrency disaster.

A few more weeks of intense work, and then they could start planning for the family Jess wanted. The family he wanted too, if he was honest with himself. Their future together, secure and fulfilling, with this exploration of boundaries as just one aspect of their multifaceted relationship.

The thought steadied him somewhat, providing perspective. What was happening with Bob was important, yes, but it wasn't the entirety of their lives. It was a chapter, not the whole story.

Tom took a deep breath, trying to center himself. Regardless of what decision Jess made today, they would handle it together. If she chose to cross that boundary, to let Bob see her naked, to let him touch her bare skin, they would process it together. If she decided to maintain that particular line, that would be okay too.

But the uncertainty remained unbearable. Tom checked the time again. 12:33 PM. Still probably an hour before he'd know what had happened, before Jess would call him as promised.

Tom couldn't sit here any longer, knee bouncing, mind spinning scenarios while pretending to work. He needed a distraction, something to occupy his thoughts beyond the endless loop of Jess and Bob and the boundaries they might be crossing at this very moment.

He stood abruptly, straightening his tie and smoothing his slacks, hoping the evidence of his arousal wasn't obvious. A few cubicles down, Miles was typing furiously at his keyboard, his forehead creased in concentration.

"Hey," Tom said, approaching Miles's desk. "Lunch?"

Miles glanced up, seeming surprised by the interruption. "What? Oh, yeah, I guess it is that time."

"That burger joint on Sixth?" Tom suggested. "I need to get out of the office for a bit."

"Sure," Miles agreed, saving whatever he'd been working on and standing. "Give me two minutes to wrap this up."

While Miles finished his task, Tom returned to his desk and gathered his wallet and phone. He checked the screen one more time, hoping for a message from Jess, but there was nothing new.

Bob Caldwell savored the condensation dripping down his beer bottle, the cold glass a welcome relief against his palm in the afternoon heat. He'd positioned himself in his preferred chair, angled toward the pool but still benefiting from the patio umbrella's shade. The white linen short-sleeve shirt he'd chosen, one of his better ones, not the usual work-stained tees he wore for gardening, felt almost too formal for poolside lounging, but today wasn't just any day. Today was the culmination of weeks of careful groundwork.

The jug of iced tea sat ready on the small table beside him, two glasses waiting. One for him, though he preferred his beer, and one for Jess. Princess. His princess, though she didn't know it yet. He'd prepared it just the way she liked, not too sweet, with that hint of fresh mint from the garden he'd planted.

Anticipation drummed beneath Bob's skin as he took another pull from his beer, the cold liquid doing little to cool the heat building inside him. Last night's surveillance had been particularly rewarding. The camera's angle might still frustrate him, but the audio had been crystal clear, each word from the Marshalls' bedroom reaching him as if he'd been right there with them.

"You should get naked for Bob," Tom had told Jess, just as Bob had suggested during their Saturday conversation. "I want you to do it."

Perfect. Fucking perfect. Tom had delivered the message exactly as instructed, planting the seed in Jess's mind while making it seem like his own idea.

Bob shifted in his seat, his blue shorts tightening as he remembered how Jess had responded, playing along, teasing about letting Bob see her naked while Tom fucked her. The fantasy talk had driven Tom wild, and Bob too, sitting below them, cock in hand, listening to every word.

He'd nearly blown his load early when their conversation took an unexpected turn, Tom's voice strained with arousal as he fucked his wife.

"Would you let him touch your pussy?" Tom had asked. "If he asked?"

And Jess had whispered back, "Maybe. If you wanted me to."

"I do. I want you to."

Bob had stroked himself faster then, his breathing matching the rhythm of their bed creaking above him. It was beyond his wildest expectations, Tom suggesting his wife let Bob touch her pussy, Jess responding with eager compliance. The line between fantasy and reality was blurring faster than Bob had dared hope.

But the real kicker, the moment that had sent Bob over the edge, was when Tom asked about his cock.

“What about his cock? Do you want to suck it, Jess? Do you want to take Bob’s huge cock in your mouth?”

Bob had almost laughed out loud at Tom using the exact scenario Bob had invented to manipulate him, the fabricated story about Jess wanting to give him blowjobs. The fantasy had come full circle, from Bob’s lie to Tom’s aroused suggestion.

And Jess’s response, “Yes. I’d love to. I bet he tastes different from you. Stronger, maybe.” had been enough to make Bob explode.

The wet sounds of her mouth on Tom’s cock had followed, her occasional gasps for air, Tom’s urging her to “take it deeper,” to show him “how deep you could take” Bob. Even now, remembering it sent fresh blood rushing to Bob’s groin. He adjusted himself in his chair, trying to maintain some semblance of composure despite the raging hard on threatening to burst through his shorts.

But had it been just fantasy talk? That was the question that had kept Bob on edge all morning, checking his watch, wondering when Jess would make her usual appearance by the pool. Today was her last chance before leaving for Savannah, her last opportunity to cross this particular boundary.

Would she do it? Would she actually get naked for him? The uncertainty was excruciating and exhilarating all at once.

Bob took another swig of his beer. He’d played it perfectly so far. When Tom had confronted him Saturday morning, Bob had feigned reluctance, had suggested taking things slow rather than rushing into oral sex, a fantasy he’d invented wholesale, claiming Jess had confided in him her desire to give him blowjobs.

“Instead of a blowjob, what if she got naked during our next massage?” he’d suggested to Tom, the words chosen carefully, planting the naked massage as the more reasonable, controlled option. “Still a big step, but one that gives her time to adjust instead of rushing into something sexual.”

And Tom, the fucking idiot, had actually agreed. Had actually gone upstairs and later told his wife to strip naked for another man, had asked her if she wanted to give that man a blowjob, had planted that seed in her head.

It wasn’t that Tom was stupid, exactly. Just vulnerable. And Bob had offered him a path, a twisted, manipulative path that served Bob’s needs far more than Tom’s, but a path nonetheless.

The sliding glass door opened upstairs, drawing Bob’s eyes to the balcony. His pulse jumped as Jess stepped out into the sunlight, the white bikini even more revealing than he’d remembered. The sheer cover-up she wore over it did little to conceal what

lay beneath. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, sunglasses perched on her head.

Bob quickly looked away, not wanting her to catch him staring too openly. Let her come to him. Let her make the first move. That had been his strategy from the beginning. Never push, never demand, just create opportunities and let her step into them of her own volition.

He listened to her footsteps on the wooden stairs, the light pad of her sandals against the deck.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" Jess called out when she'd reached the bottom of the steps.

Bob turned then, offering a casual smile as if he'd only just noticed her. "Can't complain," he replied, letting his eyes travel over her briefly before returning to her face. "Though it's about to get considerably more beautiful."

The compliment was enough to acknowledge attraction but still within the boundaries of their established banter. Jess' smile told him she wasn't offended by it.

"Charmer," she teased. "I see you've already made yourself comfortable."

"Someone has to test this chair to make sure it's safe for you," Bob replied, patting the arm of his seat. "Heavy responsibility, but I bear it."

Jess laughed, the sound light and unforced. It struck Bob again how comfortable they'd become with each other over these past weeks. The initial awkwardness of tenant and landlord had given way to something closer to friendship, or at least, that's what Jess would call it. Bob's goals were more complex, of course, but he'd cultivated that sense of easy companionship.

"I made tea," he added, gesturing to the pitcher. "Thought you might want some after your swim."

"You're spoiling me," Jess said, dropping her cover-up onto a lounger.

Bob allowed himself a moment to look, to appreciate the view before responding. "Figured you deserve a proper send off before your big trip."

"Speaking of which," Jess said, moving to the pool steps, "I'm almost ready. Just a few last-minute things to pack before the redeye tonight."

"Savannah awaits," Bob nodded.

"It does," Jess replied, stepping into the water.

Bob watched as she dove into the pool. The water seemed to both energize and relax her, providing a brief respite from whatever stresses occupied her mind.

Today, despite the impending trip, she seemed more relaxed than he'd expected. Perhaps the anticipation of professional challenges had overshadowed any anxiety about their poolside interaction. Or perhaps she'd already made her decision about getting naked for him.

The thought sent a fresh wave of blood to his groin, and Bob shifted in his seat, trying to maintain his casual posture despite his growing excitement. He watched her swim several laps, admiring the fluid movement of her arms, the occasional glimpse of long legs kicking beneath the surface.

When she finally emerged from the pool, water streaming down her body, the white bikini had become nearly transparent, sticking to her body in a way that left little to the imagination. Bob could see the outline of her nipples through the thin fabric, the slight indentation at the apex of her thighs where the material hugged her pussy.

He didn't bother hiding his appreciation this time, letting his gaze linger as she reached for a towel. Jess caught him looking and raised an eyebrow, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"See something interesting?" she asked, patting herself dry with unhurried movements.

"Just admiring the view," Bob replied honestly. "That white bikini is quite something."

"Tom picked it out," Jess said, wrapping the towel around her waist. "Years ago for a trip to Cabo." She settled into the chair beside him, reaching for the glass of tea he'd already poured. "Though I never wear it in public."

The casual mention of Tom might have been a gentle reminder of boundaries, but Bob chose to interpret it differently. She was establishing context, explaining the bikini's significance. And she'd added that she never wore it "in public," which meant this setting, with just him, wasn't considered public in her mind.

"Well, I'm honored to be among the select audience," Bob said, raising his beer bottle in a mock toast.

Jess took a sip of her tea, her expression appreciative. "Perfect as always," she commented. "You remembered the mint."

"Got to make use of that herb garden," Bob replied. "Otherwise those plants are just decorative, and they deserve better."

The conversation flowed easily, both of them settling into the comfortable rhythm they'd established over these poolside meetings. Bob asked about her final

preparations for Savannah, and Jess detailed the schedule she'd mapped out with her team, the site visits and stakeholder meetings that would fill her three days there.

"You nervous about any of it?" Bob asked, though he already knew the answer. They'd discussed the Savannah project extensively over the past weeks, including her concerns about handling Chris Webb.

"Just the usual pre-project jitters," Jess replied with a small shrug. "Plus, you know, dealing with Webb."

Bob nodded, recognizing his cue. "You feeling confident about that part? Handling him?"

"Much more so after our talks," Jess said, offering him a grateful smile. "Your advice was actually really helpful. Keep it professional, maintain clear boundaries, never be alone with him outside of work contexts."

"Men like Webb are predictable," Bob repeated, echoing his earlier wisdom. "They're used to getting what they want, which makes them easy to manipulate if you understand their patterns."

"That's exactly it," Jess agreed, leaning forward slightly. "It's about maintaining control of the situation. I can't afford to alienate him professionally, but I also can't give him the wrong idea personally."

"You'll handle him fine," Bob assured her, meaning it. From what he'd observed, Jess was more than capable of managing someone like Webb. She had a natural poise, a confidence that didn't require constant validation. It was one of the qualities that had drawn him to her from the beginning.

They fell into a comfortable silence for a moment, Jess gazing out at the garden while Bob stole glances at her profile. God, she was beautiful. Not just physically, though that was undeniable, but in the way she carried herself, the quiet assurance that infused her movements.

"I should thank you," Jess said suddenly, turning back to him.

"For what?" Bob asked.

"For the advice, the conversations. It's been... nice, having someone to talk to during the day when I'm working from home."

The sincerity in her voice made something twist in Bob's chest, an uncomfortable sensation he couldn't immediately identify. Was it guilt? No, not exactly. More like a momentary recognition that Jess saw him as someone entirely different from who he

actually was. She saw the helpful tenant, the friendly ear, the unassuming older man with landscaping skills and life wisdom to share.

Not the manipulator who'd installed a camera in her bedroom. Not the man who'd listened to her most intimate moments with her husband. Not the schemer who'd planted seeds in Tom's mind, exploiting the cracks in their marriage for his own benefit.

The discomfort passed quickly, replaced by the familiar thrill of deception. This was part of the game, part of the long con. Her trust was just another tool, another stepping stone toward his ultimate goal.

"Happy to help," he said, matching her sincerity with his own carefully crafted version. "It gives me purpose, something to focus on. And the conversations have been a highlight for me too."

Jess smiled. She stretched, arms reaching overhead, causing her breasts to push against the confines of her bikini top. The movement wasn't deliberately provocative, just a natural reaction to sitting in one position too long, but Bob felt his body respond nonetheless.

"I was hoping for a massage before I leave," Jess said, dropping her arms. The casual way she made the request suggested it had become routine, expected even, despite the intimate nature of the interaction. "If you don't mind. My shoulders are tight from hunching over my laptop all morning."

"Of course," Bob replied, keeping his tone equally casual though his pulse had quickened at her words. He set his beer aside and rose from his chair. "Let me get the lotion."

He moved to the small outdoor cabinet where they kept pool supplies, retrieving the bottle of sunscreen they'd been using for these massage sessions. His mind raced with possibilities. Would she stop at letting him massage her shoulders and back? Or would she take it further? Would she actually get naked for him?

When he turned back, Jess had moved to the lounger and was adjusting it to a flat position. She glanced up at him, something playful yet challenging in her expression.

"Don't get any ideas," she warned, though her tone was light, teasing. "This is purely therapeutic."

Bob raised an eyebrow, playing along with the pretense they both maintained, that these massages were simply friendly favors, nothing more. "Of course, princess," he replied. "Strictly professional, just like always."

Jess settled onto the lounger, lying on her stomach. She adjusted herself, arms folded beneath her head, turning her face to the side so she could still speak to him. The white bikini stood out starkly against her tanned skin, the ties at her neck and back thin and delicate, looking almost fragile against the smooth expanse of her back.

Bob allowed himself a moment to take in the sight of her. From her damp blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, to the elegant curve of her neck, the smooth plane of her back, the dip of her waist, and finally the perfect roundness of her ass barely contained by the white bikini bottoms. Her long legs stretched out, toned and golden from the sun, ending in perfectly manicured toes.

This was what patience had earned him, the goddess Jessica Marshall on a lounger, waiting for his hands on her body. Bob savored the moment, burning it into his memory.

"Ready?" he asked.

Jess shifted slightly on the lounger, settling more comfortably into position. "Ready," she replied.

The first touch of Bob's hands against her skin drew a deep, involuntary sigh from Jess's lips. She hadn't realized just how knotted her shoulders had become from hunching over design plans all morning. His fingers found the tension immediately, as if her body held a map he'd committed to memory over their previous sessions.

"God," she breathed. "Right there."

"Figured you might be carrying some stress," Bob replied as his thumbs worked circles into the tissue. "Pre-trip jitters maybe."

The lotion warmed quickly between his palms and her skin, creating a slick barrier that allowed his fingers to glide with just the right amount of friction. He applied firm pressure directly below her neck, his thumbs digging into knots that made her wince and then relax as they surrendered beneath his skilled touch.

"Always so tense right here," Bob remarked. "Designer shoulders. All that time at the desk."

Jess felt the lotion seeping beneath her bikini straps, wetting the thin white fabric. "Occupational hazard," she replied, echoing one of his frequent phrases.

"So much for not getting any ideas," Bob teased as Jess let out an involuntary moan. "People might get the wrong impression hearing those sounds."

Jess smiled against the lounger. “If Tom were here, he’d just roll his eyes. He knows I’m vocal about everything. Food, massages, you name it.”

“A woman who expresses her appreciation. Nothing wrong with that.”

Bob’s hands moved to her shoulder blades, thumbs digging into the tissue on either side of her spine. The pressure was perfect. Firm enough to reach the deeper muscles but not so intense that it crossed into pain. Jess felt herself melting into the lounger, tension draining from her body with each stroke from his strong fingers.

“Did you always know how to do this?” she asked, voice slightly muffled against her folded arms. “Or did you learn for Sarah?”

“Bit of both,” Bob replied, working his way down her back. “I had the hands for it, according to her. Just needed to learn where to put them.”

“Lucky Sarah,” she murmured.

“For a while, anyway.” There was no bitterness in Bob’s voice, just the acknowledgment of a marriage that had run its course. “Turns out massages aren’t enough to sustain a relationship.”

Jess heard the subtle self-deprecation in his words. “I’m sure there was more to it than that.”

“Plenty more,” Bob agreed, his hands sliding down to her mid-back, fingers spreading wide to cover the expanse of skin above the bikini bottoms. “But that’s ancient history now.”

His thumbs pressed into the dimples at the base of her spine, and Jess had to bite back another moan. That spot had always been particularly sensitive, a direct line to her core that seemed to vibrate when touched just right. Bob’s thumbs circled there, finding exactly the right pressure without instruction.

“You sure you weren’t a massage therapist in another life?” Jess asked, trying to keep her voice light.

“Just observant,” Bob replied. “Paying attention to what works.”

His hands moved to her arms, strong fingers encircling her biceps before sliding down to her forearms, then her wrists. The enveloping touch reminded Jess of how large his hands were, how completely they wrapped around her slender limbs. There was something primal about the contrast, his weathered, work-roughened palms against her smooth skin, his breadth against her slenderness.

As his thumbs pressed into her palms, kneading the muscles there, Jess's mind drifted to the previous night. To slipping into that red lingerie for Tom, the hungry look in his eyes when she'd emerged from the bathroom, the passion that had followed.

She remembered the way they'd talked about Bob while they fucked.

"Maybe I'll let him see everything," she'd told Tom, playing into the fantasy he so clearly enjoyed. "Spread my legs and let him see how wet I get when he touches me."

And Tom had asked, his voice strained with arousal, "Would you let him touch your pussy?"

"Maybe," she'd replied. "If you wanted me to."

"I want you to," he'd confirmed.

Those words had driven Tom wild. And later, as she finished him with her mouth, the fantasy had escalated further.

"Do you want to take Bob's huge cock in your mouth?" Tom had asked.

"I'd love to," she'd said, caught up in the moment, in Tom's obvious arousal at the idea. "I bet he tastes different from you. Stronger, maybe."

She'd taken Tom deeper then, showing him exactly how she'd do it. "I'd make it so good for him."

The memory mingled with the present sensation of Bob's hands, now returning to her lower back, blurring the line between fantasy and reality in a way that made her pulse quicken. His fingers brushed the edge of her bikini bottoms, careful not to stray beneath the fabric despite how low they sat on her hips.

Bob's touch sent a ripple of heat through her core, mingling with the strange thrill of transgression that had been building all day. Here she was, stretched out on a lounger in her backyard, wearing nothing but a white bikini so small it left little to the imagination, while Bob's hands moved over her body with professional attention that somehow felt more intimate with each session.

And Tom wanted it, wanted her to cross this boundary they'd been approaching for weeks, wanted her naked under Bob's hands, completely exposed to their tenant's gaze while her husband sat miles away in his office, imagining what might be happening.

"You're quieter today," Bob observed, his voice pulling her back to the present moment. "Everything okay?"

Jess realized she'd been lost in her thoughts, the usual commentary she provided during these sessions absent as her mind wandered through memories of the previous night.

"Just thinking," she replied.

"About Savannah?" Bob's hands continued their steady work, now focusing on the tight muscles bracketing her spine.

"Among other things."

Bob's hands stilled momentarily before resuming their rhythm. "Webb?"

"No," Jess said quickly. "I feel prepared." She paused, considering her next words carefully. "It's something else entirely."

In truth, she was distracted, but not in the way Bob might assume. Her mind kept circled back to Tom's suggestion, to the idea of getting completely naked for this massage.

Was she really considering it? Stripping bare for Bob, letting him see and touch her naked body? The line they'd been edging toward for weeks would be definitively crossed. There would be no going back.

Yet there was something undeniably compelling about the idea. Not just because Tom wanted it, not just because it would excite him to hear about later, but because a part of her, a part she'd kept carefully contained for years, wanted it too.

The exhibitionist thrill she'd first discovered during her modeling days, the rush of being seen, truly seen, and admired for her beauty. She'd buried that aspect of herself as she'd pursued her design career, determined to be taken seriously for her mind rather than her body. But in these poolside sessions with Bob, that dormant part of her had begun to stir again, to reclaim space in her identity.

And wouldn't it be better to cross this boundary deliberately, consciously, rather than continuing this gradual, almost inevitable progression they'd been on for weeks? Better to make a clear choice than to find herself sliding across the line without having fully decided to do so?

The white bikini already revealed nearly everything. Bob had seen those details, had observed her body with obvious appreciation even while maintaining his respectful demeanor. Would removing the last barrier really change so much?

The decision crystallized in her mind, not a surrender to Tom's fantasy or Bob's obvious desire, but a reclaiming of something she'd denied herself for too long. The

freedom to be both, the respected professional and the confident sexual being, the devoted wife and the woman who enjoyed being admired. She would do it.

"Bob," she said, her voice steadier now as the decision solidified within her. "This bikini's barely covering anything anyway. Would it bother you if I just took it off? Might be more comfortable for both of us."

His hands paused on her lower back, the sudden stillness making her aware of how warm his palms were against her skin.

"Are you sure that's okay with you?" The caution in his voice was clear, a boundary check disguised as a simple question.

"Yes," Jess replied. The single syllable felt significant, a deliberate step across a threshold she'd been approaching for weeks.

"Could you help with the strings?" she asked, unable to reach the ties herself from her position on the lounger.

Bob's fingers moved to the thin straps that crossed her back, tugging gently to undo the simple bow. The pressure released immediately, the fabric loosening across her back. She felt him hesitate at the second tie behind her neck.

"This one too?" he asked.

"Please," Jess confirmed.

His fingers worked the knot. As the second tie came loose, the top fell away completely, leaving her back bare from neck to the low riding bikini bottoms.

The thrill of exposure sent a pulse of heat straight to her core. She was topless in her backyard, the thin barrier of fabric that maintained propriety now gone. But why stop there? The bottoms were barely more than a thong anyway, a thin triangle of white that had been riding up between her cheeks as she lay on the lounger.

"Might as well take these off too," Jess said, lifting her hips slightly to assist.

Bob's hands moved to the thin strings that tied at her hips, pausing again as if giving her a last chance to reconsider. When she didn't speak, he carefully untied both sides and began sliding the bottoms down her legs. His movements remained controlled, professional, despite what had to be a significant shift in his perception of their interaction.

Suddenly Jess was completely naked under the Austin sun. Her pulse raced at the realization, a mixture of vulnerability and power coursing through her veins. The warm air caressed her bare ass, sliding between her slightly parted thighs to touch places that had been covered in public since her skinny-dipping days in college.

“Just let me know if anything feels uncomfortable,” Bob said, his voice maintaining that careful neutrality despite the seismic shift that had just occurred.

The statement was clearly meant to reassure her, to establish that he wouldn’t take advantage of her nakedness. Jess appreciated the sentiment, even as she registered the slight roughness in his tone that betrayed his own reaction to her nudity.

“I know,” she replied. “I trust you.”

The words weren’t empty. Despite the game they seemed to be playing, Jess did trust Bob to respect her boundaries. He’d proven himself consistently over these weeks, never pushing, never assuming, always letting her set the pace of their interactions.

Bob’s hands resumed their work, thumbs pressing into the tight muscles now unobstructed by the bikini. It was the same professional attention as before, but Jess could feel the subtle difference in his touch. A heightened awareness, perhaps, or a slightly increased pressure.

His fingers kneaded her bare hips with firm, controlled pressure. Each stroke felt more intimate than the last, her naked body responding to his touch in ways she couldn’t fully control.

“You have amazing muscle tone,” Bob commented. “The yoga and gym work really shows.”

“Thanks,” Jess managed, the word slightly breathless. The combination of his skilled touch and her complete nudity was more intense than she’d anticipated. Heat pooled in her core as his thumbs pressed deeper into the dimples above her ass, sending jolts of sensation straight to her clit.

She was acutely aware of how exposed she was, how vulnerable. Her pussy was bare, visible if he glanced between her slightly parted thighs.

“Still doing okay?” Bob asked.

“Mmhmm,” Jess confirmed.

Bob’s hands moved fully to her ass now, large palms cupping the firm flesh with slow, deliberate squeezes.

As his hands worked, occasionally his fingers would part her cheeks slightly, and Jess knew with absolute certainty that he could see her most intimate places. Could see how wet she was getting, how her arousal was manifesting physically despite the supposed therapeutic nature of their interaction.

The thought should have embarrassed her, should have made her want to cover herself or end the massage. Instead, it sent another surge of heat through her core, a perverse excitement at being so exposed, so vulnerable, yet still in control.

"This okay?" Bob asked again.

And "Mmhmm," Jess managed again, the sound more breath than word. "You've got magic hands."

Bob chuckled, the sound warm and genuine. "Years of practice. Both the massage and knowing when to check in."

His hands moved lower, to the back of her thighs, fingers digging into the strong muscles with firm, circular motions.

The tension was exquisite torture. Each stroke brought his hands near her pussy without ever quite touching it. The restraint, the professionalism he maintained despite what had to be a powerful temptation, only heightened her awareness of the boundary they were dancing along.

Jess bit her lip as his thumbs worked the sensitive juncture where thigh met ass, mere inches from where heat pulsed between her legs. Her clit throbbed with unfulfilled desire, each near-miss of his fingers sending another wave of arousal through her.

"You really do spend a lot of time in the gym, don't you?" Bob commented, his fingers finding a particularly tight spot in her hamstring. "These muscles are impressively developed."

"Three times a week," Jess confirmed, grateful for the mundane conversation despite the extraordinary circumstances. "Plus yoga twice weekly."

"It shows," Bob said, the compliment straightforward rather than leering. "Solid foundation, well-balanced development."

Jess smiled against her arms. Leave it to Bob to find a way to compliment her fitness in terms more appropriate to architecture than human anatomy.

His hands moved down her legs, working each muscle group. Calves, ankles, and finally her feet, where his thumbs pressed into the arches with a pressure that made her groan aloud.

"Oh god," she breathed. "That's incredible."

"Pressure points," Bob explained, his thumb finding a particularly sensitive spot that seemed to release tension all the way up her leg. "Everything's connected. Feet tell the story of your whole body."

"What story are mine telling?" Jess asked, curious despite herself.

"That you stand a lot. Designing, I'd guess." His thumbs pressed deeper. "And you wear heels too often."

Jess laughed softly. "Guilty on all counts."

"No judgment," Bob assured her. "Just observation."

His hands worked her feet for several more minutes, thumbs pressing into points that kept sending waves of pleasure up her legs. The sensation was both relaxing and oddly arousing, as if her body couldn't quite distinguish between types of physical pleasure in its current state.

Eventually, his hands stilled, resting lightly on her ankles. "That should do it for the back," he said. "You're all loosened up."

Jess lay still for a moment, savoring the lingering sensations. Her naked body felt loose, liquid, muscles having surrendered to his skilled touch. But beneath the physical relaxation ran a current of unreleased tension, a pulsing need centered between her thighs that had nothing to do with massage therapy and everything to do with the exhibitionist thrill of being naked under his gaze.

Jess's heart rate accelerated again. This was another decision point, another threshold. She could thank him, reach for her discarded bikini, end the session here. Or...

"Would you mind doing my front too?" she asked. "Might as well finish the job."

There was a pause, long enough for Jess to register the significance of what she was asking.

"You sure about that, Jess?" Bob's voice carried a note of caution, a final check before crossing another line.

"Yes," Jess confirmed, her decision clear despite the flutter of nervous anticipation in her stomach. "I'd like that. Go ahead."

Before she could second-guess herself, Jess held her breath and pushed up from the lounger, rolling onto her back, adjusting herself on the flat surface before settling into position. The movement was deliberate, a statement of intent rather than a surrender.

She was grateful for her sunglasses, allowing her to observe Bob's reaction without being obvious about it. His eyes did a quick sweep of her body, taking in her full breasts, her already hardening nipples, the flat and toned plane of her stomach, and the completely bare mound between her legs. His expression remained neutral, but she noticed the slight flare of his nostrils, the momentary tightening of his jaw before he composed himself.

There was power in that, in knowing the effect her body had on him while remaining in control of the interaction. It sent another pulse of heat through her, settling between her thighs where she was getting wetter by the minute.

"I'll start at the top again," Bob said as he positioned himself beside the lounger. "Same pressure as before?"

"Maybe a little lighter," Jess suggested. "Front's more sensitive."

Bob nodded, pouring more sunscreen into his palm before placing his hands on her upper chest, just below her collarbones. His touch was indeed lighter here, fingers working her muscles carefully, staying well above her breasts.

Jess closed her eyes behind her sunglasses, surrendering to the sensation. There was something profoundly liberating about lying here, completely nude under the open sky, Bob's hands on her body. A freedom she hadn't experienced in years, perhaps since those days of her modeling career when she'd first discovered the thrill of being seen, truly seen, and admired.

"Try to relax," Bob instructed.

Jess made a conscious effort to release the tension she was holding, to let her body melt into the lounger. It was harder from this position, her awareness of her nudity making her more self-conscious than she'd been while lying on her stomach.

The vulnerability of being naked on her back was entirely different from being naked on her stomach. There was nowhere to hide, nothing to shield her most intimate parts from his view. The knowledge that he could see everything, her breasts, her nipples, her bare pussy, sent continuous pulses of heat through her core.

"That's better," Bob encouraged as she exhaled slowly. "Just let gravity do the work."

His hands moved lower, tracing her sternum between her breasts without touching them directly. The restraint was both impressive and frustrating.

"Your skin takes the lotion well," Bob commented, his voice impressively steady. "No greasy residue. Must be all the moisturizing."

The mundane observation in such an extraordinary situation almost made Jess laugh. Here she was, completely naked, exposed to his gaze, and he was commenting on her skin's absorption properties as if this were the most normal massage in the world.

"Good genes, I think," she replied, playing along with the pretense of normalcy. "My mom has amazing skin too."

His hands moved to her abdomen, fingers splaying across her stomach with light, circular motions. The touch was different here, more of a gentle stroke than the deeper

pressure he'd used on her back. His thumbs traced the subtle definition of her obliques, following the natural lines of her body down toward her hips but stopping well short of her mound.

The restraint was both frustrating and exciting. Jess could feel herself getting wetter, her body responding to the careful touch and the forbidden nature of the situation. She shifted slightly on the lounger, a small adjustment that was part discomfort, part invitation.

"Still comfortable?" Bob asked, correctly interpreting her movement as potential unease.

"Very," Jess assured him. "Your hands feel amazing."

As Bob's hands worked her abdomen, Jess became aware of a new development. Looking through her sunglasses, she could see a significant outline of an erection in Bob's shorts, straining against the fabric in a way that was impossible to miss.

The sight sent another jolt of arousal through her. Seeing such clear evidence of his desire, even as he maintained his professional demeanor, was powerfully validating. She'd known he was attracted to her of course, the weekly pool sessions, the glances, the careful touches that never quite crossed the line, but seeing such undeniable proof was different.

"Careful with that thing, Bob," she teased lightly, nodding toward his obvious arousal. "You might poke someone's eye out."

Bob chuckled, the sound surprisingly genuine despite his embarrassment. "Occupational hazard when massaging beautiful women, I guess," he replied with a sheepish smile. "Sorry about that."

The apology seemed sincere, an acknowledgment that this wasn't supposed to be sexual, at least not explicitly. It reinforced the strange dance they were performing, her naked body under his hands, his obvious arousal, yet both maintaining the pretense that this was just a slightly more intimate version of their usual massage routine.

"No need to apologize," Jess said, keeping her tone light. "I'd be more offended if there was no reaction at all."

Bob laughed, the tension breaking slightly. "Well, I'm only human, after all."

His hands moved to her sides, tracing the curve of her waist. The touch sent small shivers through her body, the sensitivity of her skin heightened by her arousal.

"Cold?" Bob asked, noticing her reaction.

"No," Jess admitted. "Just... responsive."

Bob nodded, not commenting further as his hands continued their work. There was something intimate about the admission, about acknowledging that her body was reacting to his touch beyond simple relaxation.

Jess's mind drifted again to the previous night, to Tom's arousal as they'd discussed these very possibilities. "Do you want to take Bob's huge cock in your mouth?" he'd asked.

She was acutely aware of how wet she was now, how her arousal must be visible to Bob from his position. The thought was both mortifying and thrilling, the exposure feeding into the exhibitionist fantasy she'd been nursing since these poolside sessions began.

Bob's hands moved to her thighs, starting at her knees and working upward with firm, steady pressure. His thumbs traced the inner seam of her quadriceps, coming tantalizingly close to her pussy but never quite reaching it.

The restraint was maddening. Part of Jess wanted him to cross that final line, to slide those capable fingers between her thighs and touch her where she was aching to be touched. But the larger part, the part that understood exactly what they were doing and what it meant, appreciated the boundaries he was maintaining.

This wasn't about sex, not directly. It was about exposure, about vulnerability, about the power dynamics of being seen and desired while remaining in control. If his hands moved between her legs, if this became explicitly sexual, the delicate balance they'd achieved would be shattered.

"You've gone quiet again," Bob observed, his hands continuing their steady work on her thighs.

"Just enjoying the sensation," Jess replied, the statement true but incomplete. "You really are remarkably good at this."

"Years of practice," Bob repeated. "Plus, good material to work with."

The compliment, delivered casually, still made Jess smile. "Charmer."

"Just honest," Bob countered, hands moving to her calves.

As he worked the muscles there, Jess realized she was approaching a point of decision. The massage was nearing its natural conclusion, her lower legs being the last area to address unless...

Her breasts had been carefully avoided so far, a final boundary in a session that had already crossed so many. But hadn't that been the pattern of these interactions from

the beginning? Each week pushing slightly further, each session a little more intimate than the last?

Bob finished with her calves and moved to her feet, repeating the pressure point work he'd done earlier. The sensation was just as pleasurable from this angle.

"That feels incredible," Jess murmured as his thumb pressed into a particularly sensitive spot in her arch.

"Told you everything's connected," Bob replied. "These points affect your whole system."

Jess merely hummed in agreement, too caught up in the sensation to form words. His hands addressed each foot with careful attention before finally releasing them.

"Well," he said, resting his hands on his thighs. "That should do it. Covered everything."

Jess arched an eyebrow, visible above her sunglasses. "Not quite everything," she pointed out, the statement deliberate, a challenge.

Bob's expression shifted, understanding dawning. "Wasn't sure if that was... appropriate."

The word choice was interesting, suggesting that everything they'd done so far, her stripping naked, his hands on her body, her witnessing his arousal, somehow still fell within the bounds of "appropriate." But her breasts, those were a line he wasn't sure he should cross.

"You're spoiling me, Bob," Jess said, the teasing note in her voice disguising her own uncertainty. "Might as well be thorough."

She watched his face carefully, seeing the moment he made his decision. Without further comment, he poured a small amount of sunscreen into his palm, rubbing his hands together to warm it before placing them lightly on her ribs, just below her breasts.

The touch was cautious, testing, giving her every opportunity to change her mind. When she didn't object, his hands moved higher, finally cupping the undersides of her breasts.

The sensation was electric, sending currents of pleasure radiating outward from the point of contact. Jess couldn't suppress a small gasp as his thumbs brushed the sides of her breasts, not quite touching her nipples but close enough to make them harden further in anticipation.

"Good pressure?" Bob asked.

“Perfect,” Jess managed, the word more breath than sound.

His hands moved in slow, circular motions, cupping and releasing her breasts with a rhythm that was both relaxing and arousing.

When his thumbs finally brushed across her nipples, Jess couldn’t hold back a soft moan. The touch was brief, seemingly unintentional, yet it sent a jolt of pleasure straight to her core.

“Sorry,” Bob murmured, though his hands didn’t move away. “Didn’t mean to...”

“It’s fine,” Jess assured him. “Part of the territory.”

Bob nodded, continuing his movements, hands cupping and releasing, fingers tracing the curve of each breast. His thumbs brushed her nipples again, and this time the contact seemed less accidental, a deliberate inclusion in the pattern of his touch.

Jess felt her body responding, her back arching slightly. The movement was instinctive, a physical expression of the pleasure building inside her.

“You’re gonna have to stop being so good at this,” she said, trying to keep her tone light despite the fire coursing through her veins, “or I’ll never leave this lounger.”

Bob chuckled, the sound warm and genuine. “High praise from someone with your eye for quality.”

His hands continued their work, the touch maintaining that balance between therapeutic and sensual. Never lingering too long in one place, never focusing too intently on her nipples, yet somehow managing to send pleasure through her body with each stroke.

“That should do it,” Bob said finally, his hands slowing their movements before lifting away entirely. “Covered everything now.”

The absence of his touch left Jess feeling strangely empty, the sudden lack of contact a jarring return to reality. She lay there for a moment, eyes closed behind her sunglasses, processing what had just happened.

She had stripped naked for Bob Caldwell. Had lain on a lounger in her backyard, completely exposed, while his hands moved over her body. Had let him touch her breasts, had moaned when his thumbs brushed her nipples. Had gotten wet, embarrassingly wet, from the experience.

And all of it had been her choice. Not for Tom, though he’d certainly enjoy hearing about it later. Not for Bob, though his appreciation had been evident in every careful touch. But for herself, for the woman who’d been buried beneath layers of professional ambition and marital stability for so long that she’d almost forgotten she existed.

"Thank you," Jess said. "That was exactly what I needed before this trip."

"Happy to help," Bob replied, his tone returning to the casual friendliness that characterized their usual interactions. "You were carrying a lot of tension. Should feel better now."

Jess sat up slowly. There was no point in false modesty now, no reason to suddenly act shy after everything they'd just shared. She stretched, arms reaching overhead, aware of how the position displayed her breasts but not particularly concerned about it.

"Much better," she agreed, lowering her arms. "You have a gift, Bob Caldwell."

Bob chuckled, passing her a clean towel from the stack near the lounger. "Just experience," he deflected. "And a willing subject."

Jess accepted the towel, wiping the excess sunscreen from her skin before wrapping it around her torso. The covering wasn't motivated by sudden shyness but practical consideration. Her skin was slick with lotion, and she needed to shower before her final packing.

"Well, I should head up," she said, gesturing toward the house. "Still have a few things to finish before the flight tonight."

Bob nodded, his expression neutral despite the significant boundary they'd just crossed. "Safe travels, then. Knock 'em dead in Savannah."

"I plan to," Jess replied, a confident smile finding its way to her lips. "Webb won't know what hit him."

"That's my girl," Bob said.

Jess gathered her discarded bikini, not bothering to put it back on. Instead, she tucked the pieces into the pocket of her cover-up, which she draped over one arm rather than wearing.

With a final nod, she turned and made her way toward the stairs, aware of Bob's eyes on her as she walked. Each stair step sent tremors through Jess's body, the movement accentuating the wetness between her thighs, her skin still tingling from Bob's touch. She slid the balcony door closed behind her, the air conditioning raising goosebumps on her exposed skin.

Jess dropped the towel and her useless bikini onto the kitchen counter. Naked again, she felt a strange freedom moving through her own home without clothes, a continuation of the boundary she'd just crossed in the backyard.

Instead of heading straight to the shower as planned, Jess found herself drawn to the bed. Her body buzzed with unresolved tension, the arousal that had built during the massage demanding release. She sprawled across the bed, her naked body against the cool sheets a delicious contrast to the memory of warm sunshine on her skin. Her nipples still tingled from Bob's touch, the ghost of his fingers lingering on her flesh.

Reaching for her phone, Jess typed a quick message to Tom.

Jess: It happened.

Three syllables that contained multitudes, that would send Tom's imagination into overdrive. She set the phone beside her, not waiting for his reply before sliding open the nightstand drawer. Her fingers found the smooth silicone of her favorite dildo, the one Tom had bought her for those nights when work kept him late at the office. Seven inches of curved blue silicone, crafted to hit her g-spot with each thrust.

Her phone buzzed immediately, Tom's response popping up on screen.

Tom: What happened? Did you actually get naked for him?

The urgency in his message was obvious, his excitement palpable even through text. But Jess was already lost in her own need, the dildo now in her hand, her body demanding attention more pressing than Tom's curiosity.

She ran her free hand down her body, tracing the path Bob's fingers had taken. Over her collarbones, between her breasts, across her stomach, lingering at the places where his touch had been most electric. Her skin felt hypersensitive, every nerve ending alive and demanding attention.

Jess spread her legs wider, knees falling open, exposing herself to the empty room. She teased herself first, trailing the dildo's smooth head along her inner thighs, circling closer to where she needed it most without quite making contact. The anticipation heightened her arousal, her hips lifting slightly, seeking more direct stimulation.

Finally, she ran the tip of the dildo through her folds, collecting the wetness there. No need for lube. The massage had left her soaking, her arousal evident in the slickness coating her inner thighs. She circled the toy around her entrance, teasing herself further, imagining Bob's eyes on her as she performed this private act.

"Would you like to watch this, Bob?" she whispered to the empty room, the forbidden thought sending another pulse of heat through her core. "See what your massage did to me?"

The memory of Bob's hands on her body, the careful attention to her breasts, the restrained way he'd avoided crossing that final boundary despite her obvious arousal, had created a need that couldn't be ignored. She wondered if he'd gone back to his

apartment to take care of his own obvious arousal, if he was stroking himself right now thinking about her naked body beneath his hands.

Jess pressed the head of the dildo against her entrance, circling it in her wetness, building the tension with patience. Then she pushed forward, the toy sliding inside with almost embarrassing ease, her body accepting it greedily. A moan escaped her lips as she buried it to the hilt, the fullness exactly what she craved.

"Fuck," she breathed, holding it deep inside her, feeling her inner walls pulse around the intrusion.

Her phone buzzed again beside her, twice in quick succession. Tom's eagerness was evident, but Jess's focus had narrowed to the sensations rippling through her body.

She established a rhythm, sliding the dildo out almost completely before thrusting it back in. The curved head dragged against her front wall with each withdrawal, hitting that perfect spot that made her thighs tremble. She started slow, savoring each thrust, each sensation, before gradually increasing the pace.

"Yes," she hissed, her head falling back against the pillows, eyes closed as she lost herself in the feeling. "God, yes."

Each stroke sent pleasure through her body, building a delicious tension that coiled tighter with each thrust. Her free hand moved to her breast, fingers pinching and rolling her nipple the way Bob's touch had hinted at but never fully delivered. She imagined his larger hands replacing hers, his rough palms grazing her sensitive nipples, his thumbs applying just the right pressure.

In her mind, she replayed the massage, the memory heightening her arousal. Bob's large hands on her skin, his thumbs pressing into tight muscles, finding pressure points she didn't know existed. The way he'd worked around her breasts until she'd given explicit permission, then the attention he'd paid them, never lingering too long, never taking liberties. Always the professional, even as his erection strained obviously against his shorts.

"Fuck," Jess breathed, her hips rising to meet each thrust of the dildo, driving it deeper inside her. The fantasy shifted, her mind conjuring what might have happened if she'd given different signals, if she'd spread her legs just a little wider, if she'd asked him to touch her where she was aching to be touched.

Would his fingers have slipped between her thighs? Would his thumb have circled her clit while those strong fingers worked inside her? Would he have been gentle, or would the dam of his restraint have finally broken, leaving him hungry and demanding?

The image sent a fresh surge of wetness around the dildo, her pussy clenching with increased urgency. She fucked herself faster, the wet sounds of the toy moving in and out of her filling the room.

Jess pulled the dildo out completely, admiring how it glistened with her arousal. She brought it to her face, inhaling her own musky scent before bringing it to her mouth. She closed her lips around it, tasting herself, the salty-sweet flavor of her own arousal adding another layer to her pleasure. The act felt deliciously dirty, a private moment of abandon.

She sucked it deeper, taking it to the back of her throat as she'd done with Tom countless times, imagining it was Bob's cock instead of silicone. Bob's cock was certainly large. Unquestionably larger than Tom's. The thought made her empty pussy aching to be filled again.

Jess worked the dildo with her mouth, her tongue swirling around the head, her cheeks hollowing as she sucked. With her free hand, she circled her clit, light teasing touches that kept her arousal simmering without pushing her over the edge.

Her phone buzzed again. Tom, desperate for details, for confirmation of his fantasy turned reality. The thought of telling him everything, of describing how she'd stripped completely naked for their tenant, how Bob's hands had touched every inch of her body including her breasts, how wet she'd gotten from the experience, sent another wave of heat through her core.

She released the dildo from her mouth with a pop, a thin strand of saliva connecting it to her lips for a moment before breaking. Without hesitation, she returned it to her pussy, pushing it deep inside while her other hand found her clit again. The toy seemed to slide even more easily now, slick with both her arousal and her saliva.

"Oh god," she moaned, her back arching off the bed. "Fuck, yes."

She established a faster rhythm now, her patience eroded by the building need. The dildo moved in and out, hitting exactly the right spots. Jess circled her clit with increasing pressure, the dual sensation driving her higher.

In her mind, the fantasy shifted again. Now she imagined Tom watching from a distance as Bob's hands moved over her naked body. Tom's eyes dark with that mixture of jealousy and arousal she'd come to recognize, his cock hard in his slacks as he witnessed another man touching his wife. Would Tom stroke himself as he watched? Would he direct Bob where to touch her, how to please her?

"Yes," she gasped, the fantasy feeding her arousal. "Watch him touch me, Tom."

That image, Tom watching, knowing, encouraging, pushed her closer to the edge. She increased the pace, fucking herself harder with the dildo while her fingers worked her clit. The pressure built exponentially, her thighs beginning to tremble, her breath coming in sharp gasps.

"Tom," she gasped, the name a confession and an anchor, a reminder that no matter how far she pushed these boundaries, no matter how much she enjoyed Bob's attention, it was Tom she came home to, Tom she truly wanted, Tom whose love and understanding made all of this possible. "Oh god, Tom."

Her orgasm built like a tidal wave, each thrust of the dildo, each circle of her fingers on her clit adding to its height and power. When it finally broke, she shattered completely, her body seizing in ecstasy as fierce spasms gripped her core. The release ripped through her nervous system, setting every nerve ending ablaze with pleasure.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Jess chanted, riding the sensation, her hips bucking against her hand as she prolonged the release for as long as possible. Her toes curled. Her back arched off the bed.

The intensity gradually subsided, leaving her trembling and gasping, the dildo still buried inside her. Her body pulsed around it, aftershocks of pleasure making her twitch occasionally. But instead of the sated exhaustion that usually followed such a powerful orgasm, Jess found herself still hungry, still needing more.

She withdrew the dildo carefully, her body still sensitive from the powerful release. The emptiness that followed wasn't what she wanted. She flipped onto her stomach, then pushed herself up onto her knees, her chest pressed against the mattress, ass raised high in the air. The position made her feel deliciously vulnerable, exposed in a way that echoed how she'd felt lying naked on the lounger under Bob's gaze.

"Is this what you'd want to see, Bob?" she whispered into the pillow, the forbidden thought sending another surge of arousal through her.

She reached back between her legs, finding her pussy still swollen and slick with need. Two fingers slipped inside easily, curling forward. Her thumb pressed against her clit, adding a counterpoint of pleasure to the internal stimulation.

In this position, Jess could better imagine it was someone else's hand between her legs. She could almost feel Bob standing behind her, his large frame looming over her vulnerable position. Would he be gentle, still maintaining that professional restraint? Or would seeing her like this, open and wanting, finally break his composure?

"Please," she moaned, though no one was there to hear. "Please touch me."

She added a third finger, stretching herself further, fucking back against her hand as the fantasy took stronger hold. In her mind, Bob's hands gripped her hips, positioning her exactly how he wanted her. She imagined him testing her readiness with his fingers before replacing them with his cock, pushing slowly into her willing body.

"Yes," she gasped, driving her fingers deeper, her thumb working faster circles on her clit. "Just like that. Fuck me."

The second orgasm approached faster than the first, her body already primed and sensitive. Her fingers moved frantically now, chasing the release with single-minded determination. Her thighs trembled, struggling to maintain the position as pleasure built in her core.

She thought about telling Tom later, describing in explicit detail how she'd fucked herself after the massage, how she'd imagined it was Bob behind her, inside her. The thought of Tom's reaction, his arousal at her confession, was the final push she needed.

The orgasm detonated through her system, her inner walls clamping down on her fingers. A guttural cry tore from her throat as electric pulses of ecstasy seized her body in waves of escalating intensity. Her vision blurred, spots of light dancing behind her closed eyelids as her consciousness narrowed to a single point of all-consuming pleasure.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," she chanted, collapsing fully onto the bed as the aftershocks rendered her limbs useless. She lay there, face pressed into the pillow, fingers still buried inside herself, feeling the rhythmic clenching slowly subside.

As clarity returned, Jess became aware of her phone buzzing again. She withdrew her fingers carefully, her body still quivering with aftershocks, and reached for her phone with her clean hand. Her legs felt boneless, her mind blissfully empty of everything except lingering pleasure. She took a deep breath and unlocked her phone.

Four messages from Tom, each more urgent than the last.

Tom: What happened? Did you actually get naked for him?

Tom: Jess? Did you really do it?

Tom: Please tell me what happened. I'm dying here.

Tom: Jess? Are you there?

She smiled, imagining him at his desk, trying to maintain a professional facade while internally combusting with curiosity and arousal. The power dynamic had shifted, with her holding the details he so desperately craved.

Jess: Sorry, was a bit... distracted. Yes, I did it. Full naked massage.

Tom's response came instantly.

Tom: Holy shit. Like completely naked? Did he touch you everywhere?

Jess considered how much to reveal via text. Better to save the full details for when they were together, when she could watch his face as she described each moment, each sensation.

Jess: Everywhere that matters. His hands are magic, Tom. But I'm not telling you the rest over text. Get home early if you want the full story.

Tom: I can't just leave in the middle of the day! Give me something more!

Jess grinned, enjoying the teasing.

Jess: Let's just say I'm very, very relaxed now.

Tom: Did he touch your breasts?

The direct question made Jess laugh. Tom's priorities were so predictable.

Jess: Yes. But that's all you're getting for now. I need to finish packing for Savannah. See you tonight.

Tom: You're killing me, Jess.

Jess: I know. Love you.

She set the phone down, the satisfaction of leaving him wanting more adding a layer of pleasure to her post-orgasmic glow. Jess stretched on the bed, her body loose and relaxed in a way that went beyond the physical release of orgasm. There was a psychological release too, a boundary crossed deliberately rather than accidentally, a choice made and owned without regret.

The clock on the nightstand reminded her that time was still moving forward. She needed to shower, to finish packing, to prepare for her trip. Reality reasserted itself, the everyday responsibilities that continued regardless of personal explorations or boundary crossings.

Jess rolled off the bed, taking the dildo with her to clean in the bathroom. Her legs felt slightly unsteady, the residual effect of her powerful orgasms. She caught a glimpse of herself in the bedroom mirror, her hair tousled, her skin flushed with lingering pleasure, her eyes bright with something that looked like satisfaction.

The woman in the mirror was familiar yet different, as if today's choice had revealed a version of herself that had been waiting to emerge. Not a replacement for the professional, ambitious interior designer or the loving, committed wife, but an

integration of those roles with something more primal, more honest about her desires and capabilities.

Jess smiled at her reflection, a private acknowledgment of this evolution, before turning toward the bathroom. There would be time later to process fully what had happened, what boundaries had been crossed, what it meant for her and for Tom. For now, the more immediate concerns of shower, packing, and preparing for Savannah took precedence.

But as she crossed the threshold into the bathroom, Jess knew with certainty that when she returned from her trip, things would continue to evolve. The exploration had begun long before today's naked massage, and it wouldn't end here. Whatever came next, she would face it with the same clarity and ownership that had guided her decision today, allowing herself to want what she wanted without guilt or second-guessing.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 13

Jess slipped the key card into the door of her room at the Gastonian. After hours of walking through every inch of the Weatherby Mansion, her feet throbbed in protest despite her sensible flats. She pushed the door open and was immediately enveloped by the cool air of her room.

"Finally," she muttered, dropping her leather portfolio on the antique writing desk.

Her room was exactly what she'd hoped for when booking the Gastonian. The historic inn had been meticulously restored to its period glory while offering modern luxuries. Her room featured soaring fourteen-foot ceilings, a crystal chandelier, and a magnificent four-poster bed draped in rich fabrics that wouldn't have looked out of place a century and a half ago.

Jess checked her watch. 5:03 PM. She had nearly an hour before her scheduled call with Tom. Plenty of time to decompress before Webb's stakeholder dinner at eight.

She slipped off her shoes first, groaning with pleasure as her bare feet sank into the plush area rug. Next came her blazer, which she hung carefully in the closet. She unbuttoned her blouse and unzipped her skirt, folding them neatly over a chair. Standing in just her underwear, she caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror. Despite the day's exertions, she looked good, skin glowing, posture strong. The regular gym sessions and yoga classes had kept her body toned and defined.

Her eyes drifted to the bathroom door, left slightly ajar from her rushed morning preparations. The claw-foot tub had caught her attention the moment she'd checked in at dawn, its deep porcelain basin promising luxurious soaking. She hadn't had time to enjoy it then, focused instead on a quick shower before meeting Annie and Sam in the lobby.

"That tub is calling my name," she decided.

She unhooked her bra, letting it fall to the floor, then slipped out of her panties. Naked, she padded into the bathroom, flicking on the vintage-inspired light fixtures that cast a warm glow over the white subway tile. The bathroom, like the bedroom, balanced historic charm with modern convenience.

Jess bent over the tub, turned the brass fixtures, and watched as water thundered into the basin. She adjusted the temperature until it was just shy of too hot, then straightened to survey the collection of bath products arranged on a small marble shelf. The Gastonian had provided handmade lavender bath salts in a glass jar. She

measured out a generous portion, scattering it under the rushing water and watching as they dissolved into fragrant swirls.

Steam rose from the surface, carrying the soothing scent of lavender through the bathroom. Jess gathered her blonde hair into a messy bun on top of her head, securing it with the elastic from her wrist. She checked her phone, setting an alarm for 5:45 PM to ensure she'd have time to prepare for her call with Tom, then placed it safely on the closed toilet lid.

When the tub was three-quarters full, she turned off the taps and tested the water with her fingers. Perfect temperature. She stepped into the bath, carefully lowering herself into the hot water inch by inch, her body adjusting to the heat. A long, appreciative moan escaped her lips as she settled fully into the tub, the water rising to just below her neck.

"Oh my god," she breathed, her muscles already beginning to unwind.

She leaned back against the sloped end of the tub, closing her eyes as the warmth enveloped her. For the first time since leaving Austin, she allowed herself to fully relax, to let the day's tension dissolve in the fragrant water.

With her body at ease, her mind began to drift, inevitably circling back to yesterday. To Tuesday, To Bob. To lying naked on the lounger while her tenant's large hands moved over her body.

Until this moment, she hadn't had time to properly process what had happened. Tuesday night had been a whirlwind of packing and frantic sex with Tom as she'd described the naked massage in detail. Then the rush to the airport, the redeye flight, and immediately into the day's intense schedule of site inspections.

Now, floating in this cocoon of hot water, Jess allowed herself to truly reflect on what crossing that boundary had meant.

Surprisingly, guilt was nowhere to be found in her emotional landscape. What had happened with Bob felt like a natural progression, almost inevitable given the path they'd been on since that conversation a month and a half ago when Tom first revealed his fantasy. The confession that other men wanting her, potentially even being with her, aroused him had initially shocked Jess. But in the weeks that followed, they'd talked about it extensively, set boundaries, even established rules. They'd tested the waters at Domino, engaged in increasingly explicit dirty talk, and gradually escalated the poolside encounters with Bob.

Getting naked had been the culmination of this careful buildup, each step feeling small enough at the time but collectively leading to a significant boundary crossing. And though Tom had certainly encouraged it, had even explicitly told her to do it, Jess

couldn't blame him or feel manipulated. The decision had ultimately been hers, made with a clear awareness of what she was doing.

The truth, which she'd barely admitted to herself until now, was that she'd wanted to do it. Wanted to feel Bob's hands on her bare skin. Wanted to see the effect her nudity had on him. Wanted to reclaim that part of herself she'd carefully packed away when she'd hung up her modeling portfolio and committed to her design career.

That's what Tuesday had really been about. Not just fulfilling Tom's fantasy, but reconnecting with an aspect of herself she'd been denying for years. The exhibitionist thrill, the power of being admired, of being desired, had awakened something dormant inside her.

Jess's hands drifted through the water, fingertips gliding across her slick skin. The memory of Bob's hands ignited a rush of arousal in her pussy. His touch had been professional yet intimate, careful never to cross the line into sexual contact despite her obvious arousal and his equally obvious erection.

She thought about the weeks of dirty talk with Tom, the increasingly explicit scenarios they'd conjured together.

"Would you let him touch your pussy?" Tom had asked. "If he asked?"

"Maybe," she'd whispered. "If you wanted me to."

"I do," Tom had urged. "I want you to."

And then, later, as she'd taken Tom deep in her mouth, "Do you want to suck Bob's huge cock?"

"Yes," she'd admitted, lost in the fantasy. "I'd love to. I bet he tastes different from you. Stronger, maybe."

Jess's fingers slid down her stomach, tracing the path Bob's hands had followed during the massage. Over her ribs, across her abdomen, lingering at the spots where his touch had been most electric. Her skin still seemed to hold the memory of his fingers, large and strong yet surprisingly gentle.

Her own touch drifted lower, fingers between her legs before finding her clit. She was already swollen, sensitive, her body responding to the memories flooding her mind.

Closing her eyes, she recalled how exposed she'd felt lying on her back, naked on the lounger. There had been something intoxicating about that power imbalance, her completely nude, him fully clothed yet clearly affected by her nudity.

"Fuck," she whispered, increasing the pressure on her clit.

Her other hand moved to her breast, thumb brushing across her nipple in the way Bob's had, seemingly accidentally at first but then more deliberately. The memory of his large hands cupping her breasts, his careful restraint despite his obvious desire, sent another spark of arousal through her.

Jess's fingers moved faster now, circles tightening around her clit as she replayed Tuesday's events. She'd been so aroused after the massage that she'd barely made it upstairs before grabbing her dildo, fucking herself to two powerful orgasms while imagining Bob's hands on her body, his cock inside her instead of silicone.

"God," she gasped, her hips rising slightly from the bottom of the tub.

The combination of the hot bath, the lingering tension from the workday, and the vivid memories created a perfect storm of arousal. Her fingers found a rhythm that matched her quickening breath, pressure building with each circle around her sensitive bud. Her other hand continued teasing her nipple, pinching and rolling the way she liked, the way Tom knew she liked.

In her mind, the scene shifted, fragments of reality mingling with fantasy. Bob’s cock, which she'd only glimpsed as an outline in his shorts, freed from its confines, large and thick as Tom had described during their dirty talk.

"Would you really suck his cock?" Tom's voice echoed in her memory. "Show me how you'd do it."

And she had. She'd taken Tom deep, hollowing her cheeks, demonstrating exactly how she would please Bob if given the opportunity. The memory, combined with her fingers pushed her higher.

"Yes," Jess breathed, fingers moving faster now, her hips rising to meet her hand. "God, yes."

Her mind shifted to Tuesday night, to Tom's hunger when she'd told him about the massage, about Bob's hands on her breasts, about how wet she'd gotten from the experience. Tom had been insatiable, taking her against the wall as soon as they'd made it to the bedroom, then again on the bed after she'd finished packing. He'd never been so raw, so primal, so completely lost in desire for her.

The thought of Tom's reaction, of how her experience with Bob had fueled his passion, added another layer to Jess's building pleasure. This wasn't just about her, or about Bob, but about how this exploration was reshaping her marriage, rekindling a fire that had begun to dim beneath the daily pressures of career ambitions and financial setbacks.

"Fuck," Jess gasped. "Oh fuck, yes."

Her orgasm continued to build, her focus narrowing to the sensations radiating from her fingers. Her back arched, water sloshing dangerously close to the tub's edge as her body tensed in anticipation. Then the release hit, powerful contractions pulsing through her, forcing a strangled cry from her lips that echoed off the bathroom tiles.

"Yes, yes, yes," she chanted, riding the sensation as long as possible, her fingers gradually slowing as sensitivity overtook pleasure.

As the last tremors subsided, Jess slumped back against the tub, breathing hard. Her body felt loose, muscles surrendering completely to post-orgasmic bliss. The combination of the hot water, the release of tension, and the day's exhaustion created a delicious lethargy that made her limbs feel heavy, her mind pleasantly fuzzy.

She floated in that hazy state, letting her thoughts drift without direction. Images flashed behind her closed eyelids. Bob's hands on her skin, Tom's eyes dark with arousal as she'd described the massage, the intricate crown molding of the Weatherby Mansion, Webb's approving nod when she'd suggested solutions to the restoration challenges.

Her alarm jolted her back to the present, the phone vibrating against the toilet lid with a buzzing rattle that seemed obscenely loud in the quiet bathroom. 5:45 PM already. She needed to get ready for her call with Tom.

With reluctance, Jess pushed herself upright, reaching for the drain stopper. The water began to gurgle away as she stood. She stepped carefully from the tub and wrapped herself in the plush hotel robe that hung on a brass hook nearby. She then twisted her hair free from its bun, letting it fall around her shoulders.

A quick glance in the mirror revealed flushed cheeks and bright eyes, evidence of both her soak and her self-pleasure. She looked relaxed, refreshed, ready for the evening ahead. She padded back into the bedroom, checking her phone again. 5:50 PM. Tom would call in ten minutes.

Jess moved to the closet, surveying her options for Webb's stakeholder dinner. She'd narrowed it down to two choices before leaving Austin, a navy suit with a silk blouse or a more conservative gray pantsuit. The navy was ultimately her choice, the cut perfectly tailored to showcase professional confidence while still acknowledging her feminine silhouette. She laid it on the bed alongside matching lingerie, ready for after her call with Tom.

At precisely 6 PM, her phone rang. Jess smiled, settling into one of the room's antique armchairs before answering.

"Hey you," she greeted.

"There's my design superstar," Tom's voice came through, warm. "How's Savannah treating you?"

"It's incredible, Tom," Jess replied, unable to keep the enthusiasm from her voice. "This hotel is amazing. You'd love it. it's like stepping back in time but with great water pressure."

Tom chuckled. "I've got about twenty minutes before my next meeting. Tell me everything."

"Well, the room is straight out of a period drama," Jess began, glancing around at the details that had initially captivated her. "Four-poster bed, antique furnishings, period-appropriate wallpaper that somehow works. There's even a crystal chandelier."

"Sounds gorgeous," Tom said. "Almost as gorgeous as who's staying there."

Jess smiled at the compliment. "And the bathroom has this amazing claw-foot tub that I just took full advantage of."

"I bet. How's the mansion?"

"Tom, it's design heaven," Jess said, her professional excitement bubbling through. "The place is neglected, for sure. Peeling wallpaper, water damage in a few spots, decades of questionable decorating choices layered on top of each other, but the bones are incredible."

"Your favorite kind of project," Tom observed.

"Exactly. We pulled up a corner of the carpet today, and guess what? Original pine flooring underneath. Needs refinishing, but it's intact. And the crown molding is some of the most intricate I've ever seen."

"Speaking of crown molding," Tom said, "didn't you mention there was damage to some of it? How's that looking?"

"It's exactly what they found during the preliminary assessment a few weeks ago," Jess confirmed. "Some sections are significantly damaged, and the local restoration experts are booked solid for months."

"That sounds like a problem."

"It would have been," Jess said, "except I mentioned it to Bob about a month ago. He gave me a contact, a restoration specialist. I called them this morning, and they can actually fit this project into their schedule."

"Seriously? That's huge."

"I know! Webb was impressed I could solve the problem so quickly," Jess said, a note of pride in her voice. "It's funny how things work out. Taking in Bob as a tenant created this convenient ripple effect in my professional life. His contacts, his advice about handling Webb, it's all coming together perfectly."

There was a brief pause on the line. "Speaking of Bob," Tom said, his voice dropping slightly. "Yesterday."

The single word held a wealth of meaning, immediately shifting the conversation's energy. Jess adjusted in her chair.

"Yeah," she said. "Yesterday."

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about it," Tom admitted. "You naked. Bob's hands on you."

"Me neither," Jess confessed. "I was just thinking about it in the bath, actually."

"God, Jess," Tom groaned. "I don't regret encouraging it, you know. I only wish I could have watched it happen, been like a fly on the wall."

"I don't regret it either," Jess said, surprising herself with how firmly she meant it. "It was... freeing, in a way I didn't expect."

"How so?"

"Remember that conversation we had about a month ago? When we talked about how I'd suppressed the modeling side of myself?"

"I remember," Tom confirmed.

"It was almost theoretical when we talked about it, like we were analyzing a character in a book or something," Jess continued. "But now, after Tuesday, I actually feel it. That confidence, that power. It's strange, I've always gotten male attention, and I'm not a narcissist, but I know I'm beautiful. I've been told it my whole life. I see how people treat me differently."

"You are beautiful," Tom agreed. "Stunning."

"But there's something different now. It's like I'm integrating different parts of myself, the ambitious professional and this other part that I've kept buried. The flirty part that enjoys being seen, being desired, but on my own terms."

"That's incredible, Jess," Tom said, his voice warm with genuine appreciation. "I'm excited to see where this can go."

Jess paused, the phrase catching her attention. "Where it can go?" she repeated. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know, honestly," Tom replied after a moment. "I just know that whatever it is, I feel connected to you in a way I haven't in a while. Not just sexually, though that's been mind-blowing, but emotionally. Like we're seeing each other again, not just going through the motions."

Jess made a mental note to revisit this with Tom when they had more time. There was something in his phrasing that suggested expectations or hopes she wasn't entirely clear on.

"What about you?" she asked, steering the conversation. "How's the Meridian implementation coming along?"

"It's actually wrapping up faster than expected," Tom said, relief evident in his voice. "The core implementation will be complete in about two weeks. Still need to stay on as an advisor for about three months while they attempt to run it themselves but the heavy lifting is nearly done."

"That's fantastic," Jess said. "You've been killing yourself over this project."

"It'll be worth it when Davis makes the Senior Consultant promotion official," Tom replied. "The salary bump alone will put us back on track after... you know."

The crypto disaster. The financial catastrophe that had reset their timeline for starting a family, that had forced them to take in a tenant to help cover expenses, that had ultimately led to their current exploration of boundaries and desires.

"I know," Jess said softly.

"But how was Webb today?" Tom redirected. "During the walkthrough, I mean."

"Completely professional," Jess assured him. "Focused entirely on the project, asking intelligent questions about structural considerations, budget implications, timeline concerns. Not a hint of anything inappropriate."

"Good," Tom said, then added with a slightly different tone, "though if he did flirt with you, or if someone else at the dinner tonight does, and you wanted to flirt back a little... that would be… kinda hot."

Jess laughed. "I'm a professional, Tom. This is a stakeholder dinner with the historical preservation committee and the mayor's office. Not exactly a flirting environment."

"I'm serious," Tom insisted. "If there's dancing or something, it might be fun for you. To see how it feels in a controlled environment."

"There's no dancing tonight," Jess clarified. "Just a formal dinner. But the cocktail party on Friday will definitely have drinks and dancing." She paused, then added, "I'll think about it."

"That's all I'm asking," Tom said. "Just think about it. If it feels right, go with it. If not, that's fine too."

A notification sound pinged through Tom's end of the call. "Shit," he said. "Ten-minute warning for my next meeting."

"And I need to finish my hair and makeup," Jess said, glancing at the clock.

"You'll knock 'em dead," Tom assured her. "Call tomorrow, same time?"

"Perfect," Jess agreed. "Don't work too late. And Tom?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you. You know that, right?"

"I know," Tom said, his voice soft with affection. "I love you too. More than ever."

"Talk tomorrow," Jess promised.

"Looking forward to it. Bye, Jess."

The call ended with a gentle beep. Jess sat for a moment, still wrapped in her robe, processing the conversation. Tom's obvious excitement about Tuesday wasn't surprising, but his comment about "seeing where this can go" lingered in her mind. It suggested a trajectory, a progression beyond what they'd already explored. The question was, what exactly did Tom envision? And did she want the same thing?

Jess stood, dropping her robe as she moved to the bathroom to finish her hair and makeup. She had a stakeholder dinner to prepare for, a career milestone to solidify. The exploration of boundaries with Tom, the evolving dynamic with Bob, the integration of her suppressed exhibitionist tendencies, all of that would still be waiting when she returned to Austin on Saturday.

For now, she was Jessica Marshall, lead interior designer on the Magnolia House project, and she had a room full of influential people to dazzle.

Tom reached for another handful of almonds from the snack bag in his desk drawer, eyes never leaving his computer screen as he scrolled through the final test data from the Meridian implementation. Numbers aligned perfectly. Metrics hit targets across every department. The troubleshooting flowchart he'd developed had eliminated the last of the critical system errors.

"Fuck," he muttered, a rare smile crossing his face. "It actually works."

For the second day in a row, Tom was making exceptional progress at work. The Meridian implementation, which had devoured countless late nights and early

mornings over the past months, was finally coming together. The data migration issues that had plagued the project were resolving, one by one, each conquered problem feeding his momentum toward the next.

There was an irony to this sudden burst of productivity. With Jess in Savannah, his mind remained firmly at work rather than wandering homeward, conjuring scenarios of her potential poolside encounters with Bob. Her Tuesday and Thursday work from home days had become a special kind of torture since the exploration of his fantasies had begun, his imagination constantly disrupting his concentration with visions of Jess in progressively smaller swimwear, Bob's hands on her body, boundaries being tested and crossed.

But with Jess in Savannah surrounded by architecture and design challenges rather than their tenant's attentive gaze, Tom's focus had crystallized. Yesterday had been his most productive day in weeks. Today was shaping up even better.

He checked the time: 4:52 PM. Almost time for his call with Jess. Tom saved his work, shut down unnecessary applications, and gathered his notes. They'd agreed on 5 PM Austin time for their call today, which gave him time to secure a conference room for privacy.

The small conference room at the end of the hall was unoccupied, as it typically was at this hour when most people were wrapping up for the day. Tom settled into one of the chairs and dialed Jess on his cell.

"Hey, you."

"There she is," Tom said. "How's day two of the Savannah adventure treating you?"

"Exhausting but incredible," Jess replied. "We spent all day in meetings with local craftsmen, going through material options, restoration techniques, color palettes. The level of expertise here is amazing. These people have been restoring historic buildings for generations."

"You sound like you're having the time of your life," Tom observed, hearing the genuine enthusiasm.

"I kind of am," Jess admitted. "The history here, Tom, it's just everywhere. Every building has a story. The craftsmen were showing me techniques that haven't changed in a century and a half!"

Tom leaned back in the chair, picturing her surrounded by architectural plans and material samples, completely in her element. "What's on the agenda tonight? Another stakeholder dinner?"

"No, tonight's actually free. Annie, Sam, and I are going to grab dinner at some local place they've been recommending. Supposedly has the best shrimp and grits in the South."

"I'm jealous," Tom said. "I'll be eating whatever sad leftovers are in our fridge."

"Order something nice," Jess suggested. "You've earned it with all the hours you've been putting in."

Tom made a noncommittal sound, knowing he'd probably end up with a protein bar at his desk as he worked late into the evening. "How was last night's dinner? You barely had time to text."

"It was at this incredible restaurant called Elizabeth on 37th," Jess said. "Set in this restored mansion from the 1900s. The food was unreal. Southern cuisine but elevated. I had this rack of lamb with peach glaze that practically melted in my mouth."

"Sounds fancy," Tom commented. "Webb pulling out all the stops?"

"He definitely was," Jess agreed. "The whole crew was there. Webb, the other investors, including Richard Harrington and James Chen, you remember them from the Skyline party?"

"The ones you overheard with Webb talking about..."

"Exactly," Jess confirmed. "Plus representatives from the city, the historical preservation committee, the general contractor, restoration specialists, project managers, even local craftsmen. Annie and Sam were there too, of course."

"How was it seeing Harrington and Chen again? After what you overheard at Skyline..."

Jess laughed, the sound bright. "It's funny, at the time I was so shocked and angry about it, but now it almost seems... I don't know, weirdly serendipitous?"

"How so?" Tom asked, intrigued by her perspective.

"Well, if I hadn't overheard them, I wouldn't have been so upset. If I hadn't been upset, you wouldn't have asked what was wrong. If you hadn't asked what was wrong, we wouldn't have had that conversation, and if we hadn't had that conversation..."

"No naked massages from our tenant," Tom finished.

"Exactly," Jess said. "It's strange how one awful moment can lead to something unexpectedly... transformative."

Transformative. Not just exciting or arousing, but something that had fundamentally changed how they saw themselves and each other.

"So did Richard invite you on his private jet?" Tom asked teasingly, remembering what Jess had overheard at the Skyline party. "Wasn't that part of the speculation?"

Jess's laugh traveled through the phone line. "No, thankfully he kept it professional. Though he did pull me aside to talk about consulting on his personal penthouse renovation."

"And Chen? Was he behaving himself?"

"And he cornered me to discuss his Houston project," Jess said. "He's excited about having me on board. It's starting soon after this Savannah project kicks off."

"Sounds like you're going to be busy," Tom observed. "Skyline wrapping up, Magnolia House beginning, Chen's Houston project also beginning, and Harrington's personal penthouse?"

"I'm not sure I can take that one," Jess admitted. "The timing might be too tight, and I don't want to overcommit. But it's flattering to be asked."

"I bet it is," Tom said. "But it seems like they all want you for more than just your design skills."

"Maybe," Jess acknowledged. "But if they do, they're hiding it well. It was all strictly professional last night."

"Did you flirt at all?" Tom asked.

"Tom," Jess sighed, though he could hear the smile in her voice. "I told you, it wasn't that kind of party. I was there representing the design team, surrounded by people three times my age from the historical preservation committee."

"Just asking," Tom said innocently. "What about tomorrow? Who’s going to be there?"

"Same core group as last night, plus media, the potential hotel management team, other investors, some select community members. It's a bigger deal, being held in the grand ballroom here at the Gastonian."

"The hotel you're staying at?" Tom clarified.

"Yeah."

Tom's mind conjured an image of Jess in that four-poster bed, but not alone. The thought of her bringing someone up to her room after the party sent a jolt of arousal and jealousy through him.

"Convenient," he commented, trying to sound casual. "Stumbling distance to bed after the party."

"Yeah," Jess agreed, missing or ignoring his implication. "No ridesharing required. Though I'm planning to be very professional, so minimal stumbling."

"And there's dancing?" Tom asked, echoing their conversation from yesterday. "If there's music and dancing... might be fun to see how it feels to let loose a bit."

"There you go again," Jess laughed. "Your mind's always in the gutter. But yes, there will be dancing. It's a proper party, not just a formal dinner like yesterday."

"And?" Tom prompted.

"And like I said, I'll think about it," Jess conceded. "If the opportunity comes up naturally, maybe I'll test those waters. But I'm not going in with that as my objective."

"Fair enough," Tom said. His mind was already spinning scenarios of Jess in some elegant dress, moving on a dance floor with one of the investors, their hands finding excuses to touch her.

"Anyway," Jess continued, "what about you? How's Meridian looking?"

"Better than expected," Tom replied. "So much done today. Fixed the critical errors."

"So glad to hear that!" Jess exclaimed. "It's all coming together, isn't it? Your promotion, my projects..."

"And us," Tom added. "We're good, right?"

"We're better than good," Jess assured him. "Tom, I've never felt closer to you."

The sincerity in her voice soothed him. "Same."

A notification dinged on his laptop, reminding him of the 5:30 PM meeting with the Meridian team. "I have to go. Team meeting. I have to do a little prep."

"No problem," Jess said.

"I might not be able to call tomorrow," Tom warned. "There's a big client meeting that could run late."

"That's okay," Jess replied. "I'll be busy with party prep anyway. We can text."

"Speaking of which," Tom said, "send me pictures tomorrow? Especially what you're wearing to the party."

"Planning to fantasize while I'm dancing with billionaire investors?" Jess teased.

"Maybe," Tom admitted, not bothering to deny it. "Is that so wrong?"

"Not at all," Jess said. "I'll send pictures. But don't stay too late at the office tonight, okay? You need rest too."

"I'll try," Tom promised, knowing even as he said it that he'd likely be at his desk until well after dark. "Miss you."

"Miss you too," Jess replied. "Love you."

"Love you more. Talk tomorrow."

Tom ended the call and stared at the phone for a moment, processing the conversation. Jess sounded good. Happy. Excited about her work, committed to their relationship, open to continuing the exploration they'd begun. He should feel completely reassured.

But something gnawed at him. The image of Jess dancing with someone at tomorrow's party. The proximity of her hotel room to the ballroom where the event would be held. The collection of wealthy, powerful men who had already openly speculated about what she might be like in bed.

The conference room door opened, startling Tom from his thoughts.

"There you are," Miles said. "Meeting's about to start. Davis is already in the main conference room."

"Coming," Tom replied, gathering his laptop and notes. He pushed the thoughts of Jess and the party to the back of his mind. Work first. Fantasies later.

Tom closed another ticket in the Meridian system, marking the fifth major issue he'd resolved since morning. Friday was shaping up to match the productivity of the past couple of days, his focus laser-sharp despite the looming specter of Jess' cocktail party in Savannah later tonight.

He checked his watch. 2:17 PM. The party would start at 8 PM Savannah time, which gave him roughly five hours before Jess would be stepping into that grand ballroom, possibly dancing with investors who had already made their interest in her painfully clear.

His phone buzzed with a text. He grabbed it, expecting Jess, but found only a message from Miles about another meeting. Tom replied quickly, then flicked to his conversation with Jess. Their last exchange had been around noon.

No response since, which wasn't surprising. Jess had mentioned she'd be in back-to-back meetings leading up to the party, finalizing details for the official Magnolia House announcement. Still, Tom found himself checking his phone every few minutes, as if her silence might contain hidden messages about her intentions for the evening.

Tom turned back to his computer, forcing himself to concentrate on the next Meridian ticket. By the time he identified the problem, a simple but easily overlooked formatting inconsistency, another hour had passed.

Jess would be wrapping up her meetings soon, heading back to the Gastonian to prepare for the party.

As if summoned by his thoughts, his phone lit up with her name.

Jess: Finally free! Heading back to get ready. Nervous about tonight! So many media people will be there.

Tom: You'll dazzle them. You always do.

Jess: Hope so. Worried my dress is too much.

Tom's pulse quickened. Too much? What did that mean exactly?

Tom: Too much how? I need details.

Jess: Yellow. Bright yellow. Kind of low cut. Annie says it's perfect but I'm second guessing.

Tom: Low cut sounds perfect to me. Will you send a pic when you're ready?

Jess: Of course. Gotta jump in the shower now. Talk soon.

Tom set his phone down, suddenly finding it difficult to concentrate on the next ticket in his queue. Low cut. Bright yellow. The mental image began forming, Jess in a dress that showcased the body he knew by heart, drawing the eyes of everyone in that historic ballroom.

Would she dance tonight? If someone asked, Harrington or Chen, would Jess accept? Would she remember Tom's encouragement to test those waters, to explore the power of being desired?

The questions circled in his mind, tangling with the data migration issues he was supposed to be solving. He made himself focus, channeling his restless energy into the information on his screen.

By 6 PM, Tom had cleared his entire queue, a feat that would have seemed impossible just a week ago. He shut down his computer and gathered his things, suddenly desperate to escape the office. The drive home would give him time to clear his head before Jess's party began in earnest.

Traffic crawled, turning what should have been a thirty-minute drive into nearly forty-five minutes of stop and go frustration. Tom's fingers drummed impatiently on

the steering wheel. It was 6:47 PM by the time he pulled into his driveway. In Savannah, the cocktail party would be starting right about now.

The house felt emptier than usual as he stepped inside. He headed straight for the refrigerator, pulling out a beer. The cold liquid did little to calm the storm brewing inside him. He checked his phone again. Still nothing from Jess. She'd promised a picture. What was taking so long?

Tom pulled up his message thread with her and composed a message.

Tom: Hope you're having fun. Can't wait to see that dress.

He hit send, then immediately followed that up.

Tom: Remember what we talked about... dancing might be fun to try.

The message felt clumsy, too obvious in its encouragement. But subtlety had never been his strong suit where these fantasies were concerned.

Tom carried his beer to the living room and sank onto the couch, phone clutched in his hand. He flicked on the TV, more for background noise than entertainment. Some mindless reality show filled the screen, contestants bickering over trivialities that seemed impossibly distant from the tension gripping his body.

At 7:42 PM his phone buzzed.

Jess: You're so persistent!

A second message followed immediately, this one containing a photo.

Jess stood in what must be her hotel room, captured in a mirror selfie. The dress was a vibrant, sunshine yellow that made her tan skin glow and her blonde hair shine like gold. The neckline plunged deeper than he'd expected, showcasing the gentle curve of her breasts. The fabric hugged her waist before flaring slightly at her hips, ending just above her knees. She wore strappy gold heels that accentuated her long legs.

She looked spectacular. Radiant. The kind of woman who would draw every eye in the room the moment she entered.

Tom stared at the image, thumb tracing the outline of her figure on the screen. Pride mingled with arousal mingled with a spike of jealousy so sharp it nearly took his breath away. Everyone at that party would want her. The question was, would any of them have her?

Tom: You look absolutely stunning. Every man in that room is going to want to dance with you.

Jess: Got to go! Annie's knocking. Love you!

And then silence. The party would be in full swing now. Champagne flowing, music playing, Jess moving through the crowd in that yellow dress, drawing attention with every step.

Tom finished his beer and grabbed another, trying to distract himself with TV. He channel surfed restlessly, finding nothing that could hold his interest. By his third beer, he gave up on television entirely and just sat there, checking his phone every so often.

9:02 PM. 9:13 PM. 9:40 PM. 10:05 PM. 10:11 PM. No messages from Jess.

What was happening at that party? Was she dancing? Had she accepted an invitation from one of those investors? Was she right now pressed against some wealthy man's body, his hands at her waist, his mouth close to her ear as the music provided the perfect excuse for physical contact?

Tom's mind conjured vivid scenarios, each more elaborate than the last. Jess laughing at something Harrington whispered to her. Jess letting Chen guide her through the crowd, his hand at the small of her back. Jess sipping champagne, her lipstick leaving an imprint on the glass, the same shade she might leave on a stranger's collar.

His cock had hardened at the images in his mind.

Should he just jerk off? Release the tension building inside him?

He needed a distraction. Something, anything to pull his mind from the torturous loop of Jess in that yellow dress, dancing with strangers, maybe even...

He couldn't complete the thought. The possibility that had been lurking at the edges of his consciousness refused to take solid form. That Jess might invite someone back to her room. That she might cross the final boundary they'd discussed but never explicitly agreed to.

No. She wouldn't. She'd been clear about that line. Sex with others wasn't on the table. She was exploring exhibition, the power of being desired, but not infidelity.

Not that it would even be infidelity, Tom reminded himself. Not if he knew. Not if he approved. Not if it was part of their shared exploration.

By 11:20 PM, Tom had given up on distractions. He'd tried work emails and a mindless mobile game. Nothing could compete with the images playing in his head, so he slid into their empty bed.

11:47 PM. Still no word from Jess. The party must be over by now. Why hadn't she texted? Called? Was she still there, caught up in conversation? Or was she back in her room, perhaps not alone?

Tom tossed and turned, sleep evading him despite his physical and emotional exhaustion. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Jess in that yellow dress, bathed in the warm light of the historic ballroom, surrounded by men who wanted her.

Time crawled. Tom checked his phone compulsively, the screen's light harsh in the darkened room. Still nothing. The longer the silence stretched, the more his imagination tortured him with possibilities.

Had she lost track of time? Was her phone dead? Or was she deliberately not contacting him, knowing that he'd ask questions she wasn't ready to answer?

By 12:27 AM, Tom had given up on sleep entirely. He sat up in bed, turned on the lamp, and grabbed his laptop. Work. He'd distract himself with work.

He was halfway through an email when exhaustion finally claimed him. Tom fell asleep sitting up, laptop still open on his legs, phone clutched in his hand.

The buzz of an incoming message jolted him awake. Tom blinked, disoriented, the room coming slowly into focus. 1:27 AM glowed from his bedside clock. He looked down at his phone, heart racing.

Jess: So sorry for going silent! Phone died and I left my charger in the room. Party was amazing. Everyone loved the announcement. Danced my feet off. Can't wait to tell you all about it tomorrow. Miss you terribly and love you more than anything. Can't wait to be home!

Relief crashed through Tom. She'd texted. Everything was fine. Her phone had died, that's all. Nothing nefarious, no boundaries crossed without his knowledge. Just a dead phone and a fun professional event.

But she'd danced. Actually danced. With whom? How many? How close? The questions immediately resurfaced, but with less urgency now that he had confirmation she was okay, was thinking of him, was excited to come home.

Tom set his laptop aside and slid down in the bed, phone still in hand. He read Jess's message three more times before typing a response, though he knew she was likely asleep by now.

Tom: Glad you had fun! Can't wait to hear all about it. Love you too. Sleep well.

He set his phone on the nightstand and turned off the lamp. In the darkness, the tension that had gripped him for hours began to dissipate. Jess was coming home tomorrow. Whatever had happened at the party, dancing, flirting, testing boundaries, she was coming back to him. To their life together.

That knowledge was finally enough to let sleep reclaim him, his dreams filled with Jess in that yellow dress, moving through a ballroom filled with faceless men who wanted what only he truly had.

Bob Caldwell paused at the edge of the Marshalls' property, taking a moment to admire the immaculate front lawn. The hedges stood in perfect formation, each one trimmed to match its neighbor in height and width. The flower beds he'd planted weeks ago had taken root beautifully, splashes of color framing the walkway. Even the grass itself showed the results of his dedicated care, lush, green, and mowed.

Not bad for a retired tradesman. The yard had been an embarrassment when he'd first arrived, victim to the neglect that came with two busy professionals and no time for proper maintenance. Now it served as a subtle but daily reminder of his value, his presence, his growing indispensability to the Marshalls.

Bob straightened the collar of his navy polo shirt. He'd selected it this morning, still casual, but a step up from his typical work-stained t-shirts. Not so formal as to seem out of character, but clean enough to alter perception. Today he wasn't presenting himself as Bob the handyman but Bob the experienced guide in marital exploration.

He'd been wanting to talk to Tom all week, to capitalize on Tuesday's breakthrough, but Tom's Lexus had been leaving early and returning late every day. The man was clearly burying himself in work while his wife was away, probably to avoid dwelling too much on what Jess might be doing in Savannah.

Bob checked his watch. 9:03 AM. Perfect timing. Not so early as to seem desperate, not so late that he risked Tom making other plans for the day. And with Jess due back sometime today, this was his window of opportunity.

He approached the front door, noting with satisfaction that even the porch planters showed evidence of his green thumb. He rang the doorbell and waited, hands casually in his pockets, expression neutral but friendly.

The door opened after about thirty seconds. Tom stood there in sweatpants and a faded t-shirt, hair slightly disheveled, coffee mug in hand. His expression cycled through recognition, realization, and resignation in quick succession. He clearly knew why Bob was at his door. This wasn’t their first Saturday morning conversation.

"Morning," Bob greeted.

"Bob," Tom acknowledged. "What's up?"

"Got a minute?" Bob asked. "Figured we should touch base before Jess gets back."

Tom hesitated only briefly before stepping back. "Sure. Come on up."

Bob noted the invitation immediately. In their previous conversations, Tom had kept him firmly in the foyer, maintaining a literal physical boundary between the tenant's space and the couple's private domain. This invitation upstairs represented a significant shift in their dynamic, a lowering of defensive walls.

Bob followed Tom up the stairs, taking his time, observing the home he'd been inside several times before but always with a specific purpose, consulting on renovation options, updating faucets, installing smoke detectors, never for a conversation like this.

Tom led him directly to the kitchen, where a coffee maker gurgled on the counter.

"Want some?" Tom offered, gesturing to the coffee.

"Sure," Bob replied.

Tom handed him a mug, nothing fancy, just a plain blue ceramic cup with the Davis & Associates logo. Bob accepted it with a nod of thanks, taking a small sip before setting it on the counter.

"So, how's Jess doing in Savannah?" Bob asked, keeping his tone conversational. "You two been in touch?"

"She's doing well," Tom replied, not elaborating. "We've been chatting every day."

"Good, good." Bob took another sip of coffee. "Big project for her."

"Yeah, it is." Tom leaned against the counter. "I'll be picking her up later tonight. Her flight lands at 8."

Bob nodded, filing away the information. "She must be excited to come home."

"She is," Tom confirmed. His posture remained tense, clearly eager to move past the small talk to the real reason for Bob's visit.

Bob decided not to drag it out. He set his mug down and met Tom's eyes directly. "I wanted to check in about Tuesday," he said. "Make sure everything's okay with you both. These kinds of explorations can bring up unexpected feelings."

Tom's expression shifted, becoming more guarded yet somehow more engaged. "Everything's fine."

"Good to hear," Bob nodded. "There's a lot of excitement when it comes to trying new things, but it can be overwhelming if it's too much too fast."

"Like I said, we're fine," Tom repeated. "Jess and I talked about it afterwards. At length."

Bob knew exactly how "at length" they'd discussed it. The memory of Tuesday night's recording played in his mind, Jess describing the massage in detail while Tom fucked her. Their shared excitement about the boundary they'd crossed had been unmistakable, even through the limited audio of his hidden camera.

"Tuesday was a big step," Bob observed. "Shows a lot of trust."

"I encouraged her, but Jess made the decision herself."

"That's how it should be," Bob agreed, his tone warm with approval. "Never push someone past their comfort zone. Only invite them to explore it."

Tom nodded, taking a long sip of his coffee.

Bob then leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. "I hope you don't mind me saying, but she was clearly... affected by the experience."

Tom's eyes snapped to his. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I could see signs of arousal," Bob said. "By the end of the massage, her pussy was almost leaking."

Bob had chosen the crude term deliberately, testing Tom's reaction to this more explicit framing of their arrangement. Tom didn't flinch or object, which told Bob everything he needed to know about how far the man's boundaries had shifted.

"There was this point," Bob continued. "Where I could tell she wanted to ask for something more but held back."

Tom's eyes widened slightly. "More?"

Bob nodded, his expression serious. "Women like Jess, intelligent, successful, confident, they often need explicit permission from their husbands before they can fully express their desires. She clearly wanted more but needed to know you were completely on board."

"She was definitely turned on," Tom admitted, eyes dropping to his coffee mug.

"That makes sense," Bob said carefully. "Sexual energy has to go somewhere."

Tom nodded, still not meeting Bob's eyes. "What do you think she wanted? During the massage, I mean."

"Release," Bob answered without hesitation. "I've been thinking about our conversation from a couple weeks ago, when I mentioned she'd expressed interest in... reciprocating."

Tom's face flushed slightly at the reminder of Bob's previous lie about Jess wanting to give him a blowjob.

"I still think that would be too much too soon," Bob continued, reinforcing his role as the voice of restraint. "Sarah was the same way at first, needed permission before she could truly enjoy herself. But there's a more natural progression."

"Which is?" Tom asked.

Bob took another sip of coffee. "The logical next step would be for her to experience pleasure during our next encounter. Not just relaxation."

Tom's brow furrowed. "You mean..."

"I mean allowing her to enjoy the massage more actively," Bob clarified. "Maybe focusing on areas that provide more... direct stimulation."

"Like what?"

"Her inner thighs," Bob suggested. "The underside of her breasts. Perhaps even her nipples more directly. All places I deliberately avoided or quickly went over on Tuesday out of respect for your boundaries."

Tom nodded slowly, processing this.

"To be clear," Bob added, "I'm not suggesting anything that crosses into sex. Just a more sensual experience that acknowledges her arousal instead of pretending it doesn't exist."

"And you think that's what she wants?"

"Based on her reactions Tuesday? Absolutely." Bob's confidence was unwavering. "But she needs to hear from you that it's okay. That you're excited by the idea, not just tolerating it."

Bob could see Tom was receptive but still hesitant. Time to reinforce his role as guide rather than predator.

"I want to be completely transparent here," Bob said. "My interest is in creating a safe space for both of you to explore. If Tuesday taught me anything, it's that you two have a solid foundation of trust. That's rare."

"I appreciate that," Tom said. "And I'm open to... more. To discussing next steps with Jess after she gets back."

"That's good," Bob nodded. "Communication is key."

Tom shifted his weight, fingers tapping against his coffee mug. "How would you suggest I approach that conversation? With Jess, I mean."

This was what Bob had been hoping for, a request for guidance, for instruction on how to manipulate his own wife. Bob kept his expression thoughtful, as if considering the question seriously rather than delivering the answer he'd rehearsed.

"Keep reinforcing that it's okay for her to take things further," Bob advised. "Your guidance is essential because you're her husband. She trusts you and wouldn't want to hurt you."

Tom nodded, absorbing this.

"Have you tried roleplaying in bed?" Bob asked, already knowing the answer from his surveillance. "Sometimes it's easier to express desires during intimate moments."

"We have," Tom admitted. "It's been... effective."

"That's a perfect opportunity then," Bob continued. "During those moments, suggest she ask me to touch her more explicitly next time. Or even take it much further, whatever you're comfortable with."

Tom took another sip of his coffee, his expression thoughtful. "And if she does ask? For more?"

"Then I'd follow her lead," Bob said. "But this is the critical part. It needs to be her idea, her asking me to touch her. That way, she doesn't feel like we planned it behind her back. Women hate that feeling of being manipulated."

The irony of this statement wasn't lost on Bob, but Tom simply nodded in agreement, completely ignoring or missing the hypocrisy.

"Obviously," Bob added, drawing a clear ethical line to appear principled, "I'd never touch her intimate parts directly without clear consent from both of you."

"Of course," Tom agreed quickly.

"This is completely your call," Bob said, spreading his hands in a gesture of deference. "I'm comfortable either way. If you decide this isn't the right direction, I respect that completely. The last thing I want is to cause any tension between you two."

Tom seemed to consider this, his expression thoughtful. "I appreciate your approach to all this, Bob."

"I'm honored you both trust me with this," Bob replied. "That means a lot."

He drained the last of his coffee and set the mug in the sink. "I should let you get on with your day. I've got some repairs to finish downstairs."

"Right," Tom said, straightening up from his position against the counter. "Thanks for stopping by. And for the... advice."

"Anytime," Bob replied. "We're in this together now."

Tom escorted him back downstairs, their conversation shifting to the upcoming summer heat, a sprinkler head that needed replacing. By the time they reached the front door, anyone observing would see nothing more than friendly small talk between landlord and tenant.

"Tell Jess I say welcome home," Bob said as he stepped onto the porch.

"Will do," Tom promised.

The door closed behind Bob, who maintained his casual demeanor until he was halfway across the lawn. Only then did he allow a small smile to tug at the corner of his mouth. The seeds he'd planted were taking root faster than he'd expected. Tom's invitation upstairs, his openness to "more," his request for guidance on how to approach Jess, all signs that the walls of resistance were crumbling.

Bob made his way around the side of the house to the basement entrance, mind already spinning with possibilities for the next encounter with Jess. Today's conversation had secured Tom's tentative blessing for more intimate touch but Bob's goal was more ambitious, Jess's active participation rather than passive reception.

He wanted her hands on him. Wanted her to cross that boundary herself, to take that first step from being touched to touching in return. Based on her self-pleasure session after Tuesday's massage and the things she'd said aloud to her empty bedroom, he suspected she was open to it.

As Bob entered his basement apartment, he mentally reviewed the progression he'd engineered. From casual poolside conversations to increasingly revealing swimwear. From innocent sunscreen application to full body massage. From clothed to nude.

Each step had been planned, each boundary tested and crossed carefully. The beauty of his approach was that neither Tom nor Jess could point to any single moment where he'd overstepped. He'd always waited for invitation, for permission. He'd always positioned himself as the reluctant participant, the voice of restraint and wisdom. It was a masterpiece of manipulation, if he did say so himself.

Rome wasn't built in a day. And Jessica Marshall wouldn't be his in one encounter. But she would be his eventually. Of that, Bob had no doubt.

Tom shifted his weight from one foot to the other as he scanned the steady stream of weary travelers emerging from the gate. The arrivals board showed Jess's flight had landed twenty minutes ago. Any minute now, she'd appear, back from her Savannah triumph, possibly carrying stories that would both torment and excite him.

His morning conversation with Bob looped through his mind for what felt like the hundredth time. Bob's words about Jess being "affected" by the massage, about how she "clearly wanted more," about how she needed Tom's explicit permission to fully express her desires, all of it rattled around in his skull, impossible to dismiss.

The most disturbing part wasn't Bob's obvious manipulation. Tom wasn't an idiot. He recognized the calculated nature of Bob's approach. What unsettled him was how effectively it worked despite his awareness of it. Bob wanted sexual access to Jess. That much was transparent. But was that so wrong? Wasn't that exactly what Tom himself had been encouraging? Hadn't he explicitly told Jess to get naked for Bob? Hadn't he jerked off to her descriptions of Bob's hands on her breasts?

If Jess enjoyed herself, if she explored these boundaries safely, if she ultimately remained committed to their marriage, did Bob's motivations even matter?

Tom's phone buzzed in his pocket. A text from Jess.

Jess: Just got my bag. Coming out now!

Tom pocketed his phone and straightened, eyes fixed on the exit.

Jess finally appeared, pulling her roller suitcase behind her with her purse slung over one shoulder. She looked tired, the kind of exhaustion that came from days of professional intensity followed by a cramped flight. But she also looked radiant somehow, glowing with the confidence of someone who'd conquered a significant challenge.

She wore simple travel clothes, dark jeans, a loose-fitting blouse, comfortable flats, but she carried herself with the same poise she'd exhibited in that yellow dress she'd sent him a photo of last night.

When she spotted him, her face lit up with a smile. It had only been three days, but the sight of her filled him with a mix of relief and anticipation.

"Hey, you," she called, quickening her pace.

Tom met her halfway, wrapping her in a hug that lifted her slightly off the ground.

"God, I missed you," he murmured.

"Missed you too," Jess replied, pulling back to look at his face. Her eyes were tired but bright with affection. She rose on tiptoes to kiss him, a brief but firm press of lips that promised more later.

"How was the flight?" Tom asked, taking the handle of her suitcase.

"Bumpy as hell," Jess grimaced. "Thunderstorms over Georgia. But we made it."

They walked toward the exit, Tom guiding them through the crowded terminal with his hand at the small of Jess's back.

Outside, the evening air was thick with humidity, the temperature still hovering in the mid-eighties despite the setting sun. Tom popped the trunk of his Lexus and loaded Jess's suitcase while she settled into the passenger seat. When he slid behind the wheel, she had already kicked off her flats and was massaging her feet.

"Airport floors are murder," she explained, catching his glance.

"Your feet going to be okay for heels next week?" Tom asked.

"They'd better be," Jess replied with a small laugh. "Margaret's not going to be impressed by me hobbling around in orthopedic shoes."

Tom navigated them out of the airport and onto the highway before bringing up what had been consuming his thoughts. "So... the party. How was it really?"

Jess laughed, the sound both weary and genuinely amused. "Cutting right to the chase, aren't we? No 'How was the trip?' Just straight to 'Did you dance with anyone?'"

Heat crept up Tom's neck. "That's not…"

"It's okay," Jess interjected, placing her hand on his leg. "I know what you're curious about. And I'll tell you everything, I promise. But I'm starving and desperately need a shower first. Can we shelve the party talk until I'm human again?"

"Of course," Tom said, covering her hand with his. "Actually, I made dinner. It's waiting at home."

Jess's eyebrows rose. "You cooked? Actual food?"

"Don't sound so surprised," Tom replied with mock offense. "Roast chicken, baked potatoes, asparagus. Nothing fancy, but it's edible… I think."

"You think?" Jess laughed. "Not filling me with confidence here."

"The chicken looked done. Mostly."

"Well, salmonella would certainly be a memorable welcome home."

"I followed the recipe to the letter," Tom assured her. "It should be fine."

"I'm impressed," Jess said, squeezing his leg. "Thank you."

As they drove through Austin's evening traffic, Jess filled him in on the non-party aspects of her trip in more detail than their phone call. The meetings with craftsmen, the walkthrough of the mansion, the material selections, the press conference announcing the project's official name.

"The Magnolia House is going to be incredible, Tom," she said, her face animated despite her exhaustion. "The bones of that building are just spectacular. And the budget is generous enough that we're not having to cut corners. We can use authentic materials, historically accurate techniques."

"A dream project," Tom commented, turning onto the highway that would take them home.

"It really is. And the Houston project is officially happening too. James Chen will be in Austin next week to finalize everything with the firm."

"That's huge, Jess. Congratulations."

"Two major projects running simultaneously," Jess said, a mix of pride and trepidation in her voice. "It's going to be hectic, but it's exactly what I've been working toward."

Tom glanced at her profile, catching the hint of worry beneath her excitement. "You can handle it. You're brilliant at what you do."

"Thanks," Jess said softly. Then, changing the subject, "How about you? How's work been?"

"Productive," Tom admitted. "Made huge progress on Meridian. Fixed all the critical errors."

"My absence must really be good for your focus," Jess teased.

Tom laughed, though there was truth to her observation. "Probably. I worked about fourteen hours Wednesday and Thursday. Ten on Friday."

"Tom!" Jess exclaimed, her tone shifting to concern. "That's insane. You need to rest too."

"I know, I know. But the project's almost done."

They fell into comfortable silence for a few minutes, the Austin skyline receding in the rearview mirror as they headed toward their neighborhood. Tom's mind drifted back to Bob, to their morning conversation.

As if reading his thoughts, Jess asked, "Have you seen much of Bob while I was gone?"

Tom kept his expression neutral, though his pulse quickened slightly. "Not really. I was barely home with those long hours. Though I did notice him outside earlier today working on the yard."

"He's done wonders with it," Jess commented. "Remember how embarrassed I was about the state of those flower beds? Now they're practically magazine-worthy."

"He definitely has a green thumb," Tom agreed. "The roses are thriving."

"And he put in those native perennials along the back fence," Jess added. "The ones that don't need much water. They're already filling in nicely."

They turned onto their street, the familiar houses signaling their approach home. Tom pulled into their driveway, killing the engine. For a moment, neither moved, both taking in the simple fact of being home together again.

"I really did miss you," Jess said, breaking the silence. "Even with all the excitement and running around, I kept wishing you were there to see it."

"Next time," Tom promised, reaching over to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "Once Meridian's done, I'll come with you on your next Savannah trip."

Inside, the house smelled of roasted chicken and herbs. Tom had left the oven on warm, maintaining the dinner he'd prepared. The dining table was set with their good plates, a bottle of wine already open and breathing.

"I'm impressed," Jess said, surveying the scene. "You went all out."

"Figured you deserved a proper welcome home," Tom replied. "Go shower. Food will be ready when you are."

Jess stood on tiptoes to kiss him again, this one lingering longer than the quick peck at the airport. "Give me twenty minutes," she murmured against his lips before heading toward their bedroom.

Alone in the kitchen, Tom busied himself with the final dinner preparations. He checked the chicken, relieved to find it perfectly cooked, skin crisp and golden. He arranged asparagus spears on a serving plate and removed the baked potatoes from the oven, slitting them open and adding a pat of butter to each.

By the time Jess emerged, hair damp and skin flushed from the hot shower, Tom had everything on the table. She wore comfortable clothes, leggings and one of his old t-shirts that had long ago migrated to her side of the closet, but the simple outfit did nothing to diminish her beauty.

"That smells amazing," she said, sliding into her chair. "I'm starving."

Tom poured wine for them both before taking his seat. "How was the shower?"

"Heavenly," Jess replied, closing her eyes briefly. "Hotel showers are never quite right, you know?"

"No place like home," Tom agreed, raising his glass. "To successful trips and homecomings."

Jess clinked her glass against his. "And to whoever taught you to roast a chicken."

"YouTube," Tom admitted with a grin. "I watched three different tutorials."

"Well, it paid off," Jess said after taking her first bite. "This is delicious."

They ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the simple pleasure of shared food after days apart requiring no conversation.

"So," Jess said after a few bites, catching his gaze. "You want to hear about the party."

Tom didn't bother denying it. "If you're ready to talk about it."

Jess took a sip of wine. "It was... educational."

"Educational?" Tom repeated, not quite sure what to make of the description.

"Mmm," Jess nodded. "Educational in terms of learning what I'm comfortable with, what I actually enjoy versus what I thought I might enjoy."

Tom's fork paused halfway to his mouth. "You're being very cryptic."

"Maybe a little," Jess admitted. "But not to torture you. I just want to get my thoughts in order before I share everything."

"Fair enough," Tom conceded. "Take your time."

Jess studied him for a moment, her expression softening. "You really want to know all the details, don't you?"

"I do," Tom admitted, seeing no point in hiding what they both knew to be true.

"It still surprises me sometimes," Jess said, reaching for her wine. "This thing between us. How much it excites you to imagine me with others. How much I've come to enjoy the power of being desired that way."

"Is that what happened at the party?" Tom asked, trying to keep his tone casual. "You enjoyed being desired?"

"Among other things," Jess replied, that enigmatic smile returning. "But let's finish dinner first. Then I'll tell you everything. I promise."

"Everything?" Tom pressed.

"Every detail," Jess confirmed. "The dancing. The conversations. The offers."

"Offers?" Tom repeated, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Patience," Jess admonished lightly, spearing a piece of asparagus with her fork. "Food first. Stories second."

Tom forced himself to take another bite of chicken, though his appetite had shifted from food to information. Whatever had happened at that party in Savannah, Jess was clearly enjoying her power to control its revelation, to dole out details at her own pace.

It struck Tom that something fundamental had shifted in their dynamic. When they'd first begun exploring his fantasy, he had been the guide, the one encouraging Jess to push boundaries, to flirt, to test waters. Now she seemed to be embracing that role independently, finding her own pleasure in the exploration rather than simply indulging his.

As they ate, Tom couldn't help but remember Bob's words from that morning. "Sexual energy has to go somewhere." Had Jess found somewhere for hers to go in Savannah? With one of those investors who'd been eyeing her since the Skyline party?

The uncertainty was both torturous and thrilling. Whatever Jess was going to tell him, whether it was just harmless dancing or something more, Tom knew it would fuel their evening in ways neither of them had anticipated just a few months ago.

Across the table, Jess caught his gaze again and held it. "You're imagining all sorts of scenarios right now, aren't you?"

"Can't help it," Tom admitted.

"Good," Jess replied.

They continued eating, the air between them charged with anticipation. Their exploration had always been primarily in Tom's mind, in their bedroom talk, in the scenario with Bob. But Savannah had been different. Jess had been on her own, making choices without Tom's immediate input or reaction.

As Tom refilled their wine glasses, he realized he was simultaneously desperate to know and terrified to find out exactly what educational experiences his wife had encountered in that historic southern city.

Tom finished rinsing the last plate and placed it in the dish rack. The dinner had gone well. His roast chicken had been a success, the wine complemented the meal perfectly, and Jess was finally home. But as he dried his hands on a kitchen towel, his mind remained fixed on what Jess had hinted at during dinner.

The party in Savannah. The dancing. The offers.

Ten minutes had passed since Jess excused herself to the bedroom. Yet something in her tone before she left, a hint of mischief perhaps, suggested she hadn't simply

collapsed into bed. Tom hung the towel on its hook and moved through the living room, anticipation building with each step.

At the bedroom door, he paused. The light inside spilled from beneath the door, a warm glow that promised something more inviting than sleep. Tom turned the knob and pushed the door open.

"Holy shit," he breathed, unable to formulate anything more eloquent.

Jess lay on her side facing the door, propped up on one elbow. She wore lingerie he hadn't seen before, a pink floral corset that cinched her waist and pushed up her breasts, paired with a tiny matching thong.

"Like what you see?" she asked, her voice a silky invitation.

Tom nodded. "Very much." He stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. "Is this new?"

"Bought it in Savannah," Jess confirmed, running her hand down the intricate floral pattern that adorned the corset. "Saw it in a little boutique near the hotel and couldn't resist."

"Excellent impulse purchase," Tom said, already unbuttoning his shirt.

Jess shifted onto her knees, the mattress dipping beneath her weight. "I thought about you when I bought it. About coming home, about showing you..." She traced the edge of the corset where it met the swell of her breasts. "About letting you take it off me."

Tom stripped off his shirt and unbuckled his belt, never taking his eyes off her. The sight of Jess in that pink corset, her confidence, her sensuality, all of it sent blood rushing to his cock. By the time he'd kicked off his pants and boxers, he was fully hard.

Jess's eyes dropped to his erection, and her smile widened with appreciation. "Missed me, did you?"

"You have no idea," Tom replied, joining her on the bed.

They met in the middle, both on their knees. Tom's hands immediately found her waist, feeling the rigid structure of the corset beneath his fingers before sliding down to cup her ass.

Jess leaned in, pressing her lips to his in a kiss that started gentle but quickly deepened. Her hand moved between them to wrap around his cock, stroking him with firm, confident movements that had him groaning into her mouth.

"God, I've missed you," he murmured against her lips.

Jess hummed in agreement, her thumb circling the head of his cock. "Especially after Tuesday, right? Leaving you with that to think about while I was gone..."

"Speaking of things to think about," Tom said, pulling back slightly to meet her gaze. "The party. You promised to tell me everything."

Jess's eyes sparkled with something between mischief and pride. "I did, didn't I? But can't a girl welcome her husband home properly first? Cuddle a bit before the inquisition?"

Tom laughed, planting a kiss on her forehead. "Cuddle it is."

They settled against the pillows, facing each other on their sides. Her hand remained on his cock, stroking softly. Tom's own hands roamed over her body, tracing the contours of the corset, exploring the exposed skin of her thighs, occasionally dipping between them to tease her through the thin fabric of her thong.

"You know," Jess began, her voice thoughtful despite the intimate touches they were exchanging, "I've been thinking about something since we started all this."

"What's that?" Tom asked, fingers drawing lazy patterns on the outside of her thigh.

"I've been thinking about sex a lot more. Like, constantly." Jess shifted to look up at him. "More than I ever did before."

"Is that a bad thing?" Tom's hand moved to cup her breast through the corset.

"Not at all," Jess replied. "But it's made me realize how... controlled I've been. For years, really."

"Controlled how?"

Jess was quiet for a moment, seemingly gathering her thoughts. "Remember when I told you on the phone about feeling different? About integrating parts of myself?"

Tom nodded. "You mentioned the modeling side of yourself."

"It's more than that," Jess said. "It’s like I said, I've always known men look at me. Always noticed it. But I learned early on to look disinterested, to keep my expression neutral or even a little bitchy."

"Defense mechanism," Tom suggested, understanding in his voice.

"Exactly."

Tom's fingers traced the edge of her corset, just barely brushing against the swell of her breast. "And that changed in Savannah?"

"It did," Jess confirmed, a new excitement entering her voice. "I felt free there in a way I don't in Austin. Like there were no expectations, no history. Nobody knew me as 'Jessica Marshall, interior designer' or 'Tom's wife.' I was just... me."

"So what did that freedom look like?" Tom asked, genuinely curious.

Jess smiled. "I smiled back when men looked at me. Something I never do in Austin. And they approached me because I was open to it, because I wasn't putting up those walls." Her hand began moving on his cock again, slow, teasing strokes. "I flirted. Nothing crazy, just showed interest, laughed at jokes, made teasing comments. Basic flirting. And it was fun, Tom. It felt good, especially knowing you'd love hearing about it."

Tom's cock twitched in her grip at her words. "Was there more than flirting?"

"No," Jess shook her head. "I didn't hold hands or kiss anyone or even give out my number, though everyone seemed to want it."

"Everyone, huh?" Tom grinned, finding her confidence impossibly arousing.

"Well, not everyone," Jess amended with a laugh. "But more than I expected, honestly."

Tom shifted, turning to face her more fully. "Tell me about the party. The cocktail party on Friday."

"It wasn't like Domino," Jess began, her hand still lazily stroking his cock. "Not a crowded nightclub with loud music and people grinding against each other. It was like the Skyline party, a professional crowd, at least at the beginning."

"You danced, though," Tom prompted, remembering her text.

"I did," Jess confirmed. "With quite a few people, actually. Chris Webb, for one."

"And?" Tom asked.

"He told me I looked beautiful. Said he was excited to work closely with me during the project." She paused, her eyes studying Tom's reaction. "He asked if I liked Savannah, mentioned that he owns a house there that I could stay at when I come back for site visits."

"He's propositioning you," Tom said.

"Probably," Jess acknowledged. "Though he phrased it like he was just being hospitable."

"I bet," Tom scoffed. "Who else did you dance with?"

"James Chen," Jess continued. "He kept things professional, mostly talked about the Houston project."

Tom nodded. "Was he handsy at all?"

"Not really," Jess said. "But Richard Harrington definitely was."

Tom's eyebrows shot up. "Was he?"

"Mmhmm," Jess hummed, her hand tightening slightly around Tom's cock. "He kept complimenting my looks, insisted I should work on his Austin penthouse. I had to explain how busy I'll be with Magnolia House and Houston."

"And did he back off?"

Jess laughed. "Not exactly. He asked me to fly back to Austin with him on his private jet."

"Seriously? What did you say?"

"I told him I already had my flight booked," Jess replied. "But he was pretty insistent."

"Did you consider it?" Tom asked.

Jess looked at him directly. "No. I know what would have been expected if I'd accepted that offer."

"Maybe it would have been interesting to find out," Tom suggested.

Jess's expression shifted to something more serious. "Tom, if I'd gotten on that private jet with Richard Harrington, I would have come home having fucked him. Is that what you want?"

"I... I don't know," he admitted.

"That's the difference between fantasy and reality," Jess said quietly. "In your fantasies, everything is perfect. Hot but controlled, sexy but safe. Reality is messier."

Tom nodded, understanding her point but still unable to resist asking, "Was Harrington the only... offer you received?"

"No," Jess laughed, her hand resuming its gentle stroking. "I danced with so many men. I was having a really good time, honestly. The older crowd, the investors, the historical preservation committee, the mayor, they all left around eleven. The party continued with a younger crowd for a few hours after that. I stayed until around two."

"And?" Tom prompted, sensing there was more to the story.

"There were two particularly bold guys," Jess admitted. "When the dance floor got crowded, one of them... touched my ass. Really grabbed and squeezed it."

"And you let him?"

"I did," Jess confirmed, watching Tom's face carefully. "I had a feeling it would turn you on when I told you about it."

"It does," Tom confessed, his cock now fully rigid in her hand. "What else?"

"He asked me to leave with him," Jess continued. "Said he didn't live far. I declined, politely."

"And the second guy?" Tom asked, sensing there was more.

"He was younger," Jess said. "Very handsome. We were chatting, and when I mentioned I was visiting from Austin, he asked where I was staying. I told him upstairs."

Tom's pulse quickened. "You danced with him too?"

"Several times," Jess nodded. "With breaks in between for drinks, conversation with other people. Toward the end of the night, he asked if he could walk me to my room."

"And you said yes," Tom stated, not a question.

"I did," Jess confirmed. "Even though I knew I wouldn't let him inside."

"Did he try?"

"He wanted to come in so badly," Jess laughed softly. "Practically begged. I told him I needed to wake up early for my flight."

"Did you want him to come in?" Tom asked, his voice low and intense.

Jess hesitated, then shook her head. "No. I didn't."

"But if you weren't married? If we weren't together?"

Jess met his gaze directly. "Then yes, I would have fucked him."

The confession sent a jolt of pure lust through Tom's body. He moved suddenly, pushing Jess onto her back. "I need to taste you," he growled.

His hands found the fastenings of the corset, working them with clumsy urgency. Jess helped, guiding his fingers to the hooks until the garment fell open, revealing her body inch by inch. When the corset was fully open, Tom slid it out from under her, leaving Jess wearing only the pink thong.

"So beautiful," he murmured, his hands cupping her breasts. "And all mine."

"All yours," Jess agreed, her back arching into his touch.

Tom lowered his head, taking one nipple into his mouth while his hand caressed the other breast. Jess's fingers threaded through his hair, holding him against her, a soft moan escaping her lips.

As he moved to her other breast, Tom's thoughts circled back to the subject that had consumed him all week. "We haven't talked about Tuesday," he said. "Not in person. Not since you left for Savannah."

"We haven't," Jess agreed, her voice slightly breathless from his attention. "Though we did talk on the phone about it."

"We did," Tom acknowledged, trailing kisses down her sternum toward her stomach. "But I've been thinking about it. A lot."

"What about it?" Jess asked, watching as he moved lower, his destination clear.

Tom hooked his fingers in the waistband of her thong, pulling it down her legs and tossing it aside, leaving her fully naked. "You said you didn't regret it," he reminded her, settling between her thighs. "That it was freeing."

"I meant that," Jess confirmed, spreading her legs wider to accommodate him. "It was... transformative, in a way I didn't expect."

Tom's hands slid under her thighs, lifting them slightly as he gazed at her pussy, already slick. "What you told me was so hot," he said. "Especially the part about you touching yourself afterward."

He leaned forward, his breath hot against her sensitive skin as he spoke. "I keep picturing you rushing upstairs, so turned on from Bob's hands on your body that you couldn't wait." Tom placed a light kiss on her inner thigh, intentionally avoiding where she wanted him most. "So wet that you grabbed your dildo and fucked yourself."

Jess made a small sound, a mixture of arousal and protest at his teasing. "That's not exactly-"

"Tell me I'm wrong," Tom challenged, his lips brushing against her other thigh.

Jess hesitated, then admitted, "You're not entirely wrong."

Tom grinned against her skin, pleased by the confirmation. He placed another kiss, closer to her pussy but still not where she needed him. "I've been thinking," he said, his fingers replacing his mouth on her thigh, "about what comes next."

"Next?" Jess echoed, her hips shifting restlessly.

Tom's fingers traced light patterns on her skin, circling closer to her pussy without quite touching it. "With Bob," he clarified. "After the naked massage."

"What about it?"

"Next time," Tom continued, his finger sliding through her wetness without penetrating, "you should ask him to give you an orgasm. Let him use those thick fingers on you instead of having to go upstairs to finish yourself off."

Jess's eyes widened at the suggestion. "Tom..."

"He'd do it," Tom pressed, his finger now circling her clit with the lightest pressure. "He might ask if you're sure, but he'd do it. He wants you so badly, Jess. You're giving that poor guy blue balls every time you meet."

"Poor guy?" Jess repeated with a small laugh that turned into a gasp when Tom's finger finally slipped inside her.

"He probably goes inside and jerks off immediately after seeing you," Tom said, adding a second finger, feeling her inner walls clench around him. "Especially after Tuesday. Seeing you naked, getting to touch your tits..."

"Oh god," Jess moaned as Tom began a slow, rhythmic motion with his fingers.

"You should help him out," Tom suggested, his voice deceptively casual despite the intimate nature of both his words and actions. "It would be the nice thing to do."

"The nice thing to do," Jess repeated, amusement mixing with arousal in her voice. "You want me to... repay the favor?"

"If you want to," Tom replied, curling his fingers to find that spot inside her that made her gasp. "I would want you to, but only if you wanted to."

Jess's hips moved in time with his fingers, her body responding to his touch. "Getting naked is one thing," she pointed out, breathless, "but letting him touch me intimately is crossing a completely different line."

"I'd be okay with it," Tom assured her, his fingers working steadily. "I'd be okay with anything you wanted to do."

"Anything?" Jess questioned, her voice sharp despite her arousal. "What does that mean, exactly?"

Tom looked up at her from between her thighs, meeting her gaze directly. "Anything," he repeated. "Whatever you're comfortable with."

"Even sex?" Jess pressed, her eyes never leaving his.

"Yes," Tom admitted. "Even that."

Jess propped herself up on her elbows to look at him more directly. "Tom, we talked about this. I've been clear that I don't want to have sex with another man."

"I know," Tom said quickly. "And you don't have to. Not if you don't want to. But... the option is there. You have my blessing, if that's ever something you decide you want."

Jess stared at him for a long moment, something unreadable in her expression. Then she fell back against the pillows with a frustrated sound. "Stop talking and just eat me, please."

Tom didn't need to be told twice. He lowered his head and licked a long, slow stripe through her folds, savoring her taste, her scent, the way her body instantly responded to his tongue. He settled into a rhythm, alternating between broad strokes and sucking her clit, his fingers still moving inside her.

Jess's hands found his hair, holding him against her, her hips rising to meet his mouth. All conversation ceased as Tom devoted himself to her pleasure, reading the signals of her body to adjust his approach. When her breathing quickened, when her thighs began to tremble, he increased the pressure, the speed, pushing her toward the edge.

"Oh fuck," Jess gasped, her back arching. "Right there, just like that."

Tom redoubled his efforts, his tongue sucking her clit while his fingers curled inside her. Jess's grip on his hair tightened almost painfully as she came, her entire body tensing before shuddering with release. Tom didn't let up, extending her orgasm for as long as possible until she pushed at his shoulders, too sensitive to continue.

He placed a final kiss on her inner thigh before moving up her body. "You taste so good," he murmured, kissing her deeply, letting her taste herself on his tongue.

Jess's hands came up to frame his face as she returned the kiss. When they finally broke apart, her eyes were dark with residual pleasure and renewed desire. "Get on top of me," she commanded softly. "I want to feel you inside me."

Tom positioned himself between her legs, the head of his cock pressing against her entrance. He pushed forward slowly, both of them groaning as he sank into her heat. Once fully seated, he paused, giving her a moment to adjust and himself a moment to regain control.

"Did he try to kiss you?" Tom asked suddenly, the question springing from some deep well of curiosity he couldn't contain. "The guy who walked you to your room."

"He did," Jess confirmed, her hands moving to his shoulders. "I turned my head. Let him kiss my cheek instead."

"Fuck," Tom breathed. He began to move, establishing a slow rhythm. "It turns me on so much, Jess. Hearing about other men wanting you like that."

"I know," Jess replied, her hips rising to meet his thrusts. "I could tell you what would have happened if I'd let him into my room."

"Tell me," Tom urged, his pace quickening slightly.

"I would have sucked his cock," Jess said, her voice taking on a purposefully provocative tone. "Would have taken him deep down my throat." Her nails dug slightly into his shoulders. "You know how much I love sucking cock."

The words sent a jolt through Tom's body, his hips jerking forward more forcefully. "Would you suck Bob's cock too?" he asked. "His huge cock?"

Jess laughed softly. "It's always back to Bob with you, isn't it?"

"I want you to," Tom admitted, his voice strained with the effort of maintaining his rhythm. "I really want you to."

"Maybe I will, then," Jess replied, her eyes locked on his. "Maybe he deserves it after making me feel so good with those massages."

The image, Jess on her knees, Bob's cock in her mouth, pushed Tom dangerously close to the edge despite having just started. He lifted Jess's legs, positioning them over his shoulders to change the angle, driving deeper into her.

The new position increased the intensity for both of them. Words became impossible, replaced by moans, gasps, the wet sound of their bodies joining. Tom's thrusts grew more erratic as he approached climax, fighting to hold back, to extend the pleasure.

When he could no longer maintain control, Tom pulled out suddenly, moving up Jess's body to straddle her chest. He wrapped his hand around his cock, stroking rapidly as Jess opened her mouth, her tongue extending in invitation.

"Fuck, Jess," Tom groaned, his entire body tensing. "I'm going to…"

His words dissolved into a guttural sound as he came, spurts of cum landing in Jess's open mouth and on her tongue. She swallowed what she could, her eyes never leaving his face, watching his pleasure with evident satisfaction.

When the last tremor subsided, Jess took him into her mouth, sucking gently to clean the final drops from his sensitive cock. Tom hissed at the sensation, almost too intense to bear, before carefully moving off her and collapsing beside her on the bed.

For several minutes, they lay in silence, both breathing heavily, bodies slick with sweat and other fluids. Tom reached out blindly for Jess's hand, finding it and threading their fingers together in a gesture both tender and familiar after years of shared intimacy.

"I missed you," Tom said finally.

"I missed you too," Jess replied, squeezing his hand.

Tom rolled onto his side to face her, studying her profile in the soft light of the bedside lamp. "I'm proud of you, you know. The Savannah project, Houston, all of it. You're amazing at what you do."

Jess turned toward him, her expression softening. "Thank you. That means a lot, especially coming from you."

Tom reached over to switch off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. In the blackness, other senses heightened, the sound of Jess's breathing, the scent of sex in the air, the warmth of her body as she shifted closer to him.

"I love you," Tom murmured, wrapping an arm around her waist.

"I love you too," Jess replied, her voice already heavy with approaching sleep. "Even when you get weird ideas about me and Bob."

Tom laughed softly, pulling her closer. "They're not weird ideas if they turn us both on."

"Fair point," Jess conceded, nestling into the space between his neck and shoulder, her body fitting against his as if designed for exactly this purpose.

The conversation from dinner, the revelations about the party, the suggestions about Bob, all of it would be there in the morning, waiting to be examined in the light of day. But for now, in the darkness of their bedroom, they were simply Tom and Jess, husband and wife, finding their way together through this unexpected new territory of their marriage.

The Bad Tenant Ch. 14

Jess woke up Sunday morning feeling relaxed, muscles pleasantly sore from last night's reunion with Tom. She reached across the bed, expecting to find the warm solidity of her husband, but her fingertips met only cool sheets. Tom's side of the bed was empty.

Jess blinked away the last remnants of sleep, stretching her arms overhead. The distant clatter of cookware from the kitchen explained Tom's absence.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed. Physically, she felt fantastic, the kind of deep satisfaction that came from reconnecting with Tom after days apart. But mentally...

Tom's words from last night echoed in her mind.

"Even sex?" she'd asked, pressing him on what "anything" meant regarding Bob. "Yes,"

Tom had admitted. "Even that."

The recollection triggered a sharp spike of uneasiness through her. Sex with Bob, or anyone else, had been off the table from the beginning. Their conversation at Vesper had been crystal clear on that point.

"I need to state upfront that I'm not interested in having sex with anyone else," she'd told Tom firmly that night. "I'm open to pushing some boundaries, to exploring the fantasy to a certain degree, but I don't want you to keep pushing me toward that endpoint."

Tom had agreed readily. "Understood. No pressure toward sex with others."

Yet here they were, just over a month later, with Tom casually offering his blessing for her to fuck their tenant. The shift was dramatic, unsettling. Was this what Tom genuinely wanted? Or was he just caught up in fantasy, saying things in the heat of the moment he hadn't properly thought through?

Jess stood. She grabbed her robe from the hook on the closet door, pulling it around her naked body and cinching the belt at her waist. A trip to the bathroom first, then she'd confront whatever conversation waited for her in the kitchen.

After splashing cool water on her face and brushing her teeth, Jess studied herself in the mirror. Her reflection looked back at her, bright-eyed despite the lingering fatigue of travel. No

visible change marked her face, yet she felt different from the woman who had left for Savannah just days ago.

The scent of coffee grew stronger as she approached the kitchen, now mingled with the unmistakable aroma of bacon. Her stomach rumbled in response. She paused in the doorway, taking in the scene.

Tom stood at the stove, dressed in sweatpants and a faded t-shirt, flipping bacon with a pair of tongs. His hair stood up at odd angles, suggesting he hadn't bothered to shower yet. Two mugs of coffee sat on the counter beside him, steam rising from both.

"Since when did you become a regular chef?" Jess asked, stepping into the kitchen. "First dinner last night, now breakfast? Are you auditioning for a cooking show?"

Tom turned, his face lighting up at the sight of her. "Good morning to you too," he replied with a grin. "And I've always been able to cook. I just rarely had the motivation."

"Must be some powerful motivation," Jess teased, crossing to the counter and picking up one of the coffee mugs. She took a sip. Perfect. Exactly the way she liked it.

"Well, my wife just returned from a triumphant business trip," Tom said, turning his attention back to the bacon. "Seemed like a good reason to brush up on my culinary skills."

Jess moved to stand beside him, peering at the skillet. The bacon sizzled, already crisping at the edges. "It looks good," she admitted. "I'm starting to wonder if you've been replaced by a pod person. The Tom Marshall I know considers microwaving leftover pizza to be 'cooking.'"

Tom laughed, the sound warm and genuine. "People change, Jess. Maybe I'm evolving."

"Evolution usually takes millions of years, not a three-day business trip," she countered.

"You'd be surprised what a man can learn when his wife is away," Tom said. He gestured toward the toaster with his tongs. "Would you mind? The bread's already in there, just needs to be started."

Jess pushed down the lever on the toaster, then leaned against the counter, watching Tom work. There was something warm and cozy about the moment, both of them in the kitchen on a lazy Sunday morning, preparing breakfast together. It felt normal, the kind of comfortable routine that had defined their marriage before all the recent complications.

"So what else is on the menu?" she asked.

"Scrambled eggs with that fancy cheese you like," Tom replied. "Should be ready in a few minutes."

"Fancy cheese being...?" "The white crumbly one." "Feta?"

"That's the one."

Jess shook her head, amused. “At least you remembered which one I like.”

The toast popped up, and Jess busied herself buttering it while Tom transferred the bacon to a paper towel lined plate.

Tom cracked eggs into a bowl, whisking them with a fork before pouring the mixture into the skillet still slick with bacon grease. “So,” he began, his tone suddenly more serious, “about last night... about Bob...”

Jess felt her muscles tense, the pleasantness of the moment fracturing. “Can we just have a normal Sunday?” she interrupted gently. “I need some time to process everything.”

Tom glanced at her. “Yeah, of course,” he said quickly. “Normal Sunday it is.”

“Thank you,” Jess said. “I’m not saying we can’t talk about it at all. Just... not right now.”

“Understood.” Tom focused on the eggs, stirring them with a wooden spoon. “So what does a normal Sunday look like for you? It’s been a while since either of us had one.”

It was true. Between Tom’s grueling work schedule and the demands of Jess’s projects, their weekends had become extensions of the workweek rather than actual breaks.

“Well, I’m thinking gym first,” Jess replied, carrying their plates to the small kitchen table. “I missed it yesterday. Then grocery shopping. We’re out of practically everything.”

“We’ve got eggs and bacon,” Tom pointed out.

“Yes, and beyond that, our refrigerator contains condiments, beer, and something in a takeout container that might have achieved sentience by now.”

Tom laughed as he brought the skillet to the table, spooning scrambled eggs onto their plates. “Fair point. What do we need?”

“Everything,” Jess said simply. “I’ll make a list. Thought I’d do meal prep for the week too, since you mentioned things are about to get intense with Meridian.”

Tom settled into the chair across from her. “Yeah, these next two weeks are going to be brutal. The final stretch, which means all the last-minute issues are popping up.”

“Hence the breakfast,” Jess observed. “Trying to store up goodwill before you disappear into work again?”

“Something like that,” Tom admitted with a rueful smile. “I’ll probably need to put in a few hours today too, if that’s okay.”

“Of course it is,” Jess said. “I’ll handle whatever you need. This is your big push for the promotion, right?”

Tom nodded. “The salary bump alone will be worth the stress.”

“Not to mention the title,” Jess added, knowing how much Tom valued recognition for

his work. “Senior Consultant Tom Marshall has a nice ring to it.”

“Almost as good as Lead Designer Jessica Marshall,” Tom countered, raising his coffee mug in a mock toast.

Jess smiled, taking a bite of the scrambled eggs. The feta gave them a tangy richness that elevated the simple dish. “This is actually really good,” she admitted. “I’m genuinely impressed.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Tom said. “I’ve been studying.” “YouTube tutorials?”

“And a couple of actual cookbooks. Remember those Christmas presents from your mom that we shoved in a drawer?”

“So that’s where those went.”

They finished breakfast, discussing the week ahead in broad strokes. Jess made a grocery list while Tom detailed the critical items on his Meridian to-do list.

After breakfast, they cleared the table together and moved to the sink, Jess soaping the dishes, Tom rinsing. It was their long-established routine, one they’d fallen into naturally years ago.

“I should probably get some work done,” Tom said once the kitchen was clean. “Those last- minute issues won’t solve themselves.”

“And I should head to the gym,” Jess replied. “Sunday mornings aren’t usually too crowded.”

Tom nodded. He knew the gym wasn’t just about maintaining her physical fitness. It was where she went to think, to process, to work through the tangles in her mind. “I’ll be in my office when you get back,” he said.

“I’ll try not to be too long,” Jess promised. “Maybe a couple of hours including the grocery run.”

They parted in the hallway, Tom toward his office and Jess toward the bedroom to change.

She pulled out her workout clothes with more care than usual, selecting a matching set in light blue, tight, high-waisted gym shorts that showcased her long legs and a sports bra in the same shade that accentuated her toned arms and flat stomach. The color complemented her tanned skin perfectly. She skipped the loose tank top she typically layered over her sports bras.

In the bathroom, Jess applied light makeup, just enough to enhance her natural features without looking like she was trying too hard. She brushed her hair and pulled it into a high ponytail, then stepped back to assess her reflection.

The woman who looked back at her was put-together, attractive, confident. She looked good, and she knew it. Jess turned sideways, noting how the high-waisted shorts accentuated her waist before hugging her ass. The outfit was appropriate for the gym, but it was definitely on the more flattering end of the spectrum. Was she dressing up for herself or for the attention she might receive?

Jess gathered her gym bag and water bottle, then stopped by Tom's office. He was already absorbed in his laptop, fingers flying across the keyboard, brow furrowed in concentration. She knocked lightly on the open door.

"I'm heading out," she announced. "Need anything from the store I didn't put on the list?"

Tom looked up, his focus momentarily broken. His eyes traveled over her, taking in the outfit. "No, I think you covered everything," he said. "You look really good."

"Just gym clothes," Jess replied with a casual shrug that contradicted the care she'd taken in selecting them.

Tom stood and crossed the room to her. "Have a good workout," he said, his hands finding her waist. He pulled her close, pressing his lips to hers in a kiss.

Jess responded in kind, her free hand coming up to rest on his chest. The kiss lingered, neither of them pulling away, until it had stretched well beyond a casual goodbye. When they finally separated, both were slightly breathless.

"What was that for?" Jess asked with a smile on her face. "Just because," Tom replied.

"Drive safe."

"I will," Jess promised, reluctantly stepping back from his embrace. "See you in a couple of hours."

The drive to the gym was quick, just under fifteen minutes on the Sunday morning roads. Jess found herself lost in thought, replaying the events of the past few days in her mind. The Savannah trip had been a professional triumph, certainly, but it had also marked a personal shift. She had flirted with strangers at the cocktail party, had enjoyed the power of being desired without feeling diminished by it. She had reconnected with a part of herself she'd long suppressed, the part that enjoyed attention, that thrived on admiration.

And then there was Bob. The naked massage had crossed a significant line, one that still left her both exhilarated and uneasy when she thought about it. She'd been completely nude, exposed to their tenant's gaze, his hands on her body, even her breasts.

Now Tom wanted more. Wanted her to ask Bob to touch her "more explicitly." Wanted to hear about it afterward. Had even given explicit permission for sex if that's what she decided she wanted.

The parking lot at Elite Fitness was only about a third full when Jess pulled in, typical for a Sunday morning. She grabbed her gym bag from the passenger seat and headed inside, nodding to the familiar face at the front desk as she scanned her membership card.

Jess scanned the space, noting the scattered members, predominantly men with a few women interspersed. Her eyes lingered on the free weight area, half-hoping to spot Brandon but he was nowhere to be seen. A twinge of disappointment surprised her.

Jess set her bag down in an empty locker, secured it with the combination lock she always carried, and headed for the weight machines. Sunday was usually her upper

body day, and she was determined to stick to her routine despite the emotional turmoil swirling beneath the surface.

She started with lat pulldowns, adjusting the weight to her usual setting. As she settled onto the seat, she caught the reflection of a man watching her in the mirror that lined the wall. He

quickly looked away when she met his gaze, his attention suddenly focused on adjusting the weights on his own machine.

It was nothing unusual. Men looked at her at the gym. They always had. But now, after Savannah, after the naked massage with Bob, after all the conversations with Tom about his fantasies, Jess found herself more aware of these gazes, more attuned to their meaning.

What would happen if she smiled back? If she held eye contact a moment longer than necessary? If she gave any indication that she welcomed the attention?

In Savannah, she'd done exactly that. She'd smiled at strangers, had allowed conversations to develop. The freedom had been intoxicating, the anonymity of being away from home creating a space where she could explore without consequence.

But this was Austin. This was her regular gym, where she might run into the same people week after week. The stakes felt higher, the potential for complications more significant. What if she encountered these men in professional settings later? What if rumors started? What if someone recognized her as Tom's wife?

The questions churned in her mind as she moved through her workout, completing three sets of lat pulldowns before moving on to seated cable rows. She maintained her focus on form, on the burn in her muscles, on the steady rhythm of her breathing. Physical activity had always been her preferred method for processing emotional complexity, the clarity of movement providing an anchor when her thoughts threatened to spiral.

By the time she finished with the weight machines and moved to the free weights for bicep curls, Jess had drawn the attention of several men in the gym. None approached her directly, but she felt their gazes, tracking her movements, lingering when she bent to select a weight or reached up to adjust her ponytail. She wondered what Tom would think if he could see her, surrounded by male attention, the object of desire.

Would he be jealous? Aroused? Both? The boundary between those emotions seemed increasingly blurred in their relationship, each feeding into the other in a complex feedback loop that neither of them fully understood.

Jess completed her upper body routine in about forty-five minutes, feeling the pleasant burn of exertion in her muscles. She took a long drink from her water bottle and headed for the treadmills. A twenty-minute run would cap off her workout nicely, providing time for both cardiovascular benefit and continued reflection.

She set the machine for her usual interval program and began at a brisk walk, allowing her muscles to adjust before increasing to a jog. The rhythmic pounding of her feet against the belt created a meditative backdrop as her thoughts drifted to Savannah again.

The professional respect she'd received there had been deeply satisfying. The craftsmen, the restoration specialists, the historical preservationists, they'd all engaged with her ideas, had recognized her expertise, had treated her as a valued professional rather than just a pretty face. Even Webb, despite his obvious personal interest, had acknowledged her talent, had given her real authority over design aspects of the project.

That respect had coexisted with the more personal attention she'd received at the cocktail party. She'd been able to be both, the respected designer and the woman who enjoyed flirtation, who moved confidently on the dance floor, who felt the power of her own beauty without being reduced to it.

At home, Tom increasingly seemed fixated on her interactions with other men. She had initially felt in control of the exploration with Bob. But now Tom's suggestions were shifting the dynamic, nudging her toward actions she wasn't sure she would choose on her own. His statement that sex was on the table if she wanted it had moved the goalposts significantly, altering the parameters of their agreement without proper discussion.

The treadmill beeped, signaling a shift in the interval program. The speed increased, and Jess pushed herself harder.

Despite her concerns, despite the unease that lingered at the edges of her consciousness, Jess couldn't deny the genuine warmth she felt toward Tom. He had created a loving homecoming for her, had cooked dinner and breakfast, had shown interest in her professional accomplishments. He had supported her career consistently, had never tried to hold her back or diminish her success.

The contradiction left her dizzy, unable to reconcile the loving husband who prepared breakfast with the man who suggested she ask their tenant to give her an orgasm. Were they the same person? Was one more authentic than the other? Or was this simply a new facet of their relationship, a complexity they were still learning to navigate?

The treadmill beeped again, beginning its cool-down cycle. Jess gradually reduced her pace, her breathing slowing, sweat cooling on her skin.

After a quick shower in the gym's locker room, Jess changed into jeans and a simple blouse for her grocery run. She felt refreshed physically, but mentally she remained unsettled, the workout having provided temporary distraction rather than lasting clarity.

The drive to Whole Foods was short. Sunday mid-morning was busier than Jess would have preferred, the parking lot nearly full, but she managed to find a spot at the far end.

Inside, Jess grabbed a cart and began working through her list, starting with produce. She selected salad greens, vegetables for meal prep, fruits for snacking.

In the organic apple section, Jess was comparing two particularly appealing Pink Ladies when she became aware of someone watching her. She glanced up to find a man standing nearby, apparently examining the Honeycrisps but clearly more interested in her than the fruit.

He was attractive in a conventional way, tall, with dark hair, green eyes, and the kind of confident posture that suggested comfort in his own skin. When he caught her looking, he smiled rather than glancing away.

"The Pink Ladies are definitely better than the Honeycrisps this week," he said, his voice pleasantly deep. "If you're trying to decide."

Jess returned his smile, her decision made in that moment. This was exactly the kind of harmless flirtation she'd enjoyed in Savannah, the kind of interaction that would excite

Tom when she recounted it later. “Is that so?” she replied. “Are you an apple expert?”

The man’s smile widened, revealing perfectly straight teeth. “More of an enthusiast than an expert,” he said, stepping closer. “I’m Daniel, by the way.”

"Jess," she replied, placing the Pink Ladies in her cart. "And I'll take your recommendation under advisement."

"Always happy to share my produce opinions," Daniel said. "Though I'd argue my taste in wine is more reliable than my taste in apples."

"Is that your subtle way of suggesting we should discuss wine instead?" Jess asked, allowing a hint of flirtation to enter her voice.

Daniel laughed. "Not subtle at all, actually," he admitted. "I was hoping you might be interested in continuing this conversation somewhere that serves drinks rather than sells them."

"That's very direct," Jess observed, neither accepting nor rejecting the invitation.

"Life's too short for ambiguity," Daniel replied with a casual shrug. "Especially when you meet someone intriguing in the produce section on a Sunday morning."

Jess found herself genuinely amused by his approach, confident without being arrogant, direct without being crude. In another life, or if she weren't married, she might have been tempted to accept his invitation.

"I'm flattered," she said, "but I should mention I'm married."

Daniel glanced at her left hand. "I noticed," he said. "But I figured it was worth asking anyway. Some marriages have... flexibility."

Jess felt her cheeks warm slightly, but she maintained her composure. "Not mine," she

replied. "Fair enough," Daniel said, his smile never faltering. "Can't blame a guy for

trying."

"No, you can't," Jess agreed, deciding to end the conversation before it became awkward. "Nice meeting you, Daniel."

"Likewise, Jess," he replied. "And remember, Pink Ladies. You won't regret it." "I'll

keep that in mind," she said, already turning her cart toward the next aisle.

Daniel didn't follow, accepting the rejection with good grace. As Jess continued her shopping, she found herself mentally composing the story she would tell Tom later. The handsome stranger, the flirtatious exchange, the dinner invitation she'd declined. She knew exactly how Tom would respond, with that mixture of jealousy and arousal that had become the hallmark of their intimacy lately.

The thought left her feeling both powerful and slightly manipulative. Was she flirting with strangers now specifically to provoke a reaction from Tom? Was she deliberately creating scenarios that would fuel his fantasies? And if so, what did that mean for their relationship?

The questions followed her through the rest of her shopping trip, lingering as she selected meat for the week's meals, pasta and rice for side dishes, snacks and beverages to restock their depleted pantry. By the time she reached the checkout line, her cart was full and her mind no closer to resolution than it had been that morning.

The cashier was young, probably in his early twenties, with dark-rimmed glasses and nervous energy. He smiled as Jess approached, the expression flickering across his face before disappearing into concentration as he began scanning her items.

"Did you find everything you were looking for?" he asked, the question clearly part of his required script rather than genuine inquiry.

"I did, thank you," Jess replied, her tone warmer than necessary.

"That's great," he said, his voice gaining confidence. "The Pink Ladies are excellent this week."

Jess laughed softly, surprised by the coincidence. "So I've been told," she said. "Seems like everyone's an apple expert today."

The cashier smiled, the expression more natural this time. "My mom's really into apples," he explained. "She has like, six trees in her backyard. I grew up eating every kind you can imagine."

"That sounds amazing," Jess said. "Fresh picked apples are the best."

"They really are," the cashier agreed, scanning the last of her items. "Makes the store bought ones seem kind of sad by comparison."

Jess handed over her credit card. "Well, these will have to do until I can find a friend with an apple orchard."

"Or you could just come back next week," the cashier suggested, a hint of nervousness returning to his voice. "We get new shipments on Thursdays."

"Good to know," she said neutrally, accepting her receipt. "Thanks for the tip." "Have a

great day," the cashier called as she pushed her cart toward the exit.

"You too," Jess replied over her shoulder, already mentally shifting to the task of loading the groceries into her car.

The exchange had been minor, barely worth noting, yet Jess found herself adding it to the narrative she was constructing for Tom. The young cashier's nervous attention, his apple anecdote, his suggestion she return next week. It would fit neatly into the story of her grocery trip, another example of male attention that Tom seemed to find so exciting.

As Jess loaded bags into her trunk, she caught herself wondering whether she'd emphasized certain details, downplayed others, to create the most effective story for Tom's consumption. Was she curating her experiences now, filtering them through the lens of what would most excite her husband?

The thought wasn't entirely comfortable. She closed the trunk, returned the cart to the collection area, and slid into the driver's seat. Normality beckoned from home. Meal prep, laundry, the mundane tasks that formed the backbone of their shared life.

Beneath that routine, currents of complexity swirled. The boundary between fantasy and reality had become increasingly permeable, with Tom's desires shaping her actions in ways both subtle and overt. The rules they'd established at Vesper were being rewritten, the goalposts moved without proper discussion.

As Jess started the car and began the drive home, she acknowledged a difficult truth that had been hovering at the edges of her consciousness all morning. A conversation about Bob, about boundaries, about their relationship, couldn't be postponed indefinitely. Tom had respected her request for a normal Sunday, but the questions remained, waiting for answers she wasn't sure she had.

Jess nestled deeper into the corner of the couch, her bare feet tucked beneath her as she cradled a glass of red wine. The cooking competition on TV provided just enough background noise to fill what might otherwise be an awkward silence. Contestants rushed around, assembling elaborate dishes while judges offered commentary that neither she nor Tom were fully following.

Sunday night. The natural boundary between weekend and workweek. Tomorrow, they'd both return to their professional lives, Tom to the final stages of the Meridian implementation that had consumed him for months, and Jess to the conclusion of Skyline while simultaneously launching both Magnolia House and the Houston project. The weight of those responsibilities loomed, but they felt distant compared to the conversation Jess knew they couldn't avoid any longer.

She glanced at Tom, who sat at the opposite end of the couch, one arm stretched along the back cushions, fingers occasionally brushing her shoulder in an absent gesture of connection. His expression was relaxed. They'd cooked together, eaten a proper meal at their dining table, discussed mundane topics like Jess's parents' upcoming anniversary and Tom's friend's new job. They'd washed dishes side by side, shoulders occasionally bumping.

It had been nice, normal, the kind of Sunday that had once been their standard before careers and complications had intruded. But beneath that veneer of normalcy, questions had simmered in Jess's mind all day, refusing to be silenced by meal prep or grocery unpacking or TV watching.

She took a sip of wine, drawing strength from both the alcohol and the knowledge that this conversation couldn't be postponed any longer.

"Tom," she began, her voice cutting through the TV chef's enthusiastic description of a reduction sauce. "We need to talk about last night."

Tom's fingers stilled on her shoulder. He muted the TV before turning to face her more directly. "Okay," he said, his tone cautious but not defensive.

"Last night, you said something that's been bothering me all day," Jess continued, choosing her words carefully. "When we were talking about Bob, you said that sex was on the table. That if I wanted to have sex with him, you'd be okay with it."

Tom took a slow breath. "I wasn't saying you should do it," he clarified, "just that if you wanted to, I wouldn't be opposed."

Jess studied his face, searching for signs that he was backtracking, claiming it had been

heat of the moment dirty talk rather than a genuine statement. She found none. “So you’re serious about that? You genuinely meant it?”

“Yes,” Tom said simply.

The directness of his answer unsettled her. She'd half-expected him to laugh it off, to claim it was just fantasy talk that had gone too far. "So if I decide to open my legs for Bob and he actually puts his penis inside me, you'd be okay with that?"

Her deliberately crude phrasing was designed to force reality into what she suspected Tom had relegated to fantasy. To her surprise, he didn't flinch.

"Yes," he repeated, meeting her gaze. "If that's what you want."

Jess set her wine glass on the coffee table, needing both hands free for the gravity of this conversation. "Tom, at Vesper we agreed sex was off the table. I made that point specifically because you had already brought it up before that, and I wanted to be crystal clear. You agreed to that."

Tom leaned forward. "I know what I said at Vesper. And I meant it at the time. But things have evolved since then, Jess. We've both discovered things about ourselves, about what excites us."

"And that gives you the right to change our agreement?" Jess asked, keeping her tone even despite the frustration rising within her.

"That's not what I'm doing," Tom protested. "What turns me on is seeing you explore your desires. I'm not pushing you to have sex with Bob or anyone else. I'm just removing my objection as a barrier if that's something you might want."

Jess let out a short, humorless laugh. "That sounds like lawyer talk, Tom. 'I'm not pushing you, I'm just removing barriers.' That's semantics and you know it."

Tom's expression shifted, a flicker of defensiveness crossing his features. "I'm not trying to manipulate the situation, Jess. I'm trying to be honest about what I'm comfortable with."

"Tom, this isn't about adding sprinkles to ice cream. These are major boundaries in our marriage." Jess ran a hand through her hair, gathering her thoughts. "You can't just casually mention 'oh by the way, sex is on the table now' during pillow talk. That's not how this works."

Inside, Jess's emotions churned. Part of her appreciated Tom's honesty about his evolving desires. Another part felt increasingly uneasy about the pattern emerging, each boundary crossed leading immediately to testing the next one. Where would it end?

"When you say things like that, when you contradict agreements we've made, it makes me feel manipulated or pressured, even if that's not your intention," she continued, her voice softening slightly. "Have you noticed that every time we cross one boundary, you immediately suggest pushing the next one?"

Tom fell silent, his gaze dropping to his hands. After a moment, he looked up, something like realization dawning in his eyes. "I hadn't thought about it that way, but... you're right. I do get caught up in the excitement, especially after hearing about your experiences."

His voice took on an intensity as he continued. “But watching you become more confident, more in touch with that side of yourself, it’s… intoxicating. When you told me about getting naked for Bob, letting him see all of you, even your most private parts, letting him touch your breasts, your nipples, and then going upstairs and touching yourself because you were so

turned on..." He paused, swallowing visibly. "That was one of the hottest things you've ever told me."

Jess felt her cheeks warm at the reminder of her behavior last Tuesday afternoon. She couldn't deny that it had excited her too, and that sharing the details with Tom had been intensely erotic for both of them.

"And then Savannah," Tom continued, "hearing about how you danced with different men, let a man squeeze your ass on the dance floor, let a man walk you to your room. Last night you told me you would have fucked that guy if you were single, would have taken his cock down your throat."

His eyes locked with hers. "You talked about your confidence, about how you're constantly thinking about sex lately. These are fucking incredible things to hear from the woman I love, and yes, it makes me wonder what else we'd feel if things went further."

"That's exactly what worries me," Jess said. "Where does it end, Tom? If I did have sex with Bob, would you immediately start thinking about me with other men? Multiple men? In public?"

The questions weren't purely hypothetical. Jess could see the pattern forming, each new experience becoming normalized, then serving as the foundation for something more extreme. The progression from flirting to touching to potential sex seemed to have an internal logic that concerned her deeply.

Tom ran a hand through his hair. "I honestly haven't thought that far ahead," he admitted. "I've been focused on the moment, on the fantasy directly in front of me."

"But that's the problem, isn't it?" Jess pressed. "You're imagining this perfect scenario where I sleep with Bob, tell you all about it, and nothing changes between us. But real life isn't that clean."

"You're treating sex like it's just a physical act, like shaking hands but with genitals," she continued. "But it's not. It's emotional, even when we pretend it isn't. Sex is messy. It creates complications that can't be predicted or controlled."

Tom shifted closer on the couch, his hand finding hers. "I understand what you're saying. But I'm only open to pushing boundaries and exploring this because I'm absolutely certain in our commitment to each other." His voice was earnest, his grip on her hand tightening slightly. "I love you more every day, Jess. I'm not worried about other men because I know, without a doubt, that we would never leave each other."

His gaze never wavered as he continued, "I see this part of our life as sexual exploration, a time to have fun and experiment before we become serious adults with kids. It's not a permanent adventure, just a chapter in our relationship."

Jess stared at him, surprise momentarily silencing her. She pulled her hand from his grip.

"Tom, we're not college students on spring break," she said. "We're married. We're building careers. When did having sex with other people become some kind of prerequisite to parenthood?"

The question held genuine bewilderment. Somewhere in their relationship, assumptions had formed that Jess hadn't been party to, expectations she hadn't agreed upon or even recognized until this moment.

Tom backpedaled slightly, his expression shifting to one of clarification rather than defense. “That’s not what I meant. I just...” He paused, searching for words. “Once we have kids, we won’t have the freedom to explore like this. Everything will be about schedules and responsibilities and putting the children first, as it should be. This feels like our window to experience things we might otherwise never get to.”

Jess shook her head, frustration rising. “But we already did that. We dated other people before we met. We chose each other, committed to each other.”

She thought about her past relationships, about the modeling days when men had looked at her. Those experiences had shaped her, certainly, but she’d never viewed them as some checklist of sexual exploration that needed to be completed before she could fully commit to family life.

“I’ve never regretted choosing monogamy with you,” she said softly. “It never felt like a sacrifice. Until recently, it never occurred to me that I was missing out on anything by being faithful to you.”

“I don’t think you’ve been missing out,” Tom clarified. “And it’s not that I feel I’ve missed out by being with only you. But now that we’ve started exploring this side of our relationship, I’ve realized how exciting it can be. How it can actually bring us closer together rather than driving us apart.”

There was truth in what he said. Their sex life had never been more passionate, their communication about desires and boundaries never more honest. Yet the pattern of escalation troubled her.

Jess met Tom’s gaze directly. “Even though you say it’s entirely my choice, do you understand how all of this feels like increasing pressure to fulfill your escalating fantasies? How it feels like I’m disappointing you if I don’t go further each time?”

Tom looked startled by the question. “That’s never been my intention,” he said quickly. “Your enjoyment is the whole point of the fantasy for me. If you’re doing things just to please me rather than for your genuine pleasure, that kills the whole thing.”

“But Tom, that’s exactly what’s been happening,” Jess admitted. “Today at Whole Foods, I was flirting with this guy, Daniel, in the produce section. He was attractive, gave me a line about Pink Lady apples being better than Honeycrisp, asked me out for drinks. Then there was this young cashier who was clearly nervous around me, mentioned his mother growing apple trees, suggested I come back next Thursday when they get new shipments.”

Tom’s expression showed interest, but Jess wasn’t finished.

“The whole time we were talking, I was thinking about how I would tell you about it later,” she continued. “I was mentally crafting the story, highlighting certain details, planning how to present it to turn you on. I was performing.”

Understanding dawned on Tom’s face, followed by a conflicted expression. “I don’t want you to perform,” he said.

“Don’t you?” Jess challenged. “Isn’t that exactly what excites you? Hearing me describe encounters with other men in detail, asking for specifics about what they said, how they looked at me?”

Tom didn't deny it. "I love hearing those stories," he admitted. "But why can't it be both? Why can't you enjoy the experience and also know that sharing it with me later will be hot for both of us?"

The question was complex rather than accusatory. Jess considered it seriously before responding.

"Maybe it can be," she acknowledged. "But there's a contradiction in what you want, Tom. You say you want me to explore my sexuality, but only in ways that serve your fantasies. What if I develop desires or experience things you haven't anticipated or scripted?"

Tom's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Jess leaned forward, holding his gaze. "What if I did sleep with Bob, and discovered I preferred sex with him? What if I found something with him you can't give me? What if I really liked his 'huge cock' as you put it? Are you prepared for that possibility?"

She expected defensiveness, perhaps even anger. Instead, Tom's expression showed something closer to excitement mixed with vulnerability.

"That's actually what makes it so exciting," he admitted, his voice dropping slightly. "The idea that you might experience something new, something I can't give you... but that you'd still come back to me. You'd still be mine."

The admission stunned Jess momentarily.

"So your fantasy only works if I try other men but still decide you're the best?" she asked, probing deeper. "What if that's not what happens?"

"I'm not worried because I know you love me," Tom said with surprising confidence. "Sex is just sex. What we have is deeper than that." He paused, then added, "I wouldn't even mind if you found someone who could give you twenty orgasms in an hour, as long as you come back to me and tell me everything."

Jess shook her head, amazed at the disconnect in their understanding. "Tom, our sex life has never been better since we started this fantasy exploration. That's because it's emotional for us. Sex and emotions aren't separate things." She reached for his hand again, needing the physical connection to emphasize her point. "Sex with Bob wouldn't happen in an emotional vacuum. There would be feelings involved. Mine, yours, and Bob's."

"I trust you," Tom said simply.

"I know you do," Jess replied. "And I appreciate that more than I can express. But this isn't just about trust. It's about understanding the consequences of what we're considering."

She paused, another question forming that had been lingering at the edges of her thoughts. "But why Bob, specifically? You seem fixated on him. A month ago, you were almost suspicious of him. What changed?"

Tom seemed to consider his answer carefully. “It’s not just about Bob,” he said finally. “It could be anyone else. Even Derek, your yoga teacher.”

Jess blinked in surprise. Derek? The image of her yoga instructor's lean, muscular body and his gentle yet firm adjustments during class flashed through her mind. Unlike Bob's weathered masculinity, Derek possessed a refined, almost spiritual energy that she'd admittedly found attractive.

But the shift from Bob to potentially any man represented an expansion of what they'd been discussing. She made a mental note to return to this point later.

"Bob," Tom continued, apparently unaware of her surprise, "is someone we know, someone in our home, but not connected to our social or professional circles. There's less risk experimenting with Bob than with anyone else in our life."

He hesitated, then added, "And I think his age creates a power dynamic that's kind of exciting, the older man, younger woman thing. Plus, I know you'd never leave me for him."

The casual dismissal of Bob as a legitimate threat to their marriage bothered Jess in ways she couldn't immediately articulate. There was something reductive about it, as if Bob's age and status made him less than a full person.

"Have you considered what Bob might be thinking?" she asked. "He's not just a prop in our fantasy, Tom. He's a person with his own feelings."

"Oh, I'm sure he'd love nothing more than to be intimate with you," Tom replied without hesitation. "Remember that photoshoot when he moved in? He couldn't take his eyes off you that night. And he gets hard during the massages, Jess. Any man, especially an older divorced man, would love to touch someone as gorgeous as you."

Jess frowned slightly. "You can't know that for certain. You're making assumptions about what he wants."

"Are you seriously questioning whether Bob would want to have sex with you?" Tom asked, incredulity in his voice.

Jess sighed. "No, you're probably right about that. He likely would be interested. But he's been respectful and professional during the massages, even when I was completely naked."

"Of course," Tom replied.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, organizing her thoughts. "The massage did turn me on," she admitted quietly. "But that doesn't mean I want to have sex with him."

"I get that," Tom replied.

Jess seemed to be studying his face, searching for something in his expression. "Is there something else going on here, Tom? Is this fantasy filling some void for you? Is our sex life not enough?"

"God, no," Tom said emphatically. "Our sex life is better than ever. This just takes it to another level."

His vehemence was reassuring, yet Jess couldn't help wondering if there were deeper psychological drives behind his fantasies that neither of them fully understood.

"What about Tuesday?" Jess asked after a moment of silence. "What do you want to happen?"

Tom hesitated. “I’m hoping that you’ll get another nude massage, and...” He paused, visibly struggling to articulate the exact fantasy he’d shared the previous night. “That you’ll ask Bob to touch you more intimately. And that you might return the favor.”

The bluntness of his statement sent a jolt through Jess despite having heard the same sentiment the night before. Something about discussing it in the living room, fully clothed, with a cooking show muted in the background, made it feel more real, more consequential than when whispered during lovemaking.

“So the same thing you said last night,” Jess clarified, forcing Tom to confront the reality of his fantasy directly. “You want me to ask Bob to give me an orgasm? And then you want me to give him a blowjob? Is that what you’re saying?”

Tom met her gaze. “Yes,” he admitted. “But only if you’re comfortable with it. Only on your terms.”

Jess decided to push further, to make the abstract concrete with increasingly explicit language. “You want Bob, our divorced fifty-five-year-old tenant, to put his big fingers inside my vagina? Inside the place only you’ve touched since we got together? And you want him to finger me until I orgasm? And then, you want me to give him a blowjob in return? Is that what you’re saying?”

Tom swallowed visibly but didn’t look away. “Yes,” he said simply. “But only if-” “If

I’m comfortable,” Jess finished for him. “You keep saying that.”

She took a deep breath, trying to organize the tumult of emotions swirling inside her. Part of her was undeniably curious about what it would feel like to let Bob touch her more intimately.
Another part was worried about the potential fallout, the complications that would inevitably follow.

“If I do this on Tuesday, and I’m not saying I will,” Jess began carefully, “what happens next week? And the week after? Does Bob become a regular part of our sex life? Do you expect me to blow him every Tuesday and Thursday during my lunch breaks?”

Tom blinked, looking genuinely uncertain. “I... haven’t thought that far ahead,” he admitted.

“That’s the problem,” Jess pointed out. “You’re too focused on the immediate fantasy without considering the long-term implications. What if Bob develops feelings? What happens if he expects more? Have you considered how messy this could get with someone who literally lives in our house?”

“Bob understands this is just physical,” Tom said with a dismissively. “He’s an adult who’s been married twice. He knows the score.”

“You can’t possibly know what Bob is thinking or feeling,” Jess challenged, irritation creeping into her voice. “You keep talking about him like he’s some character in a porn movie who exists solely for our fantasy. He’s a real person, Tom. With real feelings.”

The conversation seemed to be circling, neither of them fully hearing the other. Jess decided to shift to more practical considerations.

“What about protection?” she asked. “Sexual health? What would be off-limits? Would he be allowed to kiss me? Would you expect details afterward? Would you want to watch or just hear about it later?”

Tom seemed taken aback by the rapid-fire questions but gathered himself quickly. “Definitely no kissing,” he replied with firmness. “That feels too intimate, too emotional. And obviously protection would be non-negotiable.” His expression softened slightly. “Beyond that, you could decide what you’re comfortable with. But safety would be paramount. And yes, I would need to hear about every single encounter. The details are... important to me.”

Jess nodded, processing this. The kissing prohibition was interesting. Where Tom drew his emotional line revealed a lot about how he compartmentalized physical versus emotional intimacy. She understood the logic. Kissing was often more intimate than other acts, carrying emotional weight beyond the physical. Still, the arbitrary nature of these boundaries struck her as somewhat artificial, as if certain acts could be neatly separated from their emotional components.

Silence settled between them, both seemingly exhausted by the intensity of the conversation. On the TV, a contestant presented their dish to the judges, their nervous excitement visible despite the muted audio.

“So,” Tom said finally, breaking the silence. “Tuesday. What are you thinking?” Jess took

a moment to answer, carefully choosing her words.

“Like I said, I did enjoy the massage with Bob,” she said. “That’s not something I can deny. It was exciting to be so exposed, to feel his hands on my skin, even on my breasts. But there’s a huge difference between enjoying a massage and asking someone to touch me intimately.”

Tom leaned closer. “But are you curious? Does part of you wonder what it might be like?”

The question cut to the heart of her conflict. Jess couldn’t deny that a certain curiosity existed, a wondering about what Bob’s fingers might feel like against her clit, inside her. The forbidden nature of it carried an undeniable charge, heightened by Tom’s obvious excitement at the possibility.

“I can’t pretend I haven’t thought about it,” she acknowledged. “But thoughts are different from actions. What do I want? I’m genuinely conflicted.”

She shifted position, turning to face Tom more directly. “Honestly, Tom, part of me is a bit curious about what it would feel like to let Bob touch me. But we still haven’t figured out what comes after, where this path leads.”

“I feel like I’m on a train that’s picking up speed, and I’m not sure I know where the tracks end,” she continued. “But whatever I choose, I need it to be my choice, for my reasons, not just to fulfill your evolving fantasies. And most importantly, I need us to stop treating this like some inevitable progression. Each step should be its own decision, not just a stepping stone to something more extreme. Can you understand that?”

Tom nodded, his expression serious. “I do understand. And I support whatever you decide.”

Jess remembered what Tom had said earlier that she’d flagged mentally to revisit. “You mentioned it could be anyone, even Derek. What did you mean by that? You’ve only ever talked about Bob in these terms.”

Tom seemed to be considering his words carefully. “What would turn me on more than anything,” he began slowly, “is to actually give you all the power, to give you the green light to do anything you want with any man and not talk about it together beforehand.”

Jess stared at him, trying to process this significant expansion of their previous discussions. “That’s a huge shift from what we’ve been talking about.”

“I know,” Tom acknowledged. “But Friday night, when you were at that party in Savannah, I couldn’t sleep. I was so anxious but also turned on at the same time because it was real. You were just doing what you wanted to. That reality, that authenticity is what makes it so intense.”

“So you want me to cheat on you?” Jess asked, struggling to understand exactly what Tom was proposing.

“No,” Tom replied quickly. “It wouldn’t be cheating if you had my blessing and if you came home and told me everything.”

Jess studied his face, trying to reconcile this new information with everything she thought she understood about their arrangement. “Let me get this straight. You’re saying that beyond Bob, beyond the scenarios we discuss beforehand, you’d be aroused by the idea of me just... doing whatever I want with whomever I want?”

“Yes,” Tom admitted. “The thought of you making those choices without my input, without my approval, but with my permission, that’s... so fucking hot”

“Why haven’t you mentioned this before?” Jess asked, genuine confusion in her voice. “We’ve spent ages talking about Bob, about boundaries.”

Tom shifted in his seat, clearly struggling to articulate feelings he hadn’t fully processed himself. “I didn’t realize how strongly I felt about it until Friday night. When you were at that party in Savannah and I was here alone, not knowing what was happening... it was torture, but I was so turned on.”

“That doesn’t sound healthy, Tom,” Jess said carefully. “Being tortured by anxiety while getting turned on by it.”

“Maybe not,” Tom conceded. “But it felt real in a way our explorations haven’t. When you’re swimming in that bikini with Bob watching, when you got naked for him, it was exciting but also... safe.”

Jess felt a flicker of irritation. “So now what we’ve been doing is too tame? Too predictable?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Tom backtracked quickly. “It’s been incredible. It’s just that Friday night showed me there’s another level to this. The complete uncertainty, not knowing what you might choose to do when I’m not there...”

“But wouldn’t that be completely different?” Jess pressed. “If I’m with someone else without you knowing beforehand, without discussing it first, that’s different from what

we've been exploring. That's not you witnessing me with someone else, even second-hand. That's me having a separate sex life that I report back to you about."

"Yes. And for some reason I can't fully explain, that's so fucking hot to me."

Jess sat back, taking a long sip of her wine as she processed this revelation. This went beyond the fantasy they'd been carefully exploring. This was something else entirely. She shook her head slightly, still trying to wrap her mind around this shift. "This feels like such a leap from where we started. From exploration to... this."

"I'm not saying we should jump right to that," Tom clarified. "I just wanted to be honest about where my thoughts are."

"And where exactly do my thoughts fit into this scenario?" Jess challenged. "Have you considered that maybe I don't want complete freedom? That maybe the structure and boundaries we've established together are what make this exploration feel safe for me?"

Tom looked genuinely startled by this perspective. "I thought... I assumed more freedom would be appealing."

"That's the problem," Jess said. "You're making assumptions about what I want based on what turns you on. But relationships don't work that way, Tom. Even in this thing we're exploring, we need to make decisions together, not just default to whatever fantasy happens to turn you on at the moment."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I got carried away."

Jess softened slightly at his acknowledgment. "I understand these feelings and fantasies can be overwhelming. They've been intense for me too. But we need to be careful about letting your escalating fantasies drive our actual decisions."

"I know," Tom agreed. "And honestly, I'm not saying we should implement this anytime soon. It was just... a thought. A fantasy."

Jess considered him for a moment before asking, "Is this why you suddenly brought up Derek? Do you have specific men in mind that you'd want me to consider beyond Bob?"

Tom hesitated. "Not specifically, no. Derek was just an example because you've mentioned him a few times."

Jess sat back, processing everything. After a moment, she said, "I think we need to table that particular fantasy for now, Tom. It's too much, too fast. We're still figuring out the dynamics with Bob. Let's not complicate things until we've figured out what's already on our plate."

"That makes sense," Tom agreed, looking relieved that she hadn't shut down the conversation entirely. "One step at a time."

"Exactly," Jess said.

"And speaking of one step at a time..." Tom paused, bringing them back to the more immediate concern. "About Tuesday... what are you thinking?"

Jess considered her options carefully. The conversation had covered significant ground, revealing depths to Tom's fantasies and her own mixed feelings that would require further reflection. But he was right that Tuesday loomed as a more immediate decision point.

“I’ll consider Tuesday,” she said finally. “I won’t promise anything specific, but I’ll be open to the possibility of exploring further with Bob.” She paused, fixing Tom with a serious look. “However, I need you to promise something in return.”

Tom nodded, eager. "Anything."

"After Tuesday, regardless of what happens, if I want to take a break from the Bob massages, or if I decide to stop altogether, I need you to support that decision completely. No pressure, no subtle hints about what turns you on."

"Absolutely," Tom agreed without hesitation. "This is about you more than anything. I'll support whatever you decide, no questions asked."

Jess studied his face, looking for any sign of reluctance or insincerity, but found only earnest support. Whatever his fantasies entailed, whatever desires drove him, Tom genuinely seemed to value her agency in all this.

Tom leaned forward, closing the distance between them on the couch. His hand came up to cup her cheek as he pressed his lips to hers. Jess responded, her hand finding the back of his neck, fingers threading through his hair as the kiss intensified.

After several moments, they broke apart. Jess settled against Tom's chest as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He unmuted the TV, returning them to the comfortable Sunday night, but Jess's mind continued to churn with the implications of their conversation.

Could she really cross this line with Bob? What would it feel like to have his fingers inside her? Could she take his cock in her mouth? Would it destroy the delicate balance they'd established, turning their tenant-landlord relationship into something messy and complicated? And beyond the immediate questions about Tuesday loomed larger concerns about the path they were on, the boundaries they were dismantling one by one, the potential consequences neither of them could fully predict.

Tom seemed to notice her distraction. "You're thinking pretty hard over there," he observed, his fingers tracing idle patterns on her shoulder.

"Just processing," Jess replied, looking up at him, not ready to articulate the full extent of her concerns.

"Whatever you decide," Tom said softly, "it won't change how I feel about you. I love you, Jess. That's the one constant in all of this."

"I love you too," she replied, meaning it completely despite the uncertainties swirling within her. They fell back into comfortable silence, the low volume of the TV the only sound in the room.

Outside, darkness had fully claimed the neighborhood, streetlights casting warm pools on the sidewalk. Sunday night was deepening toward Monday morning, the workweek looming with its own demands and distractions.

Tomorrow, Jess would return to her office, immerse herself in the Magnolia House details, consult with Annie about material selections, review Chen's preliminary documents for the Houston project. Professional responsibilities would temporarily eclipse personal considerations, providing welcome relief from the circular thoughts that

had occupied her weekend.

But Tuesday would inevitably arrive, her usual work from home day, with its laptop work, conference calls, and the now established poolside break where Bob would be waiting. What would she do? What did she truly want?

The question remained unanswered as Jess nestled closer to Tom's side, seeking comfort in the physical connection that had always been the simplest aspect of their relationship. Whatever complexity swirled around them, a basic truth remained. They loved each other, desired each other, were committed to finding their way through this uncharted territory together.

Whether that territory included Bob's hands between her legs on Tuesday remained to

be seen. "It's getting late," Tom murmured. "Bed?" he suggested.

"Bed," Jess confirmed, stretching slightly.

They moved through their nightly routine, turning off lights, brushing teeth side by side in the bathroom mirror. The ordinary tasks reminded Jess that beneath the extraordinary exploration of boundaries they'd undertaken, they remained Tom and Jess Marshall, husband and wife, partners in the mundane as well as the exceptional.

In bed, Tom's arm found her waist, pulling her closer in the darkness. "Thank you," he whispered.

"For what?" Jess asked, her voice equally soft in the quiet room.

"For being willing to talk about this. For considering Tuesday. For trusting me enough to explore this together."

Jess turned in his arms, finding his face in the shadows. "Thank you for listening," she replied. "For promising to support whatever I decide."

Tom's lips found hers, a gentle kiss that carried affection rather than demand. "I love you, Jess. More than anything."

"I love you too," she whispered back.

As Tom's breathing gradually deepened into sleep beside her, Jess remained awake, staring at the ceiling, thoughts circling back to Tuesday. The decision remained unmade, suspended in the space between possibility and commitment. She had time yet, hours to consider, to weigh her genuine desire against external influences.

What did Jessica Marshall want? The question followed her into dreams fragmented by naked massages, strangers offering apples, and trains accelerating toward unknown destinations.

Bob Caldwell checked his watch for the third time in the last fifteen minutes. 12:17 PM.

He shifted in his chair, adjusting his white short-sleeved button-up that was already sticking to his skin in the midday heat. His brown shorts rode up as he crossed his legs, then uncrossed them. The cold beer in his hand had grown warm, barely touched as anticipation overrode thirst.

Beside him on the small patio table sat Jess's iced tea, mint leaves floating on the surface, ice cubes slowly melting in the sun. He'd prepared it exactly as she liked it, not too sweet, brewed that morning and chilled to perfection. Every detail mattered. Especially today.

Bob had been waiting since 11:45 AM, positioning himself with a view of the balcony door. Jess typically emerged around noon on her work from home Tuesdays and Thursdays, never later than 12:20 PM in all their previous sessions. The delay gnawed at him.

He could have engineered an "accidental" meeting on Sunday. It would have been easy enough, a convenient project in the front yard as she headed to the gym, or a timely appearance when she returned from her grocery shopping. But he'd deliberately chosen patience over opportunity.

From a strategic perspective, waiting for today maintained their established pattern. The poolside sessions had become a framework within which boundaries had already been successfully pushed. Each incremental escalation had occurred within this specific context, the red one-piece giving way to smaller bikinis, the sunscreen applications expanding from back to legs to ass, the massage evolving to a completely nude one.

Disrupting this pattern with a Sunday encounter risked appearing too eager, too obvious in his intent. The illusion of Jess being in control of the pace of their relationship was crucial to his strategy. He had carefully positioned himself as the patient, non-threatening guide rather than the aggressor.

The Saturday night conversation between Jess and Tom, captured by his hidden smoke detector camera, had confirmed the wisdom of his patient approach. Bob had reviewed his notes that morning, committing the key points to memory.

"I've been thinking about sex a lot more. Like, constantly," Jess had told Tom. A significant shift in her sexual mindset, indicating she was in a heightened state of arousal generally, not just with her husband.

She had described feeling "free" in Savannah. "Like there were no expectations, no history. Nobody knew me as 'Jessica Marshall, interior designer' or 'Tom's wife.' I was just... me." Her craving for anonymity, for freedom from reputation, was something Bob could leverage. She maintained defensive walls in Austin that had dropped in Savannah.

The conversation had revealed that Jess enjoyed flirting, specifically when it would excite Tom later.

Most crucially, Tom had been explicit about wanting Jess to ask Bob to touch her more intimately during today's massage. "Let him use those thick fingers on you instead of having to go upstairs to finish yourself off," he'd suggested. Tom had even framed it as Jess "helping out" Bob, doing him a favor, claiming Bob probably "goes inside and jerks off immediately" after their sessions.

The idea that Tom was actually encouraging Jess to seek sexual contact with him would have been laughable if Bob hadn't heard it himself. Tom had even explicitly stated he would be okay with Jess doing anything with Bob. When she'd asked, "Even sex?" Tom had answered without hesitation. "Yes. Even that."

Jess had seemed genuinely surprised by this shift, referencing a previous agreement that sex with others was off limits. But despite her objection, she'd become extremely aroused

discussing Bob's "huge cock," even agreeing to the possibility of oral sex. "Maybe I will, then. Maybe he deserves it after making me feel so good with those massages."

One detail from the conversation had soured Bob's satisfaction, the mention of other men. Jess had danced with multiple men at a party in Savannah, including Webb, Chen, and Harrington, the investors behind her projects.

Bob took a longer pull from his beer, his jaw clenching at the thought of these other men. Webb, Chen, and Harrington represented competition he couldn't easily overcome. They had everything he didn't, money, influence, luxury properties, private jets. Billionaire investors circling Jess like sharks, offering opportunities he couldn't match.

He'd have to find a way to remove them as competition. Perhaps by convincing Tom that wealthy men were more threatening to their marriage, that the power dynamics were more complex. Or by suggesting to Jess that men like Webb would never see her as an equal, only as a conquest.

Bob checked his watch again. 12:26 PM. The delay triggered a flicker of uncertainty.

Maybe something had changed. Maybe she and Tom had talked further after Saturday night. Maybe she'd decided to pull back rather than push forward. The conversation he'd overheard had been their private bedroom talk, not a formal discussion about boundaries and next steps. Perhaps in the cold light of day, Jess had reconsidered, had expressed doubts about the direction they were heading.

Or worse, maybe Tom had finally grown a spine. Maybe he'd come to his senses, realized what he was encouraging his wife to do with their tenant, and put a stop to it. Bob had been careful to maintain plausible deniability in all his interactions with Tom, positioning himself as the reluctant participant, the voice of restraint and wisdom. But there was always the risk that Tom might see through the manipulation, might recognize Bob's true intent.

By 12:38 PM, Bob's disappointment had solidified into resignation. She wasn't coming. Something had chan