

## The Bad Tenant Ch. 22

Jess kicked off her heels the moment she entered her room at the Gastonian, not bothering to place them neatly by the door as she normally would. She tossed her portfolio and bag onto the desk before collapsing face first onto the plush bed. Wednesday, 8 PM. Twelve hours of work behind her.

The Weatherby Mansion site had drained every ounce of energy. The grand staircase that had stalled progress for weeks finally had a solution, her solution, after she'd spent hours arguing with the foreman. Garrett, the bearded fifty-something who'd initially dismissed her suggestions with a patronizing "little lady, these stairs were built before your grandparents were born," had finally conceded when she produced historical documentation proving her approach was not only historically accurate but structurally superior.

"You might have a point," he'd admitted grudgingly, stroking his beard, the closest thing to an apology she'd get from the man.

That professional victory should have been enough to carry her through the evening on a high, but an undercurrent of anxiety had simmered beneath the surface all day, reasserting itself now that she was alone.

Every time her attention had drifted during meetings, every quiet moment, her mind had returned to the moment Bob had appeared at her door yesterday. The casual way he'd handed the box to her, as if it were nothing more extraordinary than a bottle of wine or box of chocolates.

"Just a little something for your trip. I thought you might enjoy it while you're away."

She'd stood frozen at her front door, the package open in her hands, brain struggling to process what she was seeing. A cock. Not just any cock. Bob's cock.

Tom had arrived home minutes later to drive her to the airport, leaving her no time to process what had just happened. Some instinct, whether panic,

curiosity, or a bewildering mixture of both, had prompted her to hastily wrap the dildo in a t-shirt and stuff it in her suitcase. She hadn't told him yet.

Going through airport security, she'd been mortified, irrationally certain they would pull the dildo from her suitcase. She'd pictured the scene, TSA agents holding it up, everyone staring, judging.

Jess rolled over with a groan, staring at the ornate ceiling of the historic hotel room. The Gastonian's charm, normally something she'd appreciate, barely registered.

Her suitcase sat in the corner where the bellhop had placed it.

With a sigh, Jess pushed herself upright and padded across the room. She unzipped the suitcase and dug beneath her clothes until she found the t-shirt bundle. She pulled it out, unwrapped it slowly, and there it was.

The craftsmanship was undeniably impressive, shockingly realistic, every vein and ridge captured in detail. She wondered about the process of making it, imagining Bob creating a mold of himself. The planning and effort involved struck her as both flattering and unsettling.

She turned it over in her hands, noting the weight. As she examined it more closely, she realized that a strong suction cup was integrated into the design, allowing it to be mounted on any flat surface.

Part of her recognized a playful, flirty element to the gift that aligned with their established dynamic. After all, she'd sucked his cock and slid her bare pussy against it. The gift wasn't entirely inappropriate within the context they'd established. She found it both audacious and slightly amusing, Bob's bold approach on full display. Yet it bothered her.

The dildo wasn't just a sex toy. Not a generic shape, not an approximation. This was Bob, captured in silicone. His cock. His balls. It was literally a replica of his body intended to be inside her.

The symbolism wasn't subtle. It represented an unmistakable step toward actual penetration, a bridge between their current boundaries and the final one she'd maintained.

It asked a direct question. If she could take a replica inside her, why not the real thing? A move toward penetration, and a clever one at that.

How would it feel inside her? Could she accommodate his size?

Her body responded to these thoughts despite her exhaustion, a warmth between her legs.

"Not tonight," she murmured to the empty room, placing the dildo back into her suitcase.

The decision wasn't final rejection, just a postponement while she processed its implications. Her exhaustion provided convenient justification, but she recognized it was also about maintaining some control over the trajectory of their arrangement.

Jess reached for her phone. She needed to tell Tom about this. The squirting had remained her secret, a choice she still questioned, but keeping yet another significant development from him would further erode their communication. Their first rule was complete honesty, and she'd already compromised that once.

Tom answered on the second ring. "Hey, beautiful. How are you?"

"Completely wiped out," Jess replied. "Flight was delayed an hour, so I didn't land until after midnight. Grabbed maybe four hours of sleep before the 7 AM site meeting. Then twelve straight hours of Weatherby Mansion chaos."

"That sounds brutal. Have you eaten anything?"

"Breakfast was a protein bar and some truly awful coffee from the site trailer. But I had lunch and dinner. Finally made it back to the Gastonian about half

an hour ago. I'm sprawled across the bed wondering whether I have energy to shower."

"The Gastonian still has those ridiculously comfortable beds, right?"

"God, yes. But how was your day?"

"Productive. Finally got things rolling with the new project."

"Oh right, I completely forgot to ask about that yesterday with the airport rush. How's it going?"

"Really well, actually. It's another healthcare system, based in Denver. Mile High Medical Group."

"Clever name," Jess quipped.

"Yeah, the marketing team really stretched themselves there," Tom replied. "It's the usual stuff, finding inefficiencies, streamlining processes, improving patient outcomes while cutting costs."

"But you're excited about it?"

"I am. The CEO seems sharp too, none of that corporate buzzword nonsense."

"That's fantastic, Tom. Sounds like a perfect first project for Senior Consultant Marshall."

"Let's hope so. I'll be flying out to Denver in two weeks for the initial meetings."

"Two weeks?" Jess sat up straighter.

"Monday through Friday, the week after next."

"Are you serious? That's when I'm scheduled for Houston."

"Is it?"

“We’ll be ships passing in the night,” Jess said, a familiar phrase between them these days.

“Looks like it. At least we’ve got next week together.” Tom paused before asking, “So what’s your schedule like this week in Savannah? All work and no play?”

“Pretty much. Site visits, meetings with contractors, material selections. The excitement never ends.”

“No fancy dinner and dance like last time?”

“No, nothing like that. Just daily briefings with the team, then probably grabbing dinner with Sam and Annie before collapsing into bed.”

“You’re going to be with them the whole time?” Tom asked.

“Most of it, yeah. Why?”

“Just wondering if you’d have any... free time.”

“Free time for what exactly?” Jess asked, though she knew perfectly well what he was suggesting.

“You know, to explore. Experience what Savannah has to offer a beautiful woman traveling alone.”

Jess laughed. “I’m not traveling alone. I’m with colleagues.”

“Not the whole time... or you know you could always download Tinder,” Tom suggested, his tone light but testing.

“I’m not getting on Tinder, Tom.”

“Just a thought.”

“A thought that’s staying a thought,” Jess replied. Though even as she said it, something flickered, not actual interest in downloading a dating app, but awareness that Tom was now suggesting she seek out strangers.

When had that become normal between them? When had her husband encouraging her to meet other men become a “thought” he just threw out casually?

“Besides,” she continued. “Between the foreman issues and Webb’s constant check ins, I’ll barely have time to breathe.”

“Has Webb been... attentive?”

“If by ‘attentive’ you mean ‘has he hit on me,’ then no. He’s been professional. Well, at least today.”

“That’s... good.”

“Are you actually upset that my client isn’t sexually harassing me?” Jess teased.

“Of course not. Just curious if your charms were working their usual magic.”

“My charms are currently buried under hours of construction dust and exhaustion,” Jess retorted. “Not exactly irresistible right now.”

“I don’t know about that,” Tom said. “You always look irresistible to me.”

“Smoothie.” Jess smiled. “Listen, don’t forget to actually cook while I’m gone. No takeout every night.”

“Yes, dear.”

“I’m serious. There’s that salmon in the freezer, and I prepped those chicken breasts with the marinade.”

“I’ll survive, I promise,” Tom assured her. “Though I miss your cooking already.”

“I miss you,” Jess said.

“I miss you too.”

“Tom. There’s something I need to show you,” Jess said when there was a natural pause. “Can we switch to video?”

“Of course.”

The screen changed, Tom’s face appearing. He was in their home office, his tie loosened at his neck.

“Listen,” said Jess. “I need to show you something. Bob gave me a... gift yesterday.”

“A gift?” Tom’s eyebrows rose.

Jess reached off-screen, retrieving the dildo. She held it up to the camera.

Tom’s eyes widened dramatically. His mouth fell open and for several seconds he seemed incapable of speech. A flush crept up his neck to his face as he leaned closer to his screen, as if not trusting what he was seeing.

“Holy shit,” he finally managed. “Is that... is that what I think it is?”

“A perfect replica of Bob’s penis,” Jess confirmed.

Tom leaned closer to his screen. “That’s... really detailed.”

“Yeah, it’s extremely realistic,” Jess agreed, turning it so he could see it from different angles.

“When did he give you this?”

“Yesterday, just before you got home to drive me to the airport. He showed up at the door with a wrapped package.”

“What exactly did he say when he gave it to you?”

“That it was ‘a little something for my trip’ that he thought I ‘might enjoy while away.’”

“And how did you respond?”

“I barely responded at all. I was in complete shock, and then you pulled into the driveway minutes later. I just wrapped it in a t-shirt and stuffed it in my suitcase.”

“Was it awkward afterward?”

“There wasn’t really an afterward. He left, and you got home. I haven’t chatted with him since.”

Tom was quiet for a moment, processing. “Have you used it?”

“What? Tom, no, I haven’t.”

“How did the gift make you feel? Were you angry? Excited? Uncomfortable?”

Jess paused for a moment, considering.

“All of those things, I guess. Flattered in a weird way that he went to all this effort. But also objectified, like I’m just a receptacle for his cock, real or fake. I’m definitely a bit uncomfortable with the presumption though. It’s not subtle, is it? It’s literally saying ‘put me inside you.’”

“It’s a pretty bold move,” Tom agreed, his eyes never leaving the dildo on screen. “What’s it made of?”

“Definitely silicon. High quality too. It’s got this realistic feel to it. And look,” Jess showed him the base, “it has a suction cup so it can stick to surfaces.”

Tom made a small noise. “So you could attach it to the shower wall? Or the floor?”

“I guess that’s the idea,” Jess said.

“How big would you say it is, compared to in person? Does it seem accurate?”

Jess examined it. “It seems exact. Same size, same shape, even the same curve. He must have taken a mold or something.”

“God, just imagining him doing that...” Tom trailed off. “That must have been a process.”

“He definitely planned it,” Jess said. “If I use this, if I get comfortable with it, then the argument against the real thing gets weaker.”

“And is that something you’re considering? Using it?”

Jess hesitated. “I don’t know. I’m exhausted tonight. But maybe. I’m curious, I won’t lie.”

“You should,” Tom said. “If you want to, I mean. I’d love to hear about it. What it felt like. Whether you could take all of it.”

“Would you want me to record it?” Jess asked, half teasing but watching his reaction.

Tom’s eyes widened. “Would you actually do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? If it would turn you on.”

“It would definitely turn me on,” Tom admitted. “I know we’re exploring and all, but creating a recording is... well, it exists afterward, you know? And if it ever got out somehow...”

“I’d only send it directly to you, and we’d delete it after,” Jess said. “But I haven’t decided if I’m even going to use it yet, so this might be a moot point.”

“Fair enough,” Tom said.

Jess studied her husband’s face on the screen. “You’re really okay with this? It doesn’t bother you at all?”

“It’s... complicated,” Tom admitted. “There’s something about it that’s weird but it’s also hot as fuck. The idea of you with it... with him, even a replica of him...”

“Do you think Bob expects me to tell him I used it when I get back?”

“I don’t know,” Tom said. “Look, I’ll support whatever you want. Just... keep me in the loop?”

“Of course. You’ll be the first to know.”

“But right now, you need sleep,” Tom said. “You look exhausted.”

“Thanks for that flattering assessment,” Jess said with a tired smile.

“Even exhausted, you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” Tom countered. “Big day tomorrow?”

“Meetings from 7 AM straight through to dinner. I probably won’t be able to talk much. But I’ll text.”

“I’ve got the Colorado briefing packets to get through anyway.” Tom’s expression softened. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“When I get back Saturday night...” Jess said, trailing off.

“I’ll be waiting,” Tom replied, something in his voice suggesting he understood exactly what she meant.

Had it really only been two days since they’d last had sex? Before the past few months, before their exploration, before Bob, two days without sex would have been normal, unremarkable, but their routine had changed. Daily sex had become the pattern. Two days now felt longer than it should.

“Love you, Jess.”

“Love you too.”

After ending the call, Jess sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, the dildo still in her hand. She turned it over, examining it one more time.

What had Bob been thinking when he made this? Not just the practical logistics of creating the mold, but the psychology of it.

Jess put the dildo down and headed to the bathroom for a shower.

The hot water felt incredible against her exhausted muscles, washing down her shoulders, over her breasts, between her legs.

Her hand drifted lower, fingers grazing the inside of her thigh. Warmth was there, buried beneath layers of exhaustion. Her body knew what it wanted, what it had become accustomed to, but she couldn't quite marshal the energy to pursue it.

It seemed like work right now, another task to complete. She was too tired, too mentally scattered. She let her hand fall away.

Tomorrow, maybe. After a full night's sleep.

Jess turned off the water and reached for the towel.

In bed, she found herself thinking more clearly than she had all day. This trip represented her first significant period alone since their exploration with Bob had turned sexual. The distance provided an opportunity for perspective that had been difficult to achieve in Austin, where both men's desires and expectations created a charged atmosphere.

She'd reached a crucial decision point in their arrangement. The trajectory was unmistakable now. Either they continued escalating toward inevitably crossing her final boundary, or she needed to establish firmer limits with both men.

Jess committed to making a choice rather than simply following the path of least resistance. Being away from Austin might provide exactly the perspective she needed.

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Thursday morning arrived with Savannah's characteristic golden light filtering through the windows of the Weatherby Mansion's grand ballroom. The space, once a showcase of Southern opulence, now stood gutted, its potential visible only to those with trained eyes. Scaffolding climbed the walls where moldings would eventually be restored. Sheets of plastic covered sections of the original flooring. The crystal chandeliers, removed for restoration, left conspicuous empty spaces in the elaborate ceiling.

Jess stood at the center of this controlled chaos, portfolio open on a makeshift table, surrounded by a semicircle of contractors, her team members, and Chris Webb himself. She'd dressed for command in a black pencil skirt and cream blouse, her blonde hair pulled back in a sleek ponytail, her makeup minimal but precise.

"The medallions on the ceiling need special attention," Jess said, pointing upward with her pen. "We've located an artisan in Charleston who specializes in period accurate restoration. His team will be here next week to begin the mold making process."

Garrett, who'd finally conceded to her expertise yesterday, crossed his arms. "Those medallions look fine from here."

"They look fine until you get up there," Jess countered, unfazed. "The north corner has significant cracking that's not visible from floor level. Attempting to patch rather than restore will result in inconsistent appearance under the new lighting system."

"Which brings us to the chandelier placement," Sam added, stepping forward with a tablet displaying the lighting plan. Annie moved to stand beside him, her notebook open and ready.

Webb pushed himself away from the table, interrupting the discussion. "Ms. Marshall, perhaps you could walk me through the medallion restoration process in more detail? I'd like to understand the timeline impact."

“Of course, Mr. Webb,” Jess replied. She turned to Sam. “Could you continue with the lighting briefing?”

Sam nodded, taking center stage as Jess moved aside with Webb, guiding him toward the far end of the ballroom where a sample of the plasterwork had been removed for analysis.

Webb waited until they were out of earshot before speaking. “The foreman respects you now,” he observed. “Quite a change from your last visit.”

“Garrett required convincing,” Jess replied diplomatically.

“That’s a polite way of saying he was a stubborn ass until you proved him wrong,” Webb said with a small smile. “I appreciate how you handled it. No drama, just facts.”

“That’s generally the most effective approach,” Jess said. “The medallion restoration will add approximately two weeks to the timeline, but it’s necessary for historical accuracy and structural integrity. The molds will allow us to recreate any sections too damaged for preservation.”

Webb nodded, though his focus seemed less on the medallions than on Jess herself. “You have a unique ability, you know.”

“What’s that?”

“Seeing both the forest and the trees,” Webb replied. “Most designers get lost in either big picture aesthetics or microscopic details. You navigate both.”

The compliment, delivered without his usual flirtatious undertone, caught Jess by surprise. “Thank you.”

“It’s why you’re in the position you’re in,” Webb continued. He glanced around the ballroom. “You understand how each decision impacts the whole without losing sight of the significance of individual elements.”

Jess relaxed slightly, recognizing professional respect in his assessment. “The Weatherby deserves that level of attention. Buildings like this tell stories if we’re careful enough to preserve them correctly.”

“Speaking of buildings,” Webb said, transitioning, “I wanted to remind you about my offer from your first visit to Savannah.”

Jess tilted her head questioningly.

“My house here,” Webb clarified. “I mentioned you could stay there when visiting Savannah instead of the hotel.”

“Ah, yes,” Jess replied, remembering. During her first Savannah trip, he’d casually mentioned owning a home in Savannah’s historic district. “That’s very generous, but the Gastonian works perfectly for our team.”

“The offer stands,” Webb insisted. “It was built in 1797. Original pine floors, five fireplaces, and a courtyard garden that would give you more privacy than any hotel could offer. I rarely use it myself these days.”

The offer was tempting purely from a professional perspective, but Jess recognized the potential complications.

“Thank you,” she said. “The Gastonian is quite comfortable, but I appreciate the thought.”

Webb smiled. “Think about it for your next trip. You’d have the entire house to yourself, complete with a housekeeper who comes daily. Perfect for longer stays when you need space to spread out materials or even host meetings.”

Before she could respond, Annie approached with a question about the crown molding samples, saving Jess from having to more firmly decline Webb’s offer. Webb stepped back, returning to observe the overall meeting while Jess refocused on the technical discussion.

The morning progressed through various restoration challenges, whether to salvage or replace damaged wooden panels in the library, how to address

uneven settling in the east wing, the integration of modern climate control systems.

At around 10 AM, Jess shifted her weight and became suddenly, acutely aware of her underwear. Not uncomfortable exactly. Just present. The lace edge of her thong against her skin, a sensation that had been invisible all morning, now impossible to ignore.

She adjusted her stance, trying to find a position where the sensation would fade back into invisibility. It didn't work. The awareness only spread outward. The underwire of her bra against her ribs, the collar of her blouse touching her neck, her skirt's lining against her thighs when she moved.

"Ms. Marshall?" Garrett was waiting for her input.

"The original where possible," she said. "Reproduction only where structural integrity is compromised."

Garrett nodded, apparently satisfied.

As the meeting reached its scheduled end point, Webb announced, "Impressive progress, everyone. Let's reconvene in the afternoon to review the west wing assessment." His eyes found Jess. "Ms. Marshall, excellent work as always."

The group dispersed, contractors gathering their tools and plans while Webb's representatives huddled with him near the entrance. Sam approached Jess, Annie just behind him.

"Lunch?" Sam suggested. "There's a deli just three blocks away."

"I could definitely eat," Annie agreed. "My blood sugar's crashing after that three-hour marathon."

Jess checked her watch. 11:47 AM. "Sounds perfect," she said, gathering her materials.

As they left the mansion, Jess felt something she couldn't quite name. The project was going well, yes, but beneath the professional satisfaction ran a current of restlessness.

The deli Sam had recommended proved to be a small, busy establishment with checkered tablecloths and impressive sandwiches constructed from freshly baked bread and locally sourced ingredients. They secured a table after ordering, Annie and Sam discussing the morning's developments while Jess half-listened, her mind drifting.

The restaurant felt too warm despite the air conditioning running. Jess pulled at the collar of her blouse, seeking relief.

Then she noticed it was noon.

It's like her body had learned the pattern even if her conscious mind had been too preoccupied with work to remember. Tuesday noon, Thursday noon, for months, like clockwork. Her system had been primed for orgasm at this time, and the absence created a low-grade panic, like missing a meal when you're used to eating regularly.

Had she been in Austin, she would be descending those wooden steps to the pool area, probably wearing lingerie under her cover-up. The red set, maybe, that had gotten such a strong reaction last time. Or something new, something even more revealing.

Bob would be waiting, pretending to read but actually anticipating her arrival. He'd make some comment about her outfit. Then perhaps they'd start with a massage. Or maybe they'd skip the preliminaries entirely. Maybe she'd simply drop to her knees and take his impressive cock in her mouth.

He'd want another pussyjob too, she suspected. She remembered the heat and hardness of his shaft sliding between her pussy lips, the pressure against her clit with each movement, the way she'd hovered above him. How easy it would have been to sink down. How badly she'd wanted to.

Her thighs clenched involuntarily under the table.

“Jess? Earth to Jess.” Annie’s voice pulled her back to the present. “We’ve been asking about the molding samples for the drawing room.”

“Sorry,” Jess said. “Just running through the afternoon schedule in my head.”

Jess forced herself into the conversation. “The crown molding for the drawing room should match what we found in the east corridor,” Jess said, addressing Sam’s question. “We’ll need to create a custom mold, but it’s worth the investment for consistency.”

The conversation shifted to afternoon priorities as they finished their lunch.

Returning to the Weatherby Mansion, they were immediately absorbed into the afternoon’s challenges. The lighting fixtures debate consumed an hour, with the historical consultant insisting on period appropriate fixtures while the electrical engineer advocated for modern reproductions that could accommodate required safety features.

“We can have both,” Jess finally declared. “Original fixtures in viewable areas with hidden modern components, reproductions in transition spaces.” Her solution satisfied both parties, another example of her talent for finding the middle path that honored both history and practicality.

The paint color debate proved more contentious, with samples held against walls as the team attempted to match the original palette revealed during stripping. What appeared to be a simple cream shade contained subtle undertones. Manufacturing a precise match would require custom formulation.

At 1:15 PM, Jess excused herself to use the restroom. Inside, she locked the door and leaned against it, closing her eyes.

She felt a constant low-grade arousal between her legs that made concentrating on paint undertones feel absurd.

She wondered if she could make herself come right there. It was a genuine consideration. The bathroom was private, the door locked. She could slide

her hand into her panties and take care of this insistent ache in three minutes, maybe less given how sensitized she already felt.

She could return to the meeting calm, focused, professional again.

The fact that she was even considering it, masturbating in a construction site bathroom during a work day, should have alarmed her. A year ago, the thought would have been unthinkable. Two months ago, impossible. But now it felt almost... reasonable? Like a practical solution to a practical problem.

What did that mean?

She took a deep breath and returned to the meeting, where the historical consultant was still debating cream versus ivory.

At 2:07 PM, during the seemingly endless paint color debate, Jess crossed and uncrossed her legs for the third time in as many minutes.

She'd been doing this all afternoon, shifting her weight, adjusting her position, seeking some configuration that would alleviate the throb between her legs. Nothing worked.

The historical consultant held up another sample against the wall, droning about cream versus ivory undertones, and Jess found her attention drifting to the young contractor near the scaffolding. Will? Wilson? She'd heard his name but hadn't retained it.

He was maybe thirty, lean and sun-weathered, wearing a t-shirt that revealed muscular forearms as he adjusted a light fixture. Not handsome, exactly. Too rough around the edges. But something about the way he moved, confident, physical, unself-conscious, made her aware of him.

His forearms carried the kind of definition that came from years of physical labor. There was something about the way he used his hands. Not decoratively, not carefully, just functionally. Gripping the metal support beam, adjusting a bolt, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his wrist. His hands were tools he used without thinking about them.

Bob's hands looked like that.

The contractor caught her looking. Their eyes met for two full seconds, long enough for him to register her attention. He didn't smile. Just held her gaze with a directness that made her pulse spike. Not aggressive. Not flirtatious. Just... aware.

Jess looked away, heat flooding her face.

When had that become something she did? Held eye contact with strange men?

Before Bob, she wouldn't have looked twice. Before their exploration, before Tom's fantasy, before all of this, men like the contractor would have been invisible to her beyond their functional role on the project. She would have registered "worker, part of team, irrelevant to professional objectives" and moved on.

Now she was cataloging the size of his hands, imagining their texture. Wondering if he was rough in bed, whether he had a big cock, whether he'd be the type to pin her wrists above her head.

What was happening to her?

"Ms. Marshall?" The historical consultant was waiting for her input. "Your thoughts on the cream versus ivory?"

"The cream," Jess said automatically. "It's warmer. More authentic to the period."

She had no idea if that was the right answer. But it sounded confident, professional, competent. The consultant nodded and made a note.

Performance, she thought distantly. Another performance. But this time she could see herself doing it, could hear the tone she was using, the diplomatic phrasing, the qualified certainty. Usually the performance was invisible, automatic. Now she was watching herself be Jessica Marshall.

By 5:30 PM, Jess's stamina was flagging. They'd made significant progress, final selections for the library's restored bookshelves, approval of the custom glass for the solarium.

"I think we've accomplished enough for one day," Webb announced, noticing the team's energy waning. "Let's pick this up tomorrow morning."

The relief was palpable as the group began gathering materials. Sam approached Jess as she reviewed her final notes.

"Annie and I were thinking of trying a seafood place near the Gastonian tonight," he said. "Want to join? Apparently their shrimp and grits is legendary."

Jess hesitated. She was tired, and part of her wanted nothing more than to return to her hotel room, take a long shower, order room service, and stop thinking for a few hours. But team dinners were important for morale, and she prided herself on being not just a project leader but a good colleague.

"Sure," she agreed. "What time were you thinking?"

"Seven?" Sam suggested. "That gives us time to clean up and decompress a bit."

"Perfect," Jess said.

As Jess prepared to leave with Sam and Annie, Webb caught her near the entrance. "I've been meaning to ask about your Houston project," he said conversationally.

"The project's just getting started," Jess replied. "But the conceptual phase has been fascinating. Blending Eastern and Western design principles into a cohesive whole."

"Chen appreciates meticulousness," Webb said. "And authenticity. He can spot fake appreciation of his culture a mile away."

“I’ve noticed,” Jess said with a small smile. “But he seems satisfied with our direction so far.”

Webb nodded. “Good. Between the end of Skyline, and now Magnolia House and Chen’s development, your portfolio’s expanding impressively.” He paused. “Should you ever consider starting your own firm rather than remaining with Austin Design Group, I’d be interested in discussing potential backing.”

The suggestion caught Jess completely off guard.

“That’s... unexpected,” she managed.

“Just something to keep in mind,” Webb said. “I’m not asking for an answer. Just planting a seed.” He checked his watch. “Your talent deserves the widest possible platform. Anyways, I should head out. Early flight tomorrow.”

“You’re leaving?” Jess asked, surprised.

“Just overnight. Meeting in Atlanta tomorrow morning that couldn’t be rescheduled,” Webb explained. “I’ll be back for the afternoon session. Richardson will oversee the morning meeting in my absence.”

They parted ways outside the mansion, Webb heading toward the waiting car while Jess walked back to the Gastonian with Annie and Sam, their conversation focused on the day’s achievements and tomorrow’s agenda.

Back in her room, Jess unzipped her pencil skirt and unbuttoned her blouse, changing into comfortable lounge pants and a soft t-shirt. She had an hour before meeting Sam and Annie for dinner, time to review her notes and prepare for tomorrow’s discussions.

Her gaze drifted to her suitcase where Bob’s gift remained wrapped in the t-shirt.

Jess turned away, forcing herself to focus on work.

At 6:45 PM, she applied light makeup and changed into a simple navy dress and sandals. She met Sam and Annie in the lobby, both similarly refreshed after the day's work.

The restaurant proved to be a short walk, a converted townhouse with exposed brick walls and a menu highlighting local seafood.

During the walk, Jess noticed a woman pushing a stroller on the opposite sidewalk. Young, maybe twenty-five, carrying a diaper bag while simultaneously managing her phone and steering around pedestrian traffic. The coordination required looked exhausting.

She looked away, focusing instead on Annie's story about a disastrous client meeting.

Once seated at the restaurant, Jess ordered a glass of Pinot Noir while Sam and Annie opted for local craft beers.

"To surviving another day of Webb scrutiny," Sam proposed, raising his glass.

They clinked glasses, the camaraderie of shared professional challenges creating a comfortable atmosphere.

"He was actually almost pleasant today," Annie observed. "I think you've won him over, Jess."

"I wouldn't go that far," Jess replied. "But he seems to have moved past seeing me as just a pretty face."

"Pretty face with a big brain," Sam said with a grin. "The way you handled Garrett yesterday was masterful. I thought the old goat was going to have a stroke when you pulled out those historical documents."

"He didn't expect a 'little lady' to come prepared with primary sources," Annie added, mimicking Garrett's gruff Southern drawl.

Jess smiled, appreciating their support. “He’s been marginally more respectful today, at least.”

Their food arrived, shrimp and grits for Jess and Sam, short ribs for Annie. The conversation shifted to technical challenges and creative solutions, the universal language of professionals who shared both expertise and purpose.

As they ate, Jess found herself enjoying the simple pleasure of colleagues who appreciated her for her abilities rather than her appearance. No hidden agendas, no underlying sexual tension, just mutual respect and genuine camaraderie.

“How’s Tom?” Annie asked during a lull in the project discussion. “Still working crazy hours on that healthcare project?”

“Meridian wrapped last Friday, actually,” Jess replied. “He got the promotion. He’s Senior Consultant now.”

“That’s fantastic!” Annie exclaimed. “You must be thrilled.”

“I am. He worked incredibly hard for it.”

“Does that mean normal hours finally?” Sam asked.

Jess laughed. “Not exactly. He’s already been assigned to a new project in Colorado. More travel, if anything.”

“The life of consultants,” Sam said, shaking his head. “Reminds me why I stuck with design.”

“You’ll both be traveling constantly,” Annie observed. “When will you actually see each other?”

Between her Savannah and Houston commitments and Tom’s new Denver project, they would indeed be spending time apart.

“We’ll figure it out,” Jess said, taking another sip of wine. “We always do.”

They finished dessert, a shared peach cobbler that lived up to the server's enthusiastic recommendation, then walked back to the Gastonian, the evening air warm.

As they approached the hotel, Jess noticed the small but elegant bar off the main lobby.

The sight immediately triggered memories of The Fleming and Frank, the energy executive from Dallas who'd seen through their game immediately, who'd recognized what they were doing.

"There's nothing more erotic than watching your wife get satisfied by another man," he'd said.

The memory created embarrassment, arousal, curiosity about what might have happened if they'd accepted his invitation.

She could say goodnight to Sam and Annie, return to her room to freshen up, then come back down. The Gastonian's bar would have men. Business travelers, probably, looking for distraction, men who would notice a beautiful blonde woman drinking alone.

Tom would be thrilled to hear about it. He'd been actively encouraging her to explore with other men, not just Bob but hypothetical strangers in Savannah or Houston.

"Thanks for joining," Annie said, stifling a yawn as they reached the lobby. "Even if we did drag you out when you probably wanted to crash."

"I'm glad I came," Jess replied honestly.

"Meet here at seven tomorrow?" Sam asked.

"I'll be here," Jess assured him.

They said their goodnights in the hallway, each heading to their separate rooms. Jess inserted her key card, pushed open the heavy wooden door, and stepped into her room.

Alone. Finally alone.

She immediately headed for the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror, she began to undress, letting her clothes fall in a pile rather than hanging them neatly as she would at home.

Jessica Marshall, successful interior designer, Tom Marshall's devoted wife, the good girl who'd become the good wife who'd become the good employee.

She turned, examining herself from different angles. Her body looked the same as it had a month ago. Same breasts, same waist, same legs. But it didn't feel the same. It felt like a stranger's body, capable of things she hadn't known about, responding to triggers she didn't fully understand.

Bob had discovered the squirting. Tom hadn't, in all their years together. What did that mean? That Bob understood her body better? Or that her body had fundamentally changed, become something new, and Tom was still trying to navigate the old version?

She thought about the versions of herself she'd performed today. The competent professional who'd solved the medallion problem and mediated the lighting debate. The gracious team leader who'd had dinner with colleagues.

Which one was real?

She thought about Webb's words. "Your talent deserves the widest possible platform." Not ADG's platform. Her own.

She thought about Tom's words. "Whatever you want is what matters."

But what if she didn't know what she wanted? What if everything she'd built, career, marriage, self, had been constructed within frameworks other people designed, and she'd never questioned whether those frameworks fit until now?

Under the hot spray, she closed her eyes and let herself acknowledge what had been circling all day.

She was tired. Not physically, though that was true too. But tired of performing. Tired of being the version of herself each person needed.

Tom wanted the wife who told him everything. Bob wanted the princess who submitted to his touch. Webb wanted the protégée he could seduce. The contractors wanted the beautiful woman to look at. Sam and Annie wanted the professional colleague.

Everyone wanted something from her. Everyone had a version of her they preferred.

But what did she want?

She didn't have a concrete answer.

Eventually, she stepped out, wrapping herself in the hotel's plush robe. Her skin flushed from the hot water, hair damp around her shoulders, Jess moved to the bed and sat on its edge, reaching for her phone.

The time showed 9:41 PM. Not too late to call Tom, but she hesitated. She didn't want to discuss Bob's gift again until she'd made her decision, and Tom would inevitably ask about it. She needed this night to herself.

Jess typed out a text instead.

Jess: Long day at Weatherby. Made good progress but exhausted. Will call tomorrow. Love you.

The response came almost immediately.

Tom: Get some rest. Love you too.

Jess plugged her phone into its charger and turned down the bedcovers. She then glanced at her bag.

The dildo's presence was impossible to ignore. She removed it from her bag and examined it again in the soft light of the bedside lamp.

Her body knew what it wanted. She could use it. That's what Tom wanted to hear about. That's what Bob intended when he made it. The perfect test run, familiarizing her body with his size, preparing her for the inevitable next step.

But something stopped her.

She was tired of doing things because someone else wanted to hear about them afterward. What if she used it and didn't tell anyone? What if she kept something for herself? The thought felt like both liberation and betrayal.

But betrayal of what? Their rules said complete honesty, tell each other everything. But hadn't she already violated that with the squirting? And wasn't Tom keeping secrets too? She could feel it, sense it in the careful way he phrased things sometimes, in the gaps between what he said and what he meant.

What if honesty was just another performance, another framework someone else designed, and she was supposed to operate within it without questioning whether it actually served her?

She placed the dildo on the nightstand and reached for the light.

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Jess woke violently, body jerking upright. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic percussion that seemed to shake her entire body. Her t-shirt clung to her skin, soaked through with sweat.

The hotel room's darkness disoriented her for a moment. She fumbled for her phone on the nightstand, the screen illuminating with painful brightness.  
12:04 AM.

The dream was already dissolving, fragments escaping faster than she could hold onto them. She had been in their bedroom in Austin but something had

been off about it, the proportions wrong, the colors too saturated. Bob sprawled naked across their bed, his substantial cock erect and waiting. Tom sat in the corner wearing his navy work suit, writing in a notebook as if documenting a business meeting.

When she'd looked down at her own body, her stomach protruded, unmistakably pregnant. Neither man seemed to notice or care about this detail.

When Bob entered her in the dream, she'd immediately started squirting, liquid soaking the bed, spraying across the room in impossible quantities. Tom had just kept taking notes, nodding. She remembered tasting Bob's cum in her mouth even though he was inside her, the impossibility not registering as strange in the dream logic.

Then the bed transformed into scaffolding at Weatherby Mansion. She was naked, pregnant, teetering on the edge above Garrett and Webb and the workmen. She was going to fall. Everyone would see. She'd felt herself starting to fall.

That's when she'd jerked awake.

Despite the disturbing elements of the dream, or perhaps because of them, she felt a persistent ache between her legs, a sensation demanding to be filled.

She slid her hand down her stomach until her fingers slipped beneath the elastic waistband of her panties. The wetness there was immediate, coating her fingers.

If Tom were here, this would be simple. He'd wake to her pressing against him, his cock already hard from proximity and sleep. She'd climb on top, still half-asleep, and they'd fuck lazily until they both came. There would be no need to analyze dream symbolism or question her own desires. But Tom wasn't here.

Jess pressed against her clit, circling with the pattern she knew worked, had worked for years. Light pressure at first, consistent rhythm, gradual increase

in speed. Her body responded instantly. She'd perfected this technique as a teenager, refined it through adulthood, knew exactly how to touch herself.

When was the last time she'd masturbated? She tried to remember as her fingers continued their movement. About a month ago, after a session with Bob.

Before their arrangement with Bob, she'd masturbated when Tom traveled or if she was alone. Now there was rarely need. Her body had grown accustomed to regular, intense sexual contact. Self-pleasure had become an afterthought.

The room's darkness seemed less oppressive now as her eyes adjusted. She could make out the details of the antique furniture, the tall windows with their heavy drapes. The dildo was still on the nightstand where she'd left it before sleep. She could sense its presence even without looking directly at it.

Jess paused, hand still inside her panties. The decision felt weightier than it should. It was just a sex toy, after all.

She reached toward the nightstand with her free hand. She found the silicone shaft. Tom had essentially told her to use it during their video call from the previous night. "You should," he'd said. "If you want to, I mean. I'd love to hear about it."

She brought the dildo to her lips. The first contact was strange, silicone instead of skin, room temperature instead of body heat, inert instead of alive.

She pushed the head past her lips, jaw stretching. The taste was neutral, almost non-existent, nothing like the salty musky flavor of actual skin, nothing like Bob's distinct taste that she'd grown to recognize.

Tom's cock she could depththroat easily. She'd done it hundreds of times over their years together. No challenge, no adjustment period. His length and thickness were perfectly suited to her mouth, as if their bodies had been designed with each other in mind.

This replica of Bob required effort. She had to relax her jaw, breathe through her nose, work up to taking more. The realistic girth stretched her lips wide. She pushed further, feeling the head bump against the back of her throat.

Her other hand moved from between her legs to her breast, squeezing through her t-shirt, fingers finding and pinching her nipple through the fabric. The sensation sent a corresponding pulse between her legs, reminding her how connected these pleasure points were.

She pulled the dildo deeper into her mouth, consciously relaxing her throat muscles. The gag reflex activated but she breathed through it, using the technique she'd perfected with Marco. She pushed further, holding the dildo in her throat, counting seconds in her head. One. Two. Three. Four. Her eyes watered. Five. Six. She pulled back, gasping, saliva connecting her mouth to the dildo in strands she could feel but couldn't see in the darkness.

A thought came uninvited, sending an unexpected thrill through her body. If Bob could watch her practicing on the replica of his cock like homework she was determined to ace, his reaction would be smug satisfaction, that characteristic smile. "That's it, princess. You're getting so good at this." And he'd be right.

But the dildo was a poor substitute. The real thing was warmer, responsive, alive. The real thing twitched when she did something particularly good. The real thing made sounds. The real thing erupted, flooding her mouth with cum she'd learned to swallow. The dildo just sat there, inert, waiting for her to project meaning onto it.

Jess pulled it from her mouth, wiping saliva from her lips with the back of her hand. What was she even doing? Practicing deepthroating on a dildo at midnight.

She slid her hand back between her legs while the dildo remained in her other hand. She pushed her panties aside. She found her clit again, already swollen and hypersensitive. The contact sent sparks through her nervous system, making her gasp in the empty room.

Jess shifted position, knees bent and falling open. The wet panties were annoying, restrictive. She pushed them down her thighs, kicked them off with an impatient motion. They landed somewhere on the floor, invisible in the darkness. She was naked from the waist down now.

She brought the dildo lower, between her legs, guiding it blindly. The head made contact with her entrance, and the sensation triggered a vivid memory of doing the pussyjob with Bob.

She slid the dildo along her slit, not entering, just external friction. The pressure against her clit was good but wasn't enough. It wasn't Bob's body heat, Bob's voice telling her "that's it, princess," Bob's hands controlling the pace. It wasn't Tom either, Tom's cock inside her, Tom's eyes on her face, Tom's voice saying "I love you" while fucking. This was just her, alone, rubbing silicone against herself and pretending it was intimacy. Functional but lonely.

She pressed the dildo more firmly against her clit. She ground against it, hips lifting off the bed. Her free hand pushed her t-shirt up, exposing her breasts to the cool air. She pinched her nipple harder than Tom would, not as hard as Bob might, finding a middle ground between pleasure and new discovery.

She could slip the dildo inside. That's what it was designed for, what Bob intended when he made it, what Tom wanted to hear about. She could find out right now if she could accommodate Bob's size, whether the stretch would be painful or pleasurable, whether her body was ready for what everyone seemed to assume was inevitable.

But something stopped her. Some last boundary she wasn't ready to cross alone in a hotel room at midnight. Once she knew what it felt like inside her, once her body had adjusted to that size, the argument against the real thing would evaporate completely. She'd have no logical explanation for why a dildo was acceptable but Bob's actual cock wasn't.

She set the dildo aside on the bed next to her and focused her hand between her legs. Two fingers slipped inside easily.

She pumped her fingers, pressed harder. Her breathing got ragged. The orgasm approached, pleasure building. But the squirting didn't come. Just regular sensation, normal pleasure accumulating until it released. She came with a quiet gasp, body tensing then relaxing, fingers slowing as the sensitivity became too much.

It was satisfying in the way that scratching an itch was satisfying. Relief. But it wasn't the overwhelming experience she'd had with Bob, wasn't the complete loss of control, the liquid gushing from her body, the trembling legs, the temporary inability to form coherent thoughts. This was just an orgasm. Fine. Adequate. Nothing she'd feel compelled to tell anyone about.

Jess pulled her t-shirt down, tugged the sheet over herself. The dildo could stay where it was until morning. Her panties were on the floor somewhere in the darkness. She'd deal with all of it when she woke up, when she'd have to decide what to tell Tom, how to frame this, whether to admit she'd used it at all.

Her body felt heavy now, the post-orgasm drowsiness settling over. She turned onto her side, pulling her knees up slightly, and closed her eyes.

Sleep came quickly, pulling her back down into darkness. This time, mercifully, without dreams.

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Jess sank onto the king-sized bed at the Gastonian, wrapped in the hotel's plush robe after her hot shower. It was 8 PM on Friday night, and for the first time since leaving Austin, she could fully relax. No early alarm would drag her from sleep before dawn, no 7 AM meeting loomed tomorrow morning, no contractor disputes awaited resolution, no Webb scrutiny demanded her alertness. This night belonged entirely to her.

And tomorrow, her flight back to Austin wasn't until 1 PM, giving her the morning to herself.

The room service wine had arrived promptly, a decent Cabernet that complemented the glass she'd had at dinner with Sam and Annie. She took a sip, savoring the rich flavor as she leaned back against the pillows.

She'd woken up that morning feeling surprisingly refreshed despite the midnight disruption. The satisfying orgasm, however "adequate" she'd judged it in the moment, had apparently been exactly what her body needed.

The workday brought a different rhythm than Thursday's overwhelming distraction, more manageable but still present, like background music rather than a blaring alarm.

The final presentation to Webb and the full team at 2 PM had demanded her complete attention, and she'd delivered flawlessly, commanding the room with the same confidence that had won over Garrett earlier in the week. When 6 PM arrived and Webb dismissed them, Jess felt the satisfying exhaustion of work well done.

She exhaled deeply. The entire week had been productive. She'd proven herself repeatedly, built a reputation for excellence that transcended gender biases and youth prejudices. At times, she commanded rooms of men twice her age, not through force or intimidation but through expertise and calm conviction.

But personal clarity? That proved more elusive. In this moment of rare emotional freedom, Jess allowed herself to feel everything she'd been suppressing this week. And at the center of it all was the question she'd avoided last night. What did she want? Not what Tom fantasized about, not what Bob encouraged, but what did Jessica Marshall herself desire?

Earlier today, during her lunch break, she'd walked through Forsyth Park, seeking fresh air. The Spanish moss hanging from ancient oaks had created a peaceful canopy above her. But within fifteen minutes, she'd counted three visibly pregnant women, one pushing a toddler on a swing, another walking with her partner, a third photographing the famous fountain, her hand resting protectively on her round belly.

Each sighting had pierced Jess with a familiar longing. She'd once known with crystal clarity what she wanted. A baby. Their baby.

The sight of those rounded bellies had triggered an unwelcome memory of last night's dream. Her pregnant stomach, impossibly round. Bob inside her while Tom took notes. The squirting that wouldn't stop, soaking everything. She'd pushed the memory away in the moment, but even now it left a residue of unease she couldn't quite shake.

She'd dreamed of transforming their guest bedroom into a nursery, painting the walls a gentle yellow, arranging stuffed animals on shelves. She'd imagined watching Tom assemble the crib. She'd pictured rocking their child to sleep, Tom's arm around her shoulders as they both gazed down at their creation.

That dream had fractured when Tom's cryptocurrency gamble vaporized their savings. The money they'd set aside for a larger home, for her to take extended maternity leave, for their child's education, all of it gone. Though they'd never discussed it explicitly, both recognized the reality. Children would wait until they rebuilt their financial foundation.

Watching those women in the park, their faces glowing with purpose and connection, had awakened a familiar anger, not as sharp as in those first devastating weeks, but still present, a background resentment that occasionally flared. She took another swallow of wine, letting herself acknowledge this uncomfortable truth. Part of her still resented Tom for that mistake, for postponing her most cherished dream indefinitely.

Their exploration with Bob had begun in that shadow, financial necessity disguised as adventure, the renting of their downstairs unit a practical solution to a problem they should never have faced. But what had started as necessity had transformed into something neither had anticipated. Tom had confessed his voyeuristic fantasies. They'd embarked on a journey of exploration. Their sex life had reawakened from its work induced slumber.

Though the anger still flickered when she let herself examine it too closely, Jess found herself questioning the narrative she'd constructed. The

cryptocurrency loss had been devastating, yes. But sitting here in Savannah, successful project under her belt, Tom's promotion secured, their sex life revitalized... would any of this have happened if they'd gone straight into pregnancy and parenthood?

If they'd had their baby on schedule, she'd be deep into maternity leave right now. No Skyline completion. No Savannah restoration. No Houston development. No Webb offering to back her own firm. Her career trajectory would have plateaued at exactly the moment when doors were flying open.

And there would be no Bob. No exploration. No rediscovery of the sexual adventurousness she'd buried when she became "Tom's wife" and "successful professional Jessica Marshall." That part of herself would have remained dormant, possibly forever, as she transitioned into "devoted mother."

The cryptocurrency loss had hurt, yes, but it had inadvertently created space for both of them to prove themselves professionally, space for their relationship to evolve beyond the patterns they'd fallen into, space for her to remember she was more than her roles, that she contained desires beyond the socially approved script of career then marriage then baby.

She was 27. Not 35, not 40, not running out of time despite what the park bench observation had triggered in her. Having a baby at 28 or 29 was perfectly normal. She and Tom were both thriving now, earning more, saving faster. They'd recover what was lost and more.

The rationalization felt good, like permission to enjoy what she was discovering about herself, to prioritize her career momentum, to explore with Bob without the guilt of "wasting her fertile years."

But beneath the rationalization, something more honest stirred. The truth was simpler and less defensible. She was enjoying this exploration for herself, not because Tom's mistake had accidentally benefited her career. There was something genuinely thrilling about dancing with strangers at Domino months ago, flirting with Frank at The Fleming, and pushing boundaries with Bob. Though these experiences may have started as Tom's fantasies, they'd

awakened something dormant within her, a boldness and sexual agency from her college days with Marco that she'd forgotten she possessed.

With Marco, she'd been fearless, adventurous, uninhibited by convention. Somewhere along the way, she'd tucked that part of herself away, replacing it with professional ambition and domestic stability.

Now that younger Jess had resurfaced, demanding recognition. The woman who'd practiced deepthroating until she'd mastered it. The woman who'd had sex in library study rooms, in the backseat of Marco's car in public parking lots, in the shower of her shared dorm bathroom with the constant risk of interruption. That woman hadn't disappeared. She'd just been dormant.

The exploration with Bob had reawakened her curiosity, her willingness to transgress boundaries, her capacity for risk.

What did this all mean moving forward?

Jess rose from the bed, taking her empty wine glass to the mini bar. She poured the last of the wine and retrieved the dildo from her suitcase.

She sat back on the bed and placed the wine on the nightstand. She held the dildo in her hands, squeezing and stroking it.

Last night she'd practiced on it in the dark, working her throat around the girth.

Tonight she could actually cross the final boundary and answer the question that had been building since the moment she'd first seen his huge cock. She wanted to know how much pleasure that massive cock might deliver.

The practical considerations lined up neatly. Alone, privacy, time, liquid courage, no morning obligations. Everything required for crossing this threshold safely.

She'd allowed Bob's mouth on her most intimate places, taken his cock in her mouth, swallowed his cum, ground her bare pussy against his bare cock...

yet somehow, that final inch of penetration represented a boundary. What made this specific act different?

Jess turned the dildo over in her hands, imagining what it would feel like inside her versus what Bob himself would feel like. The dildo wouldn't make sounds, wouldn't breathe hard, wouldn't move with her or adjust its angle. It would just be there, an object she manipulated rather than a person who participated. Would that difference matter? Would penetration with this lifeless replica teach her anything useful about accommodating Bob's actual cock, or would it be as lacking as last night's practice had been for deepthroating, missing everything that made the act genuinely intimate?

Jess considered a truth she'd avoided acknowledging. Penetrative sex with Bob would create a direct comparison between him and Tom that blowjobs and other activities didn't create in quite the same way. Her reluctance might partially stem from fear that Bob could provide pleasure Tom couldn't match, and that this knowledge might fundamentally alter her sexual relationship with her husband.

The squirting orgasms Bob had already given her already represented a concerning precedent. How many other secrets would she keep to protect Tom's ego if she continued down this path?

When she thought about the practicality of sex, the reality was more complicated. If she were to actually do it, she'd need protection.

Back in college with Marco, she'd been on birth control pills, which had made spontaneity possible. She remembered how she'd either let him fill her pussy or she'd swallow it, depending on her mood. The memory of Marco groaning as he came inside her, that perfect moment of connection when his body tensed and then relaxed against hers was something she'd loved back then. The knowledge of his cum inside her had been intensely intimate in a way that was hard to describe.

She didn't want to go back on birth control now for health reasons. And the thought of going to a store and actually purchasing condoms for Bob mortified her. Would she order them online? Ask Tom to do it? Ask Bob to

do it? The practical aspects created complications she hadn't fully considered.

Then there was the question of expanding beyond Bob. If their exploration included different men as Tom had repeatedly suggested, Derek from yoga, hypothetical men in Savannah or Houston, despite how ridiculous that seemed, the dynamics would change entirely. Younger men closer to her age presented different complications than Bob did.

With Bob, the age gap created a natural barrier. The relationship had clear boundaries simply by virtue of their life stages being so different. But men her own age? Derek was in his early thirties, attractive, shared her interest in wellness and mindfulness. The contractor at Weatherby couldn't have been more than 30. Even Brandon was their contemporary.

These men weren't separated from her by decades of life experience. They existed in her world, shared cultural references and professional ambitions. The natural barriers that existed with Bob simply wouldn't apply.

Jess reassured herself that the exploration was fundamentally sex-based. She wasn't planning on having romantic dinners with these men, wasn't sharing her deeper thoughts and feelings, wasn't building the kind of day-to-day intimacy that formed the foundation of love. Plus, she was communicating everything with Tom, maintaining that primary emotional connection that anchored her.

Yet a small voice of doubt whispered beneath these reassurances. Hadn't she already shared certain things with Bob that she'd kept from Tom? If secrecy had already crept in, couldn't other boundaries blur as well? Sex and emotion weren't always as separate as she'd like to believe. Physical intimacy would create pathways for emotional connection.

Still, the risk seemed manageable, a theoretical concern rather than an immediate danger. She'd always been good at maintaining appropriate boundaries in other areas of life. This would be no different.

Jess glanced at her phone. She reached for it and texted Tom, not because she wanted to discuss these half-formed ideas at this moment, but because she missed her husband.

Jess: You up? Can we talk?

His response came immediately.

Tom: Of course. Everything okay?

Jess: Everything's fine. Just want to hear your voice.

She tapped his contact and waited. He answered immediately.

"Hey, you," Tom said, his voice immediately soothing her frayed nerves. "How was your day?"

"Productive," Jess replied, settling back against the pillows. "We resolved so many issues. Garrett, the foreman I told you about? He actually said I was right. Damn near fell over from shock."

Tom laughed. "The guy who called you 'little lady'? I'm surprised he didn't choke on the words."

"He practically did," Jess said, smiling at the memory. "But he's been marginally less condescending since I proved him wrong."

"That's my girl," Tom said. "How's the team doing?"

"Good. Sam and Annie have been amazing all week. We had dinner tonight at this place near the hotel. The fried chicken and crab soup were incredible."

"Sounds like a successful week all around," Tom observed.

"How about you? Still getting ready for Denver?"

"Yeah, diving into the preliminary assessment materials. It's interesting stuff. Their patient flow is a mess, but they've got some promising tech infrastructure we can build on."

“That’s good,” Jess said. “I’m glad it’s looking positive.”

“Webb been behaving himself?” Tom asked.

“Mostly professional,” Jess replied. “Though he brought up the Savannah house again.”

“The one he offered for you to stay at?” Tom asked.

“Yeah. Said it would give me more privacy than the hotel. Even mentioned it has a housekeeper who comes daily.”

“How convenient,” Tom said.

“I declined, obviously,” Jess said. “But then he surprised me with something else.”

“What’s that?”

“He offered to back me if I ever wanted to start my own firm.”

“Wait, what?” Tom sounded genuinely shocked. “Are you serious?”

“Completely serious,” Jess confirmed. “Said my talent deserves ‘the widest possible platform’ or something like that.”

“Holy shit, Jess. That’s... that’s a big deal.”

“It caught me by surprise,” Jess admitted. “Not something I’m considering right now, but...”

“But someday?” Tom finished for her.

“Maybe,” Jess said. “I want to finish these projects first. Skyline, Savannah, Houston. But down the road? I’ve thought about it.”

“I can picture it already,” Tom said, enthusiasm evident in his voice. “Jessica Marshall Design. JMD. The website, the awards, the magazine features. You’d be unstoppable.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself,” Jess laughed, though his immediate support warmed her.

“I’m serious,” Tom insisted. “You’ve got the talent, the vision, and now potentially the backing. It’s something to think about.”

“I will,” Jess promised. “Just not tonight.”

A comfortable silence fell between them, the kind possible only between people who knew each other intimately.

“So...” Tom said after a moment. “Have you decided about Bob’s... gift?”

And there it was. The question she’d known was coming since she’d first called him.

“Not yet,” Jess replied. “I’ve been too exhausted every night. Early meetings, long days.”

The lie came easily, though it left a sour taste. She had used it, of course, but telling him now, over the phone while they were apart, felt wrong. This wasn’t something to share as casual conversation or phone sex fodder. When she finally crossed that threshold, when she actually used it the way it was intended, she wanted to be able to look Tom in the eye and have a real conversation about what it meant and where they were going. She needed that conversation to happen face to face, not filtered through a phone screen or reduced to dirty talk.

“But you’re thinking about it?” Tom pressed.

“I am,” Jess confirmed.

“I bet,” Tom said. “No meetings tomorrow morning, though, right? Could be the perfect opportunity.”

“Could be,” Jess agreed noncommittally.

“You know,” Tom said, “we could do it now. Together.”

“What do you mean?”

“Phone sex,” Tom clarified. “I could talk you through it, listen to you.”

Jess laughed. “That’s a sweet offer, but I’m still processing everything. This exploration has been intense for me, and I haven’t really had time to think about what it means to me personally.”

“Oh,” Tom said, sounding slightly taken aback. “That’s... that’s fair. What kind of things are you thinking about?”

“I’m not even sure yet,” Jess admitted. “Just trying to understand my own desires. I think I’d like to have a serious conversation when I get back to Austin.”

“Of course,” Tom said quickly. “Whatever you need.”

“Thank you,” Jess said, relieved by his understanding.

Tom hesitated, then circled back. “But you’re curious about it though, right? The dildo?”

“Yes,” Jess admitted. “I’m curious.”

“And what about the real thing?” Tom asked.

The question demanded honesty that felt both frightening and freeing. After a brief hesitation, Jess whispered, “Yes.”

That single word changed the energy of their conversation immediately.

“Holy shit,” Tom breathed.

“That doesn’t mean I’m planning to do anything,” Jess clarified quickly. “Being curious isn’t the same as acting on it.”

“I know,” Tom assured her. “I just... hearing you say that... it’s so fucking hot.”

Jess rolled her eyes, though Tom couldn't see her. "Of course you think it's hot."

"Is it just Bob?" Tom asked. "Or are you curious about other men too?"

"I haven't thought about it," Jess said, though this wasn't entirely true. She'd had fleeting thoughts about what it might be like with Derek or even Brandon, though she'd never admit that one to Tom.

"Actually, that's not entirely true," Jess admitted after a pause. "I have thought about it. Derek from yoga."

"Derek?" Tom's voice perked up immediately.

"Yes," Jess said. "He definitely likes me."

"Would you consider... exploring with him?"

"Maybe," Jess replied.

"You mean, like... ending things with Bob and starting fresh with Derek?" Tom asked.

"I don't know," Jess said. "Just thinking out loud."

"What about other guys?" Tom pressed.

Jess felt a spark of mischief at his question. "You mean like going downstairs right now to see if anyone hits on me at the hotel bar?"

"You wouldn't," Tom said confidently.

"Be careful what you wish for," Jess replied. "It's Friday night after a long work week. I've got two glasses of wine in me, and I'm horny."

"You're just saying that to work me up," Tom accused.

“Maybe,” Jess admitted. “Or maybe I’m remembering what you said about having boyfriends in different cities. One in Savannah, one in Houston, one in Austin. Your words, not mine.”

“Wait, are you actually considering going downstairs?” Tom asked, the confident dismissal in his voice suddenly replaced by uncertainty.

“Maybe I’ll find a date for the next time I’m in Savannah,” Jess continued, enjoying his reaction. “Someone to show me the local sights, someone I can stay with.”

“You’re just trying to get under my skin,” Tom insisted, though he sounded less convinced now. “You’re not going to do that.”

Jess laughed, finding his reaction hilarious. “How do you know? Maybe I’ll do something tonight, so I’ll have a story to share tomorrow when I see you.”

“Like going down to the bar to flirt with random men?” Tom asked.

“Yes, or maybe I’ll use the dildo and record it for you,” Jess offered.

“Would you really do that?” Tom asked eagerly, clearly thinking the dildo option was more probable.

“What would the rules be?” Jess asked, ignoring his question. “If I went downstairs, I mean.”

“You’re not going downstairs,” Tom said.

“But if I did,” Jess pressed. “What would the rules be? You might not like it if I keep a secret.”

Tom was quiet for a moment. “The usual rules, I guess,” he finally said. “Just... use your own judgment.”

“That’s dangerous,” Jess pointed out. “Giving me that much freedom.”

“That’s what makes it fun,” Tom replied.

Jess thought about this and realized she agreed. The uncertainty, the risk, the exploration of unfamiliar territory, these elements had been present throughout their arrangement with Bob. Maybe that was part of the thrill for both of them.

“Well,” Jess said, “I should probably hang up now. The hotel bar won’t stay open all night.”

“Wait. Are you seriously going down there?” Tom asked, the sudden alarm in his voice making her smile.

“Maybe,” she teased. “Or maybe I’ll just stay in my room and get acquainted with Bob’s gift. Either way, I’ll have quite the story for you tomorrow.”

“Jess...”

“Guess you’ll just have to wait and see,” she said. “I’ll text you before my flight.”

“I... okay.” Tom sounded completely thrown off balance. “Just... be careful?”

“Always am,” Jess replied. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” Tom said, his voice carrying a mix of confusion and arousal that made her laugh as she ended the call.

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Tom Marshall sat in his Lexus, parked among dozens of other vehicles in Austin-Bergstrom’s cell phone waiting area. The dashboard clock read 6:37 PM. His phone, balanced on his lap, displayed Jess’s text from five minutes ago.

Jess: Just landed! See you soon!

Fifteen to twenty minutes, he estimated. Maybe less if the plane had parked at a close gate. No checked luggage meant she'd skip baggage claim, just deplane and walk straight through the terminal.

Around him, other people waited in their cars. An elderly man in a Ford checked his watch repeatedly. A young woman in an Audi applied lipstick using the rearview mirror, pursing her lips to check the color.

He'd woken early this morning, immediately reaching for his phone to text her. He'd been eager, perhaps too eager, to learn what she'd done the previous night after their phone call. The suspense had gnawed at him throughout the night.

He picked up his phone, scrolling back through the morning's increasingly desperate messages.

Tom: Morning! Sleep well?

Tom: What did you end up doing last night?

Tom: Jess? You're usually up by now.

Tom: Getting a bit worried here. Please text me when you see this.

As minutes stretched into hours with no response, his mind had spiraled into increasingly darker scenarios. Her uncharacteristic lack of response had triggered an alarm system in his brain that he hadn't known existed.

Maybe she'd gone to the hotel bar as she'd teased, had more wine than intended. Maybe someone approached her, offered to buy her a drink, and she'd said yes. The conversation might have continued, his attention flattering after a long week of work stress. Maybe he suggested they continue talking somewhere more private.

And then what? The scenarios spiraled darker. Her phone dying, or worse, being taken. An encounter that started consensual turning dangerous when she tried to leave. A hospital room where she couldn't reach him. A police

station where she struggled to explain what had happened. Or somewhere worse, somewhere he couldn't find her, couldn't protect her, couldn't help.

The progression from flirtation to danger had seemed so plausible in those anxious morning hours.

These thoughts weren't rational, he knew that. Jess was an adult woman fully capable of making smart decisions, even after a couple glasses of wine. The Gastonian was a respectable hotel in a safe part of Savannah. Nothing in their relationship history suggested she would act recklessly.

When her message finally appeared, he'd nearly collapsed with relief.

Jess: Sorry!!! Overslept. I'm fine just rushing to get ready and leave for the airport.

Tom: Safe flight. Text when you land.

Jess: Will do. Love you.

Tom: Love you too.

The scenarios his imagination had constructed vanished like smoke, leaving him feeling slightly foolish yet still unsettled. Her mundane explanation, sleeping in after an exhausting work week, was so ordinary, so reasonable, that it highlighted the absurdity of his catastrophizing.

Yet the fear hadn't been entirely irrational. The geographical distance between them suddenly made their exploration feel dangerously different, introducing variables he hadn't considered before. In Austin, when they'd experimented at Domino and The Fleming, he'd been close by, watching. Even when he was at work while Jess was with Bob, he'd been able to return home quickly if needed. The same safety net didn't exist in different cities. Hundreds of miles separated them, removing his ability to intervene if something went wrong.

His casual suggestion at Xenia about "boyfriends in different cities" now felt reckless, evidence of poor judgment clouded by sexual excitement. What had

he been thinking? The fantasy of Jess with other men had obviously affected his reasoning, making him suggest something potentially risky without considering the practical implications.

Tom leaned back against the headrest, closing his eyes briefly. The past three days had felt longer than they should have. He'd thrown himself into work to fill the hours, completing the preliminary Denver assessment ahead of schedule.

Meals had simplified to functional refueling. The television had remained untouched. He'd fallen into bed each night immediately after brushing his teeth. This monk like existence had yielded impressive professional results, but the sterility of it highlighted how much Jess's presence animated his life.

The house had remained unnaturally quiet during her absence. No music playing from her portable speaker in the kitchen, no distant sound of her on a work call, no cabinet doors opening and closing as she searched for a snack. The house wasn't a home without her.

His phone buzzed in the cupholder.

Jess: Coming out now! Can't wait to see you!

Tom shifted the car into drive and pulled away from the cell phone lot, joining the line of vehicles circling toward the arrivals terminal. Traffic moved slowly, each car stopping to collect its passenger before continuing the rotation.

Grandparents embraced grandchildren, couples kissed after separation, friends greeted friends with enthusiastic hugs. These reunions that would normally register as heartwarming barely penetrated the fog of his preoccupation.

What had Jess actually done last night? She'd teased him about going down to the hotel bar, about finding a date for her next Savannah visit. She'd been playful, enjoying his reaction, but beneath the teasing he'd sensed something else, a genuine consideration of possibilities he'd encouraged.

Their Friday night conversation kept replaying in his mind, particularly one moment that had fundamentally shifted something between them.

“And what about the real thing?” he’d asked. “With Bob, I mean.”

Her hesitation had been brief but meaningful. Then, quietly, “yes.”

That single word confirmation, that she was curious about actual sex with Bob, made his heart race whenever he remembered it. The confession had stunned him even though perhaps it shouldn’t have, given everything that had already transpired between them.

Was he truly prepared for that final boundary to fall? When aroused, the answer was obvious. The fantasy turned him on with an intensity like nothing else. The thought of Jess taking another man, experiencing pleasure, surrendering to sensations beyond what their marriage had contained, created a visceral response he couldn’t fully explain even to himself.

But in calmer moments like this, doubts emerged that couldn’t be dismissed. Once they crossed that line, there would be no returning to their previous state. The knowledge would always exist between them. Jess would have experienced another man inside her during their marriage. No amount of rationalization could erase the significance of that threshold.

What would it mean for them? Would it strengthen their bond through radical honesty and shared exploration, or would it introduce complications they couldn’t currently anticipate? The unknown created both excitement and profound unease.

Traffic inched forward.

Another aspect of Friday’s conversation weighed on him. Jess had mentioned wanting a “serious conversation” about boundaries upon returning. The phrasing had introduced a formality into what had previously been a more organic evolution.

What specific aspects of their arrangement did she want to discuss? The phrasing suggested potential limitations rather than expansions. “Serious

conversation about boundaries” implied reassessment, perhaps even restrictions of their current exploration.

Had Jess decided their arrangement with Bob had gone too far? Was she planning to end it? He’d become invested in their exploration, perhaps more than he cared to admit. The thrill of hearing about Jess’s encounters, the renewed passion in their own lovemaking, the breaking of conventional restraints, all had become almost integral to their relationship in recent months. The prospect of returning to “normal” felt deflating, like abandoning a path of discovery mid-journey.

But maybe that was exactly what needed to happen. Maybe they’d pushed too far, too fast, without adequate consideration of the long-term implications. Maybe Jess had recognized something during her time away that he was still too caught up in the fantasy to see clearly.

Tom’s mind shifted to Bob’s gift, the dildo that had both fascinated and troubled him since Jess first showed it to him via video call. Something about it crossed a line he hadn’t fully articulated even to himself.

There was an audacity to it, a presumption that felt different from their previous progression. Even with their ongoing exploration, giving your landlord’s wife a perfect replica of your penis seemed wildly inappropriate. It suggested a level of intimacy that went beyond what their arrangement had sanctioned, a claiming of territory that hadn’t been granted.

But despite his unease, Tom couldn’t deny how the mental images aroused him. Jess alone in her hotel room, working that substantial dildo inside herself, discovering whether her body could accommodate Bob’s impressive cock. How much of it could she take? Would she ease it in slowly, tentatively at first, then with growing confidence as her body adjusted?

The visualization was vivid, Jess on the hotel bed, back arching, toes curling, one hand working the dildo while the other squeezed a breast. She’d make those little sounds she made when completely lost in sensation, uninhibited and raw, and all of it with Bob’s cock inside her, even if just a replica.

Traffic lurched forward another few feet. The line of cars continued its slow rotation, each vehicle briefly pausing at the curb before moving on.

Tom's thoughts circled back to what Jess had done last night. He realized with some discomfort that he couldn't decide which possibility he preferred. The dildo represented preparation for an eventual reality he'd encouraged. But the hotel bar scenario carried its own charge, the spontaneity of it, the element of genuine risk and unpredictability.

He thought about Frank Ellison, the energy executive they'd encountered at The Fleming. That night had marked their first attempt at the bar game, and Jess had seemed genuinely engaged during her conversation with Frank. She'd laughed at something he said, leaned in to hear him better over the bar noise, accepted the business card with his room number without hesitation.

If Frank had been creepy or aggressive, if the experience had left her uncomfortable, she would have shut down any future attempts at similar exploration. But she hadn't. When they'd discussed it afterward, she'd admitted finding the interaction interesting, even flattering. Frank had been smooth, perceptive, experienced enough to recognize what they were doing without making it awkward.

"The invitation stands," Frank had said, and Tom knew he'd meant it. Men like Frank, wealthy and confident, didn't make empty offers. If Jess had wanted to, she could have reached out during her Savannah trip. A man who owned a penthouse suite and traveled for energy conferences wouldn't have hesitated to arrange a meeting if she'd shown interest.

Had she thought about it? Did she keep the card?

Tom scanned the crowds gathering at the curb, looking for Jess among the travelers emerging with their rolling luggage and backpacks.

A car ahead pulled away from the curb. Tom advanced, now just a few vehicles from the pickup zone.

Then he spotted her.

Even among the chaos of the arrivals area, Jess commanded attention in a way that seemed effortless. She stood at the curb beside her rolling suitcase, and Tom watched as a man walking past did a double take. A moment later, another traveler slowed his pace, pretending to check his phone while stealing glances in her direction.

She wore dark jeans and a light cardigan, nothing remarkable, yet somehow the simplicity only amplified her natural beauty. Even exhausted from travel, even without the polished makeup and designer clothes she wore for meetings, she possessed an almost gravitational quality that bent the attention of everyone within her orbit.

But seeing her now, after days apart, after imagining scenarios both mundane and catastrophic, the sight of her hit differently. She stood there scanning the approaching cars for his Lexus, unaware or perhaps simply indifferent to the attention she drew, and something in Tom's chest constricted with an emotion too complicated to name.

Whatever had or hadn't happened in Savannah, whatever conversations they needed to have about boundaries and futures and the sustainability of their arrangement, the fact that he loved her remained true. The complexity of their current situation didn't change that fundamental reality.

Tom pulled the Lexus to the curb where Jess waited. The moment she recognized his car, her face transformed. The polite, distant expression she wore while scanning traffic dissolved into something radiant and unreserved, a smile that seemed to originate from somewhere deeper than mere social pleasantries.

He barely put the car in park before opening the door and closing the distance between them. Jess met him halfway, her carry-on forgotten on the sidewalk as she walked straight into his arms.

"Hi," she breathed against his neck.

"Hi," Tom replied, holding her tighter than an airport pickup probably warranted. "You scared the hell out of me this morning."

She pulled back just enough to meet his eyes, her expression shifting to apologetic. “I know. I’m sorry. I just crashed so hard and didn’t hear my alarm.”

“You’re okay?”

“I’m perfect,” she assured him, her hand coming up to cup his cheek.

“Exhausted and ready to be home, but perfect.”

“I missed you,” he said simply.

“I missed you too... more than usual this time.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. The bed was too big. The room was too quiet. Everything felt off. We have things to talk about, but first I just want to go home. Is that okay?”

“More than okay,” he assured her.

He kissed her then, her lips soft and warm, tasting faintly of mint gum. When they separated, an airport security guard was eyeing them from twenty feet away, clearly preparing to tell them to move along. Tom released her, retrieving the rolling carry on she’d abandoned and hefting it into the trunk.

Jess slid into the passenger seat as he rounded the car and dropped back behind the wheel.

As he merged into the crawling airport traffic, her hand found his on the console, fingers interlacing with a naturalness born from years together.