

The Bad Tenant Ch. 26

Eddie Wilder

Oct 05, 2026

· Paid

Tom returned to his desk at 2:05 PM, his mind still fogged from the meeting that had just concluded. For sixty minutes, he'd sat in the conference room while Davis, Miles, and three senior partners discussed budgets, timelines, and deliverables for the Denver project. As a newly promoted Senior Consultant, this was exactly the kind of discussion where Tom should have been demonstrating the analytical clarity that had earned him the promotion in the first place.

His entire career was built on seeing systems clearly, on taking clients' chaos and reducing it to manageable components. When businesses brought their problems, they were bringing him complexity that needed ordering, inefficiency that needed solving. He'd always excelled at being the one in control, the one who could analyze any situation and identify the optimal path forward.

But today, that analytical clarity had abandoned him completely. The entire hour existed in Tom's memory as disjointed fragments. Voices had risen and fallen around him while his thoughts constructed scenarios about what might have happened at home.

What positions did they try this time? Did they do missionary like Tuesday? Or had Bob bent her over something? Had she been vocal? Had she moaned Bob's name? Had she come? How many times?

Tom had tried to focus on the meeting, had made notes in his planner, had nodded at appropriate intervals, but his mind kept slipping away from projected revenue figures and implementation schedules to the image of Bob having his way with Jess's naked body.

At one point Davis had looked directly at him. "Tom? Your take on the phase two timeline?"

Tom had stared blankly, his brain struggling to transition from imagining Bob driving his huge cock into Jess to comprehending that words were being directed at him. The silence had probably lasted only three or four seconds in reality, but long enough that confusion registered on Davis's face, his brows pulling together slightly.

Miles had jumped in with, “I think Tom and I are aligned on the compressed schedule, right Tom?”

The lifeline had been so obvious, so clearly a rescue operation, that Tom had felt shame course through him even as he nodded gratefully. “Yeah, absolutely. The timeline makes sense given the constraints.” He had no idea what schedule they were discussing, whether he actually agreed with it, or what implications it might have for his own deliverables. He’d just prayed his response was appropriate and that no one would ask him to elaborate.

Davis had given him an odd look, then moved on, but Tom had spent the rest of the meeting in low-grade terror that he’d be called on again, that his complete inability to focus would be exposed in front of everyone. If he lost credibility now, at this early stage of his new position, it might take months, if not years to rebuild it.

He’d made a conscious effort to keep professional and engaged. He’d asked one clarifying question about vendor relationships. He’d even managed to make a suggestion about budget contingencies that Davis seemed to approve of, nodding and making a note. But beneath this performance of competence, Tom’s mind had been split in two, one half struggling to stay present, the other half wandering relentlessly back to his home, to his wife.

He’d left his phone at his desk before the meeting, not wanting the distraction. His reasoning had been that if he brought it into the conference room, he’d check it compulsively and everyone would notice.

The strategy had failed spectacularly. Leaving his phone behind hadn’t prevented his mind from wandering. It had just removed his ability to check for updates, creating a different kind of torture. Instead of being distracted by actual information, he’d been distracted by the absence of information, by wondering what Jess had texted, by imagining what she might have said.

Now, back at his desk, Tom opened the drawer where he’d left his phone. His heart was already racing before he’d even looked at the screen, before he knew if there was anything waiting for him.

Since Tuesday night, Tom had been working on a strategy. He’d recognized something crucial about his own behavior, something that made him deeply uncomfortable but that he couldn’t ignore.

His neediness and desperation didn't just feel pathetic, they actively undermined everything.

When he'd bombarded her with texts after she'd told him what happened with Bob, when he'd peppered her with anxious questions before, during and after sex, when he'd needed constant reassurance that they were okay, that she still loved him, that Tuesday hadn't changed everything, he'd transformed himself into someone whose feelings needed constant monitoring, someone fragile who couldn't be trusted with difficult truths. He'd made himself into a dependent rather than a partner, and he'd seen it register in Jess's eyes, that flash of something that might have been disappointment or pity or exhaustion.

So he'd developed a plan, a set of principles that felt almost like a work framework, the kind of systematic approach he'd use for a client problem.

Tom opened his Notes app, scrolling past his grocery list and meeting agendas until he found the entry from Wednesday morning, titled simply "Strategy."

Give Jess space. Don't be needy. Don't bombard her with texts. Let her have her experience. Be the man who can handle hearing about other men without making it about your own insecurity. Trust that giving her control and power will strengthen your bond rather than weaken it.

This last part was the core belief, the foundational assumption everything else rested on, that Jess would appreciate his security and confidence, would value his lack of neediness so deeply, that it would make her love him more, not less.

Today, when he'd sent those initial texts before Jess went downstairs, he'd been implementing this strategy. He'd shown care, established connection, let her know he was thinking about her, but then he'd stopped, given her space, trusted that she would come back to him because he was secure enough not to cling.

The past two hours had been Tom's attempt to transform from the desperate, needy person he'd been Tuesday night into someone stronger. The silence while Jess was with Bob had required a discipline that felt like holding his breath underwater.

Every cell in his body had screamed at him to text her. "Is everything okay?" or "Just checking in" or "Thinking about you" or even just a heart emoji, anything to remind Jess that he existed, that he mattered, that she should be thinking about him too.

But he hadn't given in. He'd forced himself to sit through the entire meeting, to endure not knowing because he'd understood that giving in would prove he was still the needy version of himself he was trying to transcend, that every text he sent would be evidence that he couldn't actually handle this.

Tom finally picked up his phone. What he saw on the screen, what nothing could have prepared him for despite all his anxious speculation during the meeting, were Jess's words.

Jess: He fucked the hell out of me

Tom's body reacted before his mind fully processed the text. His heart rate spiked, hands began to shake, breathing became shallow and rapid, butterflies exploded in his stomach, and his cock hardened.

He swallowed hard, trying to get moisture back into his mouth, which had suddenly gone completely dry. His face felt hot. He was probably flushed, probably looked like someone who'd just received devastating news or incredible news or news that was somehow both at once, someone whose emotional state was written clearly across his features for anyone who cared to look.

Had his silence been wrong? Had Jess interpreted his lack of texts as disinterest rather than discipline?

A memory surfaced, triggered by this same cocktail of emotions, feelings he hadn't experienced at this level of intensity since he was eighteen.

Tom and Lauren had become friends in their freshman year of high school when they were partnered for a group project in World History. Their assignment had been to create a presentation on ancient Rome, and Lauren had shown up at the library with color-coded notes and a level of organization that both intimidated and impressed Tom. She was a gorgeous natural blonde with a bright smile and effortless charisma. Tom had fallen for her immediately and completely, but they were both dating other people at the time.

Over the years, they'd developed into good friends, but Tom's crush never faded. In fact, it intensified with each passing semester. Their friendship was flirty, and others often commented that they behaved like lovers. Once, at a party junior year, one of Lauren's friends had pulled Tom aside and asked him point-blank why he and Lauren weren't dating. He'd mumbled something about timing and friendship, but the truth was that he'd

never found the courage to cross that line, too afraid of rejection to risk the relationship they'd built.

Their dynamic had its own particular rhythm, long conversations in the school parking lot after everyone else had gone home, inside jokes that no one else understood, study sessions that often devolved into sharing secrets and dreams. Tom knew she listened to Fleetwood Mac when she was sad, that she wanted to be a journalist or a lawyer after high school, that she liked so much cream in her coffee that it was barely coffee anymore. He knew everything about her except what it felt like to be with her.

Towards the end of high school, during senior year, Lauren was dumped by her boyfriend of two years, a college freshman who decided long-distance wasn't working. Tom had brought her ice cream and watched bad movies with her, had been the supportive friend she needed. Two weeks later, when she seemed to be doing better, Tom took the opportunity to ask her to be his date for prom. She'd accepted with a smile that made his stomach flip.

Tom had taken Lauren to dinner a week before prom. That night, after eating at a small Italian restaurant, they'd sat in his car in front of her house and made out for the first time. Her lip gloss had tasted like strawberries, and Tom had felt dizzy with the reality that he was finally kissing Lauren after years of imagining this moment.

When they'd pulled apart, breathless and smiling, Tom had revealed that he was in love with her and wanted to date. He would never forget what she told him regarding why it wouldn't work out.

"I'm bad."

Her eyes had been serious, almost sad, as she said it, like she was confessing something shameful. Tom had told her he liked bad girls, trying to make light of it, not understanding what she meant. Lauren had responded that she'd always liked him but needed time to think about it. Tom had left believing he was finally going to date her, elated by the possibility.

At the time, sitting in his car after that first kiss, when she said she was "bad," he'd thought she meant rebellious, someone who broke curfew, who drank at parties, who didn't care what her parents thought. The kind of thrilling bad that made perfect girls interesting.

The next day, Saturday, Tom had driven to Lauren's house with roses on his passenger seat. He'd put his car in park a few houses down, planning to walk up to her door with the flowers, to take her out as a surprise.

He was about to leave his car when Lauren walked out her front door with a guy Tom had never seen before and would never see again. The asshole, as Tom had referred to him in his head for years afterward, had turned around and kissed Lauren, not a quick peck but a deep, possessive kiss. Then the asshole had taken her hand and walked her to his car, an older model Mustang, too nice for a high school student, suggesting he was older, maybe in college or even beyond.

In that moment, Tom had felt for the first time in his life a feeling he couldn't name, shame and terror and arousal and anguish all tangled together, the same feeling he'd just gotten reading Jess's text. His body had betrayed him, responding to the sight of Lauren with another man in ways he couldn't control or understand.

As they drove off, Tom had followed for several blocks, confused, devastated, heart pounding, intensely curious about who that man was. After three or four blocks, he'd realized he was essentially stalking her. He didn't know what he'd been thinking or what he would have done if he'd caught up to them. Confront them, watch them, follow them wherever they were going? He'd pulled over, shaking. His throat had felt tight, and a tear had escaped his eye. He'd felt pathetic and foolish.

He'd thrown the roses away in a gas station dumpster on his way home, tossing them into the trash alongside coffee cups and fast-food wrappers.

Back in his bedroom, Tom had obsessively checked Lauren's social media, looking for any clue about who the guy was. Her Instagram and Facebook revealed nothing, no photos with the mystery man, no status updates about dating someone new. It was as if the guy Tom had seen her with didn't exist in her public life.

Tom had felt incredibly hurt and dejected but also confused because she wasn't his girlfriend, so he had no right to feel betrayed. She hadn't done anything wrong and could date whoever she wanted. She'd asked for time to think, and he'd assumed that meant she was considering being with him, when maybe she'd just been trying to let him down gently.

Lauren had texted him later that night, and they'd chatted as usual, Lauren not mentioning the other guy despite Tom's attempts at figuring it out through casual

questions about what she'd done that day. She'd responded cheerfully, normally, saying she'd mostly stayed home and done homework, maybe the most devastating lie Tom had ever been told.

Tom had eventually figured that Lauren had been honest when she told him she was bad. She'd warned him. When she said she was "bad," she hadn't meant rebellious, she'd meant sexually experienced. She'd meant she had appetites, histories, knowledge that good-boy Tom could never match.

And the thought that Lauren had a whole sexual life Tom knew nothing about had aroused Tom more than anything else. She was corrupted, experienced, unavailable, and Tom had wanted her more, not less, because of it.

Days later, Tom had masturbated to the image of the asshole's hand in Lauren's, to the kiss on her doorstep. He'd felt disgusted afterward, but he'd done it again the next night, and the night after that, the fantasy of Lauren with the asshole becoming more potent than any porn he'd ever seen.

He'd imagined what they did together, how the guy touched her, what Lauren looked like when she came. Tom's imagination had filled in details he had no way of knowing, the sounds Lauren might make, the way her body might respond to experienced hands, the things she might whisper in the dark.

Despite his hurt over seeing Lauren with the other man, Tom had said nothing to her about what he'd witnessed, still hoping to date her. He'd taken her to prom a week later as planned, and they'd had a good time, dancing and laughing and taking photos.

Lauren had worn a deep blue dress that made her eyes look like the ocean, and Tom had worn a matching tie. They'd looked perfect together in the photos.

At the end of the night, at the afterparty, Tom had leaned in to kiss Lauren while they stood alone in the kitchen, and she'd avoided it by turning her head at the last moment, his lips grazing her cheek instead. Lauren had hugged him and told him how much she valued him as a friend, and Tom had understood in that moment that the time she'd needed to think about dating him had led to a gentle no, delivered through continued friendship rather than explicit rejection. He'd felt like a fool.

That summer, he'd withdrawn from Lauren, purposely drifted away despite strong urges to text her. When she'd called to ask why he was avoiding her, he'd made excuses about

summer jobs and college preparation. Eventually, her texts and calls had stopped coming.

In the fall, Tom had started college. He'd thrown himself into reinventing himself, started running, studying hard to get good grades. He'd made sure he was never the friend-zoned nice guy again, learning how to be confident and make the first move and be the guy who got chosen instead of the guy who watched from the sidelines.

Tom had never told Jess about Lauren. There was shame about being a nice guy, about being friend-zoned. There was shame about the stalking behavior, following her car.

There was shame about being rejected. There was shame about his feelings, the recognition that his jealousy was unfounded because she owed him nothing, that his pain was wrong because it was based on a sense of entitlement he had no right to feel.

If Jess knew about Lauren, the original blonde crush, she might think that Tom saw her as a replacement, as a do-over, as his second chance to be chosen by the perfect girl.

That recognition would taint their entire relationship, would make everything they'd built together feel like Tom's elaborate mechanism for healing a wound. And maybe it was true, on some level. Maybe Tom had been drawn to Jess partly because she reminded him of what he'd lost, what he'd never really had. But over time, Jess had become so much more than that. She was her own person, complex and real in ways that his idealized memory of Lauren could never be.

Now, sitting in this office chair reading Jess's text, feeling this same cocktail of terror and arousal and exclusion, Tom recognized that he was still the eighteen-year-old with roses on his passenger seat, still watching the girl he loved choose someone else, still getting hard from the exclusion. He realized that winning the beautiful blonde hadn't healed the eighteen-year-old who'd cried in his car. The wound was still there, just hidden under layers of professional success and a happy marriage.

Tom wondered if he was just subconsciously recreating the original trauma, putting Jess in Lauren's position, Bob in the asshole's role, and himself back in his car watching from outside, excluded, hard and ashamed and terrified. Except this time, when the blonde chose the other man, she came back to Tom afterward. She told him everything, still loved him, was still his. Was that progress, or just a more elaborate form of self-torture? Had he engineered this whole situation with Bob? Was he trying to confront his fears by voluntarily putting himself in the position he'd found himself in unwillingly all those years

ago? Or was there something deeper and more disturbing at work, some part of him that needed to relive the pain, that found satisfaction in watching history repeat itself?

The recognition made him feel a little sick. All this time he'd told himself he was exploring sexuality, pushing boundaries, being adventurous, but maybe he was just... what?

Forcing Jess to reenact his high school heartbreak? Using his wife as therapy for a wound he never healed from? The thought was so disturbing he almost wanted to call her right now, tell her to end things with Bob, admit that this was about him being a fucked-up eighteen-year-old who never got over being friend-zoned.

But even as he considered this, another part of his mind rejected it. No, this was different. This wasn't about Lauren. This was about him and Jess exploring their sexuality together, taking risks together, finding new dimensions to their relationship. The similarities to his past were coincidental, not causal. And besides, Jess wasn't doing this for him, she was doing it for herself, finding her own pleasure, making her own choices. She wasn't a puppet in his psychological drama. She was the co-author of their shared story.

Tom took a deep breath. He returned to the present moment, to the phone in his hand and the text still glowing on the screen. He read it again.

She typed "He fucked the hell out of me," not "we had sex again," not "Bob and I hooked up again," not even "we fooled around again." He fucked was past tense, a completed action. Bob did something to Jess. That's what the grammar said, Bob as the one performing the action, Jess as the one being acted upon.

And "the hell out of" added its own meaning. This wasn't just "he fucked me." The phrase suggested Bob didn't just have sex with Jess. He dominated her, took her, did something to her body that warranted this kind of emphasis. The language was raw, direct, unfiltered. It wasn't how Jess typically talked. It was as if Bob had changed how she expressed herself.

Tom looked at the timestamp on Jess's text and saw it was sent at 1:57 PM. He did the math automatically. He'd gotten her text at 11:42 AM saying "Heading down in a few minutes." Even accounting for her going downstairs, getting settled, whatever preliminary conversation they had, that was still essentially two hours.

Two hours of... what? Extended foreplay followed by extended sex followed by recovery followed by more sex? Or did she finish with Bob, come back upstairs, take a shower,

maybe check some work emails, and then text him? The lack of information was agonizing.

He scrolled up to check their text message history. Tuesday she'd texted at around 1 PM with "Had an interesting encounter with Bob. Let's talk about it tonight. Love you." She'd texted him almost immediately after, while probably still in Bob's apartment or just upstairs.

And what Tom couldn't help but notice, what made this text different from Tuesday, was that there was no cushioning. No "I love you." No "thinking about you." No "can't wait to see you tonight." Just the raw statement of what Bob did to her, delivered with no emotional framing, no reassurance.

Was that significant? Was she too overwhelmed by what had happened to think about softening the message? Was she being provocative, knowing how those words would affect him? Or was she simply reporting a fact, not realizing how the starkness of her phrasing might come across?

Tom startled slightly when Miles appeared beside his desk. He'd been so absorbed in staring at his phone that he hadn't noticed Miles approaching. Tom quickly flipped his phone face-down on the desk, the motion probably too quick, too defensive, definitely noticeable.

Miles raised an eyebrow. "You okay, man? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Tom sat up straighter. "Yeah. Fine. That meeting was just... intense." He stood up abruptly. "Think I need a walk to clear my head."

He felt like he needed to escape the office, to move, to be anywhere but here.

"Fresh air helps," Miles said, concern lingering in his expression. "You sure you're good? You seemed a bit off in the meeting too."

Tom felt a flash of embarrassment. "Just a lot on my mind with the Denver project. Trying to get my head around all the moving parts."

Miles nodded. "It's a big one, for sure. First major project since your promotion too. No pressure, right?" He grinned, trying to lighten the mood.

"Right," Tom managed a weak smile in return. "Exactly."

"Want company on that walk? I could use some air myself. We could talk through some of those phase two concerns."

The last thing Tom needed was company. He needed to be alone, to process Jess's message, to decide how to respond. "Thanks, but I need to sort through some thoughts. Catch up with you later?"

"Sure thing," Miles stepped back.

Tom nodded, pocketed his phone, and made his way past cubicles, past the front desk, toward the elevator.

The elevator arrived with a soft ping, and Tom stepped inside, grateful to find it empty. As the doors closed, he leaned against the back wall, suddenly aware of how physically affected he was by Jess's text. His heart was still racing, his palms were sweaty, and despite his best efforts to think of anything else, his mind kept returning to the image of Bob on top of Jess.

Outside, the sun beat down relentlessly, and Tom felt exposed, as if everyone could see the turmoil written across his face. He started walking with no destination in mind, just needing to move, to somehow externalize the restless energy coursing through him.

The downtown sidewalks teemed with life despite the temperature. A group of tourists with water bottles and sunglasses passed him, laughing about something. Two construction workers ate lunch in the shadow of their truck, their visibility vests almost painful to look at in the bright sunlight. A homeless man sat propped against a building with a cardboard sign Tom didn't bother to read. The world continued its normal rhythms while Tom's inner landscape had been transformed by words on a screen.

After a few minutes of aimless walking, he spotted a small pocket park squeezed between two office buildings, one of those urban concessions to nature, installed by developers to satisfy zoning requirements rather than out of any genuine commitment to green space. A square of grass struggling to stay green, three metal benches arranged at odd angles, a few shrubs with browning leaves, and a live oak tree offering a meager patch of shade. It wasn't much, but enough.

Tom made his way to the bench beneath the tree and sat down heavily. The shade provided immediate relief from the direct sun. He loosened his tie slightly and took a deep breath.

He checked his watch. 2:11 PM. He had a team sync at 2:30 PM, the Denver materials review with Miles at 3 PM, the client presentation at 4 PM that he couldn't possibly

reschedule, and three emails flagged urgent in his inbox.

Nineteen minutes until his next meeting, nineteen minutes in which he should be reviewing notes, preparing talking points, focusing his mind on the professional challenges ahead. Instead, he sat staring at his phone, reading Jess's message for what felt like the hundredth time.

Jess: He fucked the hell out of me

The bluntness of it, the rawness, kept hitting him afresh each time he read it.

His professional life was demanding his attention with increasing urgency. The Denver project wasn't just any assignment, it was his first major undertaking since the promotion. Davis had entrusted him with significant responsibility, had specifically mentioned during their last one on one that he'd chosen Tom to lead because "you're the one who can see the whole picture while keeping track of the details." The client was expecting excellence. Miles was counting on his partnership. The team was looking to him for direction.

And tomorrow night was Jess's Skyline party, where he'd need to be the charming, supportive husband, making small talk with Webb and Chen and all the other men who wanted to fuck his wife. He'd need to stand confidently beside her while she sparkled in conversations, while she laughed at inside jokes about clients and colleagues. He'd need to answer questions about his own work with just the right balance of success and humility, to present himself as the kind of man worthy of being married to Jessica Marshall.

Then next week brought its own complications. He'd be in Denver while Jess would be in Houston. Five days where he wouldn't see her face except through FaceTime, wouldn't be able to read her body language, wouldn't know what she was doing except what she chose to tell him.

Yet despite the crushing weight of these obligations, Tom felt strangely alive. His senses seemed heightened, colors more vivid, sounds sharper. The rustle of leaves above his head, the distant hum of traffic, the murmured conversation from a couple walking past, everything registered with unusual clarity. This must be what people meant when they talked about being fully present, though it seemed darkly ironic that it was happening in the context of what felt like psychological freefall.

He looked down at the phone in his hand, at those words that didn't sound like his wife, not because Jess wouldn't use those words, but because the context was wrong. This was the middle of a workday. Jess would have cleaned up by now, would have dressed, would have returned to her professional self.

But this message came from the Jess who emerged when inhibitions fell away, who said things in the heat of the moment that she'd never say in normal conversation, whose vocabulary became raw and unfiltered, who communicated in gasps and moans and demands.

And if that was true, if she was still in that headspace when she texted, that meant they'd likely been having sex for most of those two hours. Not just sex, but the kind of sex that left Jess so affected she couldn't even frame it in the more restrained language she typically used when telling Tom about her experiences.

"Fuck," Tom said aloud, not bothering to lower his voice. A couple walking past glanced at him curiously, the woman raising an eyebrow, the man giving him a wide berth as they passed. Tom barely noticed their reaction. He stared at his phone, at those words, feeling their implications sink deeper into his consciousness.

What he truly, desperately wanted, was to leave work, to go home and find Jess, to take her to bed and fuck her. Not make love, not have tender reconnecting sex, not carefully process their feelings together, but just fuck her, reclaim her, lose himself in her body until both of their minds went blank.

But that wasn't possible. The 4 PM client presentation couldn't be rescheduled. The Denver materials needed review. The team sync would require his active participation. His professional responsibilities demanded his attention regardless of his personal crisis. And even if he could leave, what would that hasty departure communicate? Would it signal passion and desire? "I'm so turned on by you I had to come home"?

Or would it betray desperation and insecurity? "I'm so threatened by Bob I need to reclaim you immediately"?

Tom feared it would be the latter, regardless of his intentions. The optics would reveal exactly how fragile he felt, how precarious his emotional state had become.

The man Tom wanted to be would wait until evening, would go home at his normal time, would hear Jess's full story over dinner, and would then have sex that emerged naturally from their connection rather than from territorial panic. He'd be patient, controlled,

confident in his place in Jess's life, unthreatened by what had happened between her and Bob because he'd know that whatever physical pleasure Bob might give her, the emotional foundation of their marriage remained secure.

Sitting here, Tom's mind circled back to a problem he couldn't ignore. This morning's meeting had been a disaster, Miles covering for him, Davis noticing, two days a week where he essentially ceased to function as a professional because his wife might be having sex with their tenant.

He couldn't sustain this. Forty percent of his workweek spent in psychological freefall wasn't compatible with being the Senior Consultant he'd just been promoted to be. Something would need to change, some framework or strategy that would let him maintain his career while this exploration continued.

The answer wasn't obvious. He'd need time to think it through, but not now, not sitting on a park bench with nineteen minutes until his next meeting and his mind still reeling from Jess's text.

He needed to go back to work. But first, he needed to respond to Jess. What should he say?

Tom opened his messaging app and positioned his thumbs over the keyboard. He made a decision. He'd be authentic. He'd respond with what he was actually feeling, not what he thought he should feel.

Tom: I'm so turned on right now. I want to know everything. I love you so much.

It wasn't perfect, but it was honest. Tom hit send before he could second-guess himself, before he could delete and rewrite again. The moment the message went through, he felt relief because the paralysis was over, the decision made.

He stood from the bench, pocketed his phone, and started walking back toward his office building.

As he walked, Tom felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. His heart jumped.

Pulling it out, he saw Jess had responded.

Jess: I can't stop thinking about it. Can't wait to tell you everything tonight. Love you too. Something in her response settled him slightly. The "love you too" reminded him that through all of this, they remained connected. Whatever was happening with Bob, Jess was still his wife, still choosing him, still maintaining the emotional bond that was the

foundation of their marriage. And “can’t stop thinking about it” confirmed what he’d suspected, that the experience had been powerful enough to linger in her mind.

Tom quickened his pace, his professional responsibilities regaining urgency in his mind. Somehow, he’d have to push aside thoughts of Jess and Bob for the next few hours and focus on being the Senior Consultant he was supposed to be.

On Friday evening, Tom stood in front of the full-length mirror in their bedroom walk-in closet, adjusting his black tie against his white shirt. He was already dressed except for his suit jacket, which hung on the back of the bedroom door. His hair was styled with product, pushed back the way Jess liked. He had applied Armani cologne after his shower, two sprays on his neck, one on each wrist. He looked professional and polished, like the kind of husband who photographs well at his wife’s work party.

The hairdryer hummed from the master bathroom, occasionally pausing as Jess shifted positions or changed settings. She’d been in there for twenty minutes, transforming herself.

Tom moved to the bed and sat on the edge, phone in hand. He wasn’t really looking at anything on the screen, just scrolling through nothing in particular, occupying his hands while his mind drifted back to last night.

Last night had followed a pattern becoming familiar but no less intense for its familiarity. Tom had left work at 5:47 PM. The drive had felt endless despite taking the same length of time it always did. At every red light, his mind had constructed scenarios about what Jess might tell him, had replayed her text over and over.

When he’d finally pulled into their driveway at 6:11 PM, Tom had sat in his car for a full minute, trying to compose himself. His strategy was to be calm, to be the secure husband who could hear about his wife’s afternoon without falling apart, without peppering her with detailed questions. He’d reminded himself of the framework he’d written in his notes app.

Give Jess space. Don’t be needy. Don’t bombard her with texts. Let her have her experience. Be the man who can handle hearing about other men without making it about your own insecurity. Trust that giving her control and power will strengthen your bond rather than weaken it.

His hands had been shaking as he'd unbuckled his seatbelt, and when he'd walked through the front door, his heart had been hammering so hard he'd wondered if Jess would be able to hear it.

She'd been in the kitchen when he entered, stirring something on the stove. Her hair had been pulled up in a messy bun, the kind she always did when she didn't want it in her face while cooking.

"Hey," she'd said, glancing over her shoulder with a small smile. "Perfect timing. This is almost ready."

Tom had crossed to her immediately. He'd wrapped his arms around her from behind, pressing his face into her hair, breathing in the scent of her shampoo. She'd leaned back into him, one hand coming up to rest on his arm, her thumb stroking his skin in an absent, affectionate way.

"Carbonara?" he'd asked.

"One of your favs," she'd confirmed.

They'd stood like that for a moment, Tom holding her, feeling the warmth of her body against his chest, the shape of her in his arms.

"How was your day?" she'd asked, the question so normal, so routine, that Tom had almost laughed.

"Couldn't concentrate," he'd admitted. "All I could think about was you."

Jess had set down her wooden spoon and turned in his arms, looking up at him. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," Tom had said honestly, one hand coming up to cup her cheek. "I want to hear everything but I'm also terrified to hear everything. Does that make sense?"

She'd leaned into his palm, her expression softening. "It makes perfect sense."

"But I want to do this differently tonight," he'd said. "Not like Tuesday."

"Okay..." Jess had tilted her head slightly. "But what does differently mean exactly?"

"I just..." Tom had struggled to articulate his new strategy without making it sound like criticism of how Tuesday had gone. "I want to give you space to tell me what you want to tell me, on your terms. Without me being..."

"A complete wreck?" Jess had offered with a teasing smile.

"I was going to say needy, but sure, that works too." Tom had managed a weak laugh.

She'd studied his face for another moment, then reached up to smooth down his collar where it had gotten ruffled. "Tom, you're allowed to have feelings about this. You know that, right?"

"I know. But Tuesday I felt like just... I interrogated you. I couldn't stop asking questions. I want to do better tonight."

Jess had nodded slowly. "Okay. We'll figure it out as we go." Then she'd reached up on her toes and kissed him softly, just a brief press of her lips to his, the kind of affection they'd exchanged ten thousand times. "Let me finish this up and we can eat."

They'd moved to the kitchen table then, where Jess had served the carbonara she'd prepared. The pasta had been perfect as always, creamy and rich with just the right amount of black pepper. Tom had watched her plate his portion with the same care she always did, adding an extra sprinkle of parmesan the way he liked it.

For the first few minutes they'd eaten in silence. Tom had picked up his fork, twirled pasta around it, brought it to his mouth. The carbonara was delicious, exactly as he remembered it from the dozens of other times she'd made this recipe, but he'd managed only three bites before his appetite abandoned him. His stomach was too tight, too knotted with anticipation and dread and arousal all tangled together.

He'd set down his fork and reached for his wine glass instead, draining half of it in one long swallow.

Jess had noticed immediately. She'd set down her own fork, wiping her mouth with her napkin. "You're not eating."

"I will," he'd said. "Just need a minute."

She'd set down her own fork. "Do you want me to tell you about today or do you want to wait until after dinner?"

The question had made his heart rate spike immediately, his cock hardening in his pants just from her acknowledging that there was something to tell. His body's response embarrassed him, the Pavlovian nature of it, but he couldn't control it. "Now's good," he'd said. "If you're ready."

"Okay." Jess had picked up her wine glass, taken a sip, then another. She'd been gathering her thoughts, and Tom had recognized the gesture, the way she always needed a moment to organize what she wanted to say when it was something difficult or important.

Tom had felt his anxiety building with each passing second. His knee had started bouncing under the table.

“So I went down around noon,” Jess had finally begun, her eyes on her wine glass rather than his face. “Right after I texted you. Bob was in his living room when I got there. We talked for a bit, just normal stuff about the week, about you being gone to Denver and me being gone to Houston.”

Tom had nodded.

“Then I...” Jess had paused, color rising in her cheeks. “I basically stripped for him. In his living room. I took off my clothes piece by piece and then got on my knees in front of him.”

“Jesus,” he’d breathed.

“I gave him a blowjob,” Jess had continued, speaking faster now. “It lasted for a while. Then I tried to take him inside my throat. Like, really deep.”

He’d wanted to ask if she’d managed it, wanted to know exactly how much of Bob she’d been able to take, but he’d bitten the inside of his cheek to keep the question from escaping.

“I kept gagging.” She’d continued. “Had to pull off and try again over and over. My throat was sore afterward. Still is a bit, actually. You might notice tomorrow if my voice sounds rough.”

“After that,” Jess had continued, still not quite meeting his eyes, “I got on top of him, on his couch, and I rode him.”

“For how long?” The question had escaped before Tom could stop it, before he could remind himself that he was supposed to be giving her space, not interrogating.

“I don’t know exactly,” Jess had said. “It felt like... a while, long enough that my legs were tired and shaking by the end.”

He’d wanted to ask more, wanted to know every detail, wanted her to describe exactly what it had felt like. The questions had crowded his throat, demanding to be asked, but he’d forced them down. This was the new Tom, the one who could handle this.

“Then we moved to his bedroom,” Jess had continued. “He wanted me from behind in doggy style. That’s where he finished. He came in the condom.”

Tom had nodded, his mind constructing images he’d never seen but could imagine, Jess on her hands and knees on Bob’s bed, Bob behind her, inside her, taking her.

Finally, he'd managed to ask the question that had been building since she'd started talking. "What did you enjoy most?" The words had emerged from some desperate need to understand not just what had happened but how she'd experienced it, what it had meant to her.

Jess had taken a deep breath. She'd opened her mouth, closed it, then picked up her glass and taken a long sip.

"I've been scared to tell you this," she'd finally said, her voice quieter than before.

"Scared of how you'd react."

Tom's heart had started pounding harder. "Tell me what?"

Jess had looked down at the table, at her half-eaten pasta, at anywhere but his face. "I really like his cock, Tom." The words had come out in a rush, like she'd been holding them in and they'd finally broken free. "I know that's probably awful to say, but it feels really, really good. And I... I come easily with him."

The confession had hit Tom like a lightning strike. Every cell in his body had lit up at once, that Lauren feeling coursing through him. His cock had gone from hard to fully hard in the space of a single breath.

He'd stared at his wife who was now telling him she really liked another man's cock. The woman who'd obviously been so careful, so protective of his feelings during their entire exploration, had just crossed a line she'd been avoiding.

"That's..." He'd paused. "That's the hottest fucking thing you've ever said to me."

Jess's eyes had snapped up to his face, surprise clear in her expression. "Really?"

"Really." Tom had leaned forward, elbows on the table, needing her to understand. "Look, yeah, there's a part of me as a man that feels jealous hearing that. I'm not going to lie and say it doesn't sting a little." He'd paused, running a hand through his hair. "But Jess, this whole thing, everything we're doing... if... if his cock makes you come easily, if it feels that good to you..." He'd had to stop and swallow hard. "That's exactly what I want to know. That's what makes this work for both of us."

"Are you sure?" Jess had asked, her voice uncertain.

"I'm sure," Tom had said, and he'd meant it despite the mix of emotions churning in his gut. "I want you to tell me these things, need you to tell me these things. The whole point of this is that you get to experience pleasure and then share it with me."

Jess had studied his face for a long moment, as if trying to determine whether he was being honest or just saying what he thought she wanted to hear. Whatever she'd seen had apparently satisfied her because she'd nodded slowly. "Okay."

"How many times?" Tom had asked then. "How many times did you come?"

Jess had bit her lip. "I lost count," she'd admitted.

Tom had felt the air leave his lungs. With him, Jess typically came once, maybe twice, thrice on exceptional nights.

On Tuesday she'd mentioned a couple orgasms but had been vague about the number. Lost count meant... what? Five? Seven? Ten? The number didn't matter as much as the fact that there had been so many her brain had stopped tracking them, that pleasure had been so continuous she'd lost the ability to distinguish individual peaks.

"You lost count," he'd repeated, not quite able to process the statement.

"I'm sorry," Jess had said quickly, seeing something in his expression. "I know that's probably not what you wanted to hear."

"No," Tom had interrupted, shaking his head. "Don't apologize. Jesus, Jess, don't apologize for experiencing pleasure." He'd reached across the table to take her hand, squeezing her fingers. "That's incredible. It's overwhelming to hear, yeah, but it's not bad. It's just... fuck, it's a lot to take in."

They'd sat like that for a moment, hands joined across the table.

"I wish I could have watched," Tom had said. The fantasy had been building in his mind as she'd talked, the image of seeing her lose count of her orgasms, of watching her body respond that way.

But Jess had gone very still, her hand tensing in his. "No way," she'd said firmly. "That's not happening, Tom. I'm not into that and I don't even want it recorded either."

The firmness of her response had surprised him, and he'd backed off immediately.

"Okay. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have suggested it."

"I mean it," Jess had said. "The thought of you actually being there, watching... it makes me uncomfortable."

"I understand," Tom had said, and he had, even though the fantasy had been compelling. Jess had relaxed slightly, her hand loosening in his grip. "Thank you."

At some point, Tom had asked about the text, about why she'd phrased it the way she had.

Jess had looked uncomfortable when he'd asked, had set down her fork and taken a sip of wine before answering. "I don't know why I sent that," she'd finally said. "I kind of lost my mind for a moment."

"What do you mean?" Tom had asked.

"I had just gotten upstairs and everything was still spinning. I was expecting to see what you had texted, and when I saw nothing, I got kind of scared." She'd looked down at her plate. "I thought you were pulling away from me. Not seeing any texts made me panic a little. I thought maybe you were pulling back emotionally." She'd looked up at him then, her eyes vulnerable. "Honestly, Tom, the text was meant to... provoke a reaction, to make you respond. I'm sorry."

Tom had felt awful hearing this explanation. The irony had been immediate. His strategy to be less needy, to give her space, to not hover, had been interpreted as exactly the opposite of what he'd intended.

"Jess, no, that's not..." He'd reached across the table to take her hand again. "I thought I was giving you room to have your experience without... bombarding you with texts."

She'd squeezed his hand. "So we both misunderstood each other."

"Spectacularly," Tom had agreed.

They hadn't stayed at the kitchen table much longer after that. They'd moved to the bedroom without discussing it, both of them just standing up and migrating there as if by mutual unspoken agreement. There had been no elaborate lingerie presentation this time. They'd just undressed and gotten into bed together, lying naked beneath the covers, and continued talking.

Tom had pulled Jess against his side, her head finding its natural place on his chest, his arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"I really couldn't concentrate at work today," Tom had said. "Davis noticed something was off during the meeting. Miles actually had to cover for me when Davis asked me a question and I just stared blankly."

Jess had lifted her head to look at him, concern immediate in her eyes. "Baby, that's not good. I don't want this to damage your career." Her hand had come up to rest on his

chest, right over his heart. “It’s not worth it. Maybe we need to reconsider what we’re doing if it’s going to cost you your reputation at work.”

Tom had caught her hand, threading his fingers through hers. He’d appreciated her concern but had also recognized that simply stopping wasn’t a real option, not when they’d already gone this far, not when the dynamic had already been established. “I don’t think we can just stop,” he’d said. “But I do think we need to figure out how to make this sustainable.”

“What do you mean?” Jess had settled back against him, her thumb stroking the back of his hand.

“I can’t be basically non-operational two days of my workweek.” Tom had stared at the ceiling, organizing his thoughts. “I can’t be the Senior Consultant I’ve just been promoted to be if every Tuesday and Thursday I’m basically useless at my job because I can’t stop thinking about you and Bob.”

Jess had been quiet for a moment, her breathing soft against his skin. “Okay. So what’s your solution?”

Tom had taken a breath. “You know exposure therapy? How they treat phobias?”

“Where they expose you to whatever you’re afraid of until you stop freaking out about it?”

Jess had shifted slightly, propping herself up on one elbow so she could see his face.

“Are you seriously comparing this to a phobia right now?”

“Not exactly.” Tom had managed a weak smile at her tone, which had been somewhere between amused and incredulous. “But hear me out. The principle kind of applies. Right now, every time you’re working from home, it’s like this massive high-intensity event and I can’t think about anything else. My brain just... short-circuits. What if, instead of these really intense days, you engaged in lower-level stuff more often?”

“Lower-level stuff.” Jess had repeated his words with a slight smirk. “Very romantic, Tom.”

“You know what I mean,” he’d said, unable to help smiling back despite the seriousness of the conversation. “Just... interactions with other men, but nothing huge. Accepting a drink from a stranger at a hotel bar when you’re traveling, flirting with someone attractive at the grocery store, maybe going out dancing with someone at the gym, just taking advantage of opportunities as they come up naturally.”

Jess had been quiet for a long moment, her expression shifting from playful to thoughtful to skeptical. She'd flopped back down onto the pillow beside him with a sigh. "So you want me to be constantly 'on,' constantly scanning my environment for flirting opportunities, constantly performing this role for you?" She'd turned her head to look at him. "That sounds exhausting, Tom. And honestly? It would make our entire relationship about this thing rather than this being just one aspect of our relationship."

"No, that's not what I'm saying." Tom had turned onto his side to face her, his hand finding her hip beneath the covers. "I'm not asking you to turn every interaction into some kind of flirtation. I just mean being open to possibilities." He'd searched for the right words. "Not performing for me but being authentic to your own desires when attractive men show interest in you. Like, if you're at a hotel bar alone and someone offers to buy you a drink, you could say yes if you want to. If you're at the grocery store and you have a moment of connection with someone, you could lean into that rather than shutting it down right away."

Jess had studied his face, her blue eyes searching his for something. Then she'd asked the question he hadn't fully prepared for, her voice gentle but pointed. "Would that actually help you adjust and become less anxious? Or would it just mean you'd be anxious every single day instead of just Tuesdays and Thursdays?" She'd reached up to touch his face, her thumb brushing his cheekbone. "Because I'm not sure spreading your anxiety across the entire week would actually solve anything. It might make things worse, not better."

Tom had opened his mouth to respond, then closed it. He'd tried again. "I think it would help because..." He'd trailed off, realizing he didn't actually have a coherent argument, that he hadn't thought this through as carefully as he'd believed. "I think it would help," he'd finished weakly.

Jess had let the silence sit between them without rushing to fill it. She'd just watched him, her hand still on his face, her expression patient.

"I don't know," Tom had finally admitted. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I haven't thought this through."

"I think," Jess had said softly, "you're trying to solve an emotional problem with logic." She'd leaned forward and kissed him, just a brief press of her lips to his. "Which is very you, by the way. Very Senior Consultant Tom Marshall, trying to create a systematic framework for managing your feelings."

Despite everything, Tom had laughed. "Fair point."

"I'm not saying no," Jess had said, settling back against her pillow. "I'm just saying I need to think about it. And I think you need to think more carefully about whether you actually want what you're proposing. Like, really want it, not just think you should want it."

"Okay," Tom had agreed. "That's fair."

After the conversation had reached its natural conclusion, they'd had sex. It had been slow and careful because Jess was sore.

Tom had started by kissing her, long and deep, his hands moving over her body with a kind of reverence. His mouth had traveled down her neck.

When he'd moved lower, trailing kisses down her stomach, Jess had placed her hand gently on his shoulder. "You don't have to," she'd said softly. "I'm really sore, Tom. We can just..."

"I want to," he'd interrupted, and he had wanted to, desperately, despite knowing that Bob had been inside her just hours earlier, that her pussy had gripped Bob's cock through multiple orgasms, had squeezed him until he'd come in the condom buried deep inside her.

He'd settled between her legs, his hands gentle on her inner thighs as he spread them. In the darkness, he couldn't see much, but he'd worked slowly, carefully, aware that she was tender, that Bob's cock had stretched her.

He'd focused entirely on her clit, using his tongue in slow circles, the pattern he'd perfected over years of learning her body. Jess's hands had found his hair, her fingers threading through it.

"Tom," she'd breathed. "God, that feels good."

After several minutes, Tom had lifted his head and slid two fingers inside her. His fingers had glided in with almost no friction, her pussy opening easily to accommodate him, slick and warm and yielding in a way that was different from what he was accustomed to.

Tom had thrust his fingers gently in and out of her, continued working her with his mouth and fingers together, determined to bring her pleasure despite her exhausted, used state.

Jess had come quietly, her body tensing around his fingers, her hand tightening in his hair, a soft moan escaping her throat, a gentle orgasm, intimate in its tenderness.

When Tom had moved up her body, positioning himself between her legs, Jess had looked up at him with eyes that held something like love and gratitude and maybe a touch of concern. "Go slow," she'd said, her hands coming up to rest on his shoulders. "I will," Tom had promised, and he'd meant it even as his cock throbbed, even as every instinct in his body screamed at him to drive into her, to reclaim her, to mark her as his. Tom had entered her slowly, feeling her pussy stretch to accommodate him, and even going carefully he'd felt her tense beneath him, had seen the slight wince cross her face before she'd forced it into a smile. "Okay?" he'd asked, holding himself completely still. "Yeah," she'd breathed, her hands sliding up his back, nails pressing lightly into his skin. He'd waited, giving her body time to adjust, feeling her gradually relax beneath him. The fact that she needed this adjustment period, that his cock, which she'd taken countless times without issue, now required careful adjustment, was further proof of what Bob had done to her earlier.

When she'd finally nodded, Tom had begun to move. Slow, deep strokes, pulling almost all the way out before pushing back in with care. He'd braced his weight on his forearms, keeping his face close to hers, maintaining eye contact when she opened her eyes, pressing his forehead against hers when she closed them.

Jess had responded by wrapping her legs around his waist, her arms circling his back, pulling him closer despite the soreness, as if she needed this connection as much as he did, needed to feel him inside her after everything that had happened.

"I love you," she'd whispered against his mouth, her fingers threading through his hair. "I love you so much, Tom."

"I love you too," he'd said. "So much, Jess. So fucking much."

He'd maintained his slow, deep rhythm, fighting every instinct that demanded he go harder, faster.

It had been reconnection sex, reassurance sex, the kind of intimacy that acknowledged everything that had happened while affirming that they were still them, still together, still choosing each other. There had been no dirty talk, no fantasies, no mention of Bob or anyone else, just Tom and Jess, husband and wife, moving together in the darkness of their bedroom.

But as the minutes passed and sensation built, Tom had felt his orgasm approaching. His rhythm had begun to falter, his hips moving faster despite his intention to stay slow and

controlled. The pleasure was building too intensely, his body demanding its release.

“Tom,” Jess had said, her voice gentle but firm, her hands pressing against his shoulders. “Slow down.”

The words had cut through his rising pleasure like cold water. Tom had immediately complied, forcing his hips back to the careful pace he’d been maintaining before. “Sorry,” he’d gasped. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she’d assured him, one hand coming up to cup his face. “Just keep it slow.”

“I’m going to cum,” Tom had said just moments later.

Jess had nodded understanding, unwrapping her legs from around his waist. Tom had withdrawn, immediately taking his cock in hand, stroking himself. His orgasm had been approaching already. It didn’t take much more than a few strokes before he’d felt it cresting.

He’d come across her stomach, marking her in a way that felt both primitive and necessary. When he’d finished, he’d stared down at the evidence on her body, his chest heaving.

Jess had looked up at him with soft eyes, then brought her index finger to her stomach, scooping up some of his cum. She’d brought it to her mouth, slipping her finger between her lips and sucking it clean while maintaining eye contact with him.

“God, you’re so fucking sexy,” Tom had breathed, still recovering from his orgasm, mesmerized by the sight of her tasting him.

A small smile had played at her lips as she withdrew her finger from her mouth.

Tom had collapsed beside her, pulling her against his side immediately. She’d settled her head on his chest, one arm draping across his stomach, her leg hooking over his thigh.

Then she’d reached for tissues from the nightstand to wipe away the rest.

“That was perfect,” she’d said quietly into the darkness. “Thank you.”

Tom had stroked her back in long, soothing movements, his other hand playing with her hair. “Always,” he’d managed.

They’d lain tangled together for a while, neither of them speaking, both processing in their own way. Jess’s breathing had gradually deepened into sleep but Tom had stayed awake longer, staring at the ceiling in the darkness, his mind unable to quiet.

He'd found himself wondering, lying there with Jess's warm body pressed against him, if this was going to be the pattern going forward. Bob would fuck Jess hard enough to leave her sore, hard enough that she'd lose count of her orgasms, and then Tom would get the tender aftermath, the gentle reassurance sex, the "I love you" whispers, the careful navigation around her body's limits because Bob had already pushed her past them.

The division felt a little like degradation, like he was being relegated to a supporting role in his own marriage, like he was becoming the emotional safety net while Bob did the real work, the one who actually got to use her body without restraint, the one who got to fuck her the way his instincts demanded without having to constantly check in and adjust and slow down because she'd already been thoroughly used.

Which role was more important? The one who made her lose count of orgasms, who left her so sore she had to ask her own husband to slow down? Or the one she whispered "I love you" to in the aftermath, the one who held her while she fell asleep?

Tom wanted to believe the answer was obvious, that love mattered more than orgasms, that emotional connection trumped physical pleasure, that being her husband meant more, but lying there in the dark, remembering how easily his fingers had slid into her earlier, remembering the wince when he'd first entered her, knowing she'd asked him to slow down while Bob apparently never had to, Tom recognized that this answer felt increasingly like self-reassurance rather than certainty, the kind of thing he needed to believe rather than something he actually knew to be true.

Tom hadn't found an answer before he finally fell asleep.

Now, sitting on the edge of their bed nearly a day later, Tom heard the hairdryer finally go silent.

Tom shook his head slightly, trying to dispel the memory of those thoughts. Tonight wasn't about Bob or his own insecurity. Tonight was Jess's party. He could set aside his complicated feelings for a few hours and just be the supportive husband he needed to be.

The bathroom door opened and Jess emerged, wrapped in a towel, her hair dried and styled in soft waves that fell past her shoulders. Her makeup was finished, subtle but polished in that way that looked effortless, but Tom knew had taken her half an hour to achieve. She was beautiful in that specific way she got when she was preparing for a

professional event, composed and put-together, every detail attended to with the same precision she brought to her design work.

“Hey,” she said, catching his eye and smiling. She moved toward the closet, one hand holding the towel secure around her body. “How do I look?”

“Beautiful,” Tom said. “You’re going to own that room tonight.”

Jess’s smile widened, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “That’s the plan.” She paused at the closet entrance, turning back to look at him. “Are you okay? You’ve been kind of quiet.”

“Just thinking,” Tom said, which was true if incomplete. “And trying not to obsess about work stuff before your big night.”

“Work stuff,” Jess repeated, her tone suggesting she wasn’t entirely convinced but wasn’t going to push. “Okay. Well, I still need to pick a dress.” She disappeared into the walk-in closet.

She called out, “How much time do I have?”

Tom checked his watch. “It’s five now. Uber gets here at five-thirty, so you’ve got half an hour.”

“Perfect,” Jess replied. Tom heard rustling from inside the closet.

Tom stood from the bed, crossed to the door where his suit jacket hung, and slipped it on. He adjusted it across his shoulders, making sure the fit was right, then moved to the oversized armchair in the corner of their bedroom and settled into it.

Sitting quietly, Tom listened to the sounds of Jess moving around inside the walk-in closet, fabric rustling, hangers sliding, the small noises of someone getting dressed. His mind drifted back to last night’s conversation, to her admission that she’d lost count of her orgasms. The thought still ignited that peculiar mix of arousal, jealousy, and inadequacy that had become so familiar lately.

After a minute or two of silence, Tom decided to ask something he’d been considering since their talk ended.

“Jess?”

“Hmm?” Her voice floated from the closet, slightly distracted.

“How are you feeling about everything we’re doing? Not just with Bob, but the whole dynamic. How are you processing it?”

From inside the closet, Jess went quiet. The pause lasted long enough that Tom wondered if she was going to answer at all. When she finally spoke, her voice carried a note of gentle resistance.

“Do we really need to have this conversation right now?”

“I know the timing isn’t perfect,” Tom said. “But I’ve been thinking about this a lot, and I just want to understand how you’re experiencing all of this. It’s not an interrogation, just... understanding. I promise to keep it light, no heavy stuff. I’m just curious about your perspective.”

Jess sighed, but it wasn’t annoyed, more resigned acceptance. “Okay, but you have to promise not to turn this into a whole thing. We have to leave in thirty minutes, and I can’t show up to the party with red eyes from crying or whatever.”

“I promise,” Tom said. “I don’t want to ruin your night. I just want to hear how you’re processing everything.”

When Jess started to speak, her voice carried from inside the closet with a tentative quality, like she was figuring out what she thought as she said it.

“I’ve been thinking about this, actually, trying to understand for myself what this is really about.” She paused, and Tom heard fabric rustling. “I never really had a wild phase when I was younger, not like some of my friends did. I was with Michael in high school, then Nate in college, then Marco for a few months as a rebound, then I met you. Three relationships, essentially, two of them serious before you.”

Tom heard more movement, a zipper being pulled up. Jess’s voice continued from the closet, and he could hear her struggling slightly to articulate something.

“What’s happening now feels like...” she trailed off, then started again. “Most women never get to do this, right? To explore something like this with their husband’s full support.” She corrected herself immediately. “I mean, that’s not quite right either, because you stay faithful while I explore, so it’s not like we’re both doing it. The asymmetry is part of it, I think. It’s focused on me, on my pleasure, on my experiences, and you get to...” she paused again, searching for words. “Experience it through me, maybe?” She sounded uncertain, like she was testing out the phrasing to see if it fit.

Tom felt something tighten in his chest at the way she described it. “Focused on her pleasure.” Tom as the spectator who “experiences it through her.” The accuracy of the description made it sting. He wanted to interrupt, to ask if that bothered her or if she

thought it was unfair, but he stayed quiet, letting her continue, waiting to hear where this thought led.

She emerged briefly from the closet, now wearing a sophisticated black dress. One hand reached behind her back, clearly struggling with the zipper. Tom stood, crossed to her, and helped her zip it up the rest of the way. She thanked him softly and returned to the closet, and Tom went back to the armchair.

From the closet, Jess's voice continued, and Tom heard her moving around. "Part of what I've discovered, or maybe what I'm rediscovering, is that there's something in me that this whole thing has unlocked." She struggled with how to describe it, started a sentence and stopped, tried again. "It's like there are all these expectations placed on women, right? About how you're supposed to be, especially once you're married. And I've been aware of those expectations my whole life, the idea that wanting sex makes you a certain kind of person, that enjoying attention from men is shallow or vain, that once you're someone's wife you're supposed to just... stop being that version of yourself that responds to... to desire."

Tom heard jewelry clinking softly, like she was putting on a necklace or bracelet. She paused, and in the silence Tom processed what she was saying. She was framing this as liberation, as pushing back against social constraints. Part of him recognized the validity of that, understood that women did face different sexual expectations than men. But another part of him felt defensive, felt like this framing let her off the hook for how her "liberation" affected him.

"What you're offering me," she continued, "this freedom to explore while staying married, while keeping our emotional connection intact, that's something rare. I know that. I'm aware that most women would never have this opportunity. And there's something about that, about taking advantage of something so unusual, that feels like... feels kind of like I'd be foolish not to explore it."

"Is it mainly about the freedom itself?" Tom asked. "About rebelling against expectations? Or is there something else drawing you to it?"

Jess went quiet again, and the pause was longer this time. Tom heard her moving around, the sound of a shoe being slipped on. When she spoke, her tone was more thoughtful.

“It’s not just about rebellion, though that’s part of it. There’s something else but I don’t quite know how to explain it.” She tried anyway. “The confidence I’ve been gaining from all of this, from knowing that men want me, from understanding my own power in that way, it’s been showing up in other places in my life. At work, specifically. In how I handle difficult clients, how I present my ideas, how I negotiate. I feel more powerful sexually and that power seems to carry over into work. The two things are connected somehow.”

Her professional confidence was coming from Bob fucking her? From other men wanting to fuck her? The connection she drew felt like it diminished what he’d given her, all the emotional support and encouragement he’d provided throughout her career. But even as the annoyance flared, Tom recognized it wasn’t entirely fair. She wasn’t saying he didn’t matter, just that this exploration had given her something additional, something she apparently couldn’t get from their marriage alone.

“You know what I mean?” Jess asked, emerging from the closet with a pair of earrings she was trying to put on. “Last month when I faced down that contractor who was trying to blame our design team for his scheduling issues? The old me would have compromised just to keep the peace. But I stood my ground, and I felt this weird power in doing it. Like I knew my own worth in a way I hadn’t before.”

Tom nodded slowly. “And you think that’s connected to... this thing with Bob?”

“Not just Bob,” Jess said, successfully inserting one earring. “This whole exploration. The attention at Webb’s party, the conversations with Chen, even that thing with Frank at the Fleming. It’s like I’m rediscovering that I’m not just ‘Tom’s wife’ or ‘the interior designer.’ I’m still a woman who can turn heads, who can make choices.” She paused, struggling with the second earring. “Does that make sense?”

“It does,” Tom said, though he wasn’t entirely sure it did. “I guess I’m just wondering why that validation has to come from attention with other men. Why couldn’t it come from something else?”

Jess’s hands stilled, the earring halfway in. “That’s a fair question,” she said quietly. “I don’t know if I have a good answer. Maybe because attention is so... primal? When a man wants you sexually, there’s no ambiguity there. It’s clear and direct in a way that other forms of validation aren’t.”

She finished with the earring and turned to face him fully. “But it’s more than just validation from men. It’s about me allowing myself to want things I’ve been told I

shouldn't want. To feel things I've been told I shouldn't feel."

"Do you feel guilty about any of it?" Tom asked.

There was a long pause. When Jess finally responded, her voice was quieter.

"Yes, I do feel guilty, actually. Part of me feels bad about how all of this started, with the crypto loss, with the pressure that kind of forced us to take on Bob in the first place.

There's something that feels almost wrong about the fact that our... our crisis turned into my sexual awakening, like I'm profiting from our worst moment together."

Tom felt his throat tighten. He hadn't expected her to bring that up, the crypto loss that he'd tried so hard not to think about, the mistake that derailed all their plans and created this whole situation in the first place. Hearing her acknowledge it, hearing her call it a "crisis," made the shame bloom fresh in his chest. But she continued before he could respond.

"But another part of me feels like maybe this was always going to happen somehow, like the financial pressure just accelerated something that was inevitable. I've been feeling for a while, even before Bob, like there was some part of me I'd put away when I became Mrs. Marshall, when I became the adult with a career and a mortgage and a five-year plan. And what's happening now is kind of like me accessing that again, that version of me that was curious and adventurous and willing to take risks."

She disappeared back into the closet and Tom heard her rummaging through something.

"Also," she called out, her voice slightly muffled, "I worry about what this all means for you. About whether I'm being selfish or if this is hurting you in ways you're not telling me."

"I agreed to all of it," Tom said, surprised by the direction she'd taken. "This was my idea."

"I know," Jess replied, emerging again, now with a small purse in hand. "But sometimes I wonder if you suggested it because you actually wanted it or because you were trying to... I don't know, make up for the crypto thing. Like you felt you owed me something."

Tom started to protest, but Jess held up a hand. "I'm not saying that's definitely what happened. I'm just saying I've wondered about it sometimes. And I worry that you're suffering through parts of this because you feel like you deserve the punishment."

Tom felt the truth of her observation land somewhat. Was she right? Was the guilt about crypto loss mixing with something older, the eighteen-year-old who'd cried in his car

watching Lauren choose someone else? Was he recreating that wound with Jess because on some level he felt he deserved to be the excluded nice guy?

"That's not it," he said. "Or at least, that's not all of it."

Jess studied him. "Sometimes I think you understand yourself less than you think you do."

Tom couldn't argue with that. His self-image as the analytical one, the one who understood systems and motivations, had been thoroughly dismantled over the past few months. He'd discovered depths to himself he hadn't known existed, jealousy and possessiveness tangled with arousal, insecurity transformed into sexual excitement, shame becoming a perverse form of pleasure.

"Maybe you're right," he acknowledged. "Maybe I don't understand myself as well as I thought."

Jess crossed to him and placed a gentle hand on his cheek. "We're figuring this out together, Tom. Neither of us has all the answers."

Tom reached up and covered her hand with his own. "Do you see this continuing long-term? Is this just a phase we're going through or is this who we are now... permanently?"

Jess looked directly at him, and Tom saw something in her eyes that might have been uncertainty or might have been reluctance to articulate what she actually thought.

"Honestly, I don't know," she said. "I'm trying not to think too far ahead because when I do, it all feels overwhelming and impossible to navigate. Right now, I'm just trying to take it one experience at a time, trying to stay present with what I'm feeling rather than projecting into some hypothetical future where we have to have everything figured out." She paused, then added with a small apologetic smile, "I know that's probably not the answer you want. I know you like to have a plan and a clear trajectory, but this just isn't something I can approach that way. Not right now."

Tom nodded slowly, processing. "Okay," he said. "That's fair."

Jess glanced at her phone, checking the time, and Tom knew the moment for pressing further had passed.

"Ready to go?" she asked, her voice lighter.

Tom checked his pockets automatically, phone, wallet, keys all accounted for.

"There's one more thing I need to know," Tom said, not quite ready to let the conversation end. "Are you happy, Jess? I mean, overall, with your life, with us, with

everything. Are you happier now than you were before all this started?"

Jess looked at him, her eyes softening. "Yes," she said simply. "I am. Not every minute of every day, but overall? Yes. I'm happier. I feel more alive, more connected to myself."

She took a step closer to him. "And I love you more than ever, Tom. That hasn't changed. If anything, it's deeper now."

Tom felt a wave of emotion, relief, gratitude, fear, and something like wonder. "I love you too," he said. "So much it scares me sometimes."

Jess smiled and leaned in to kiss him, careful not to smudge her lipstick. "We're going to be okay," she whispered against his lips. "I promise."

Tom wasn't sure if he believed that promise, wasn't sure if anyone could make that guarantee given the path they were on. But he nodded anyway.

"Ready now?" Jess asked.

"Ready when you are," he said.

They made their way downstairs together. As they reached the first floor, Jess stopped briefly to check her lipstick one more time in the entryway mirror. Tom watched her make the small adjustment, the gesture of a woman who knew exactly how she wanted to present herself to the world.

He opened the front door, held it for her, and they stepped outside together into the early evening air. The temperature had dropped slightly from the afternoon heat, and there was a pleasant warmth to the breeze. The Uber was already waiting at the curb, pulled up exactly when it was supposed to arrive, the driver's face illuminated by his phone screen.

Tom opened the car door for Jess, watching as she slid into the backseat, her dress riding up slightly on her thighs before she adjusted it. He followed her in, closing the door behind him with a solid thunk. As the Uber pulled away from their house, he watched their home recede in the side mirror.

Tom reached for Jess's hand, and she laced her fingers through his without hesitation. For all the uncertainty swirling between them, that simple gesture felt like a tether, a reminder that whatever came next, they would face it together.