Eddie's Substack

The Bad Tenant Ch. 27

Eddie WIlder

4 hours ago

Tom’s hand rested on the small of Jess’s back as they stepped from the Uber onto the hotel’s circular drive. The Fairmont Austin loomed above them, its glass exterior reflecting the city lights. Valets moved among arriving vehicles while doormen greeted guests with smiles.

“Ready?” Tom asked, leaning close to Jess’s ear.

She nodded, smoothing her dress. “As I’ll ever be.”

They moved through the revolving doors into the lobby. Polished marble floors reflected the warm glow of chandeliers. A sign reading “Skyline Austin Celebration” and an arrow pointed them toward the grand ballroom.

Tom sensed Jess’s posture change as they approached the event, shoulders squaring, chin lifting slightly. It was a subtle transformation he’d witnessed countless times, his wife becoming the professional version of herself, the designer who commanded rooms and impressed clients.

At the check-in table, a young woman greeted them with a bright smile. “Good evening! Names, please?”

“Tom and Jessica Marshall,” Jess said.

The woman scanned her list. “Perfect! Here’s your seating chart.” She handed them a small card with a layout of the ballroom. “You’re at the ADG table, right near the front.”

Tom glanced at the chart, noting their position. The proximity to the stage signaled Jess’s importance to the event. From inside the ballroom, the gentle notes of a string quartet drifted out, playing something classical he couldn’t identify.

They paused at the entrance, and Tom felt Jess’s hand tighten around his. He squeezed back reassuringly. “You’re going to own this room,” he whispered.

Jess flashed him a smile, the kind that still made his heart skip even after years of marriage. “Let’s do this.”

They walked in together, hand in hand, and Tom felt the shift the moment they crossed the threshold. Conversations paused, heads turned, and eyes tracked their movement.

He leaned in close to her ear. “At least ten men just turned to look at you. And women, too.”

Jess laughed softly. “Count them for me.”

The ballroom was spectacular. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, casting soft light over white linens. A long bar stretched across one wall, staffed by bartenders in white jackets. At the front of the room, a stage held a podium emblazoned with the Skyline Austin logo.

A server approached with a tray of champagne flutes. Tom plucked two from the tray and handed one to Jess, who accepted with a grateful look.

“To your night,” Tom said, clinking his glass against hers.

Before Jess could respond, a voice called out, “There she is!”

Annie, Jess’s colleague, hurried toward them, with Sam trailing behind. She embraced Jess.

“You look amazing,” Annie said, stepping back to admire Jess’s dress.

“So do you,” Jess replied.

Tom’s attention shifted to Sam, who looked distinctly uncomfortable. He clutched a folded paper covered in handwritten notes, and his face held a strained expression.

“Big night,” Tom offered, extending his hand.

Sam shook it. “Webb wants me to say a few words about the technical side. I’ve been revising this all day.”

Tom watched as Jess immediately shifted into a calming presence for Sam. She placed a hand on his arm and spoke in low, reassuring tones. “You know this material better than anyone in the room,” she said. “And the acoustics in this space are excellent. Your voice will carry without shouting.”

Sam’s shoulders visibly relaxed at her guidance. It was something Tom had always admired about Jess, her ability to read what others needed and provide it effortlessly.

Annie leaned toward Jess and murmured something quick and conspiratorial. Jess’s eyes widened, then she bit back a laugh, and the two of them shared a look that held a whole conversation. Tom caught the ease of it, colleagues who were also friends, and felt like a pleasant outsider.

“Margaret’s been holding court with Webb for ten minutes,” Annie said. “You should do your rounds before the speeches.”

“We’re heading over now,” Jess said. “See you at the table?”

Annie nodded and steered Sam off for more rehearsal.

They moved through clusters of guests toward the ADG table. Tom spotted Margaret first, her silver hair in its signature bob, her posture impeccable in a deep navy gown. Beside her stood a man Tom knew only from Jess’s retellings, Chris Webb, imposing in a black suit tailored well beyond anything off a rack. A blonde woman in a vintage-style gown stood at his side, her hand tucked into the crook of his elbow. Tom guessed she was his wife.

As they approached, Margaret turned and smiled. “Jessica! And Tom, so glad you could join us this time.”

Webb extended his hand to Tom first. His grip was firm, his eye contact direct. “Tom. Chris Webb. A pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Mr. Webb,” Tom said, matching his grip. “Jess speaks highly of your leadership on both the Skyline and Savannah projects.”

“Chris, please. And she’s been far too modest about her own contributions, I’m sure.” He released Tom’s hand and turned to Jess, taking her hand and holding it between both of his. “Jessica, goodness. You look absolutely exceptional tonight.”

This was the man Jess had overheard at the Skyline party months ago, the man who’d wanted to see her ass turning pink under his hand, to bend her over his desk, to see her mouth wrapped around his cock. Tom had carried those words around ever since, and now here was the face that went with them, polished and gracious and holding his wife’s hand. Webb’s professional smile didn’t quite hide the hunger underneath.

“Thank you for having us, Chris,” Jess said.

“Of course,” Webb replied, holding her hand a beat longer before releasing it. He turned slightly. “And this is my wife, Eleanor.”

Eleanor Webb was a MILF in every sense of the word. She was a voluptuous woman in her forties with an hourglass figure, and she carried herself with the kind of confidence that came from knowing men had been staring at her chest for decades and probably always would. “Jessica, darling,” she said, stepping forward to embrace Jess. “Chris raves about your talent. I feel as if I know you already.”

Eleanor turned to Tom and offered a manicured hand. “And you must be the supportive husband I’ve heard so much about.” Her assessment was quick and thorough. Tom wondered exactly what she’d heard.

Chris Webb asked about his firm and followed up with a question about a recent healthcare merger that told Tom the man actually read the business pages. Tom found himself warming despite himself. Webb was attentive and made him feel included rather than peripheral. Then, after a few minutes, Webb pivoted back to Jess.

“Your handling of the Weatherby renovation has been exceptional so far,” Webb said. “That budget constraint would have broken lesser designers but you’re finding solutions that actually improve the concept.”

Unlike the generic flattery Tom had heard aimed at Jess before, Webb’s praise was specific and professional.

“You have a rare gift,” Webb continued, his voice dropping half a register. “The ability to see what a space wants to become, not just what a client thinks they need. That kind of intuition can’t be taught. It’s either in you or it isn’t.” He paused, let that settle. “It’s in you.”

Tom watched Jess absorb the compliment, saw the slight flush that crept up her neck, the way her eyes held Webb’s.

“You’re among the finest design minds I’ve worked with in twenty years,” Webb concluded, and the phrasing itself, among the finest minds, elevated her beyond mere aesthetics, beyond the pretty woman who could pick colors. He was calling her brilliant, and the compliment held substance because it came from someone whose opinion opened doors.

Tom turned to see James Chen approached their circle, greeting everyone with professional cordiality. He was dressed impeccably in a black suit, his glasses lending him a scholarly air. “My apologies for arriving separately. My wife is visiting family in Taiwan this month.”

After the brief round of greetings, Chen turned his attention to Jess. “I received the updated site plans for Houston. Excellent work incorporating the natural light we discussed.”

“Thank you,” Jess said. “I’m looking forward to walking the site with you next week.”

“As am I.” Chen paused. “I’ve acquired two new pieces for my collection since we last spoke. The offer to show you remains open. My home has a gallery space designed specifically for intimate viewings. Proper lighting, no distractions. The art deserves to be experienced properly, with someone who understands nuance”

Tom noted the difference between the two men. Where Webb was immediate and direct, Chen seemed content to play a longer game. Both clearly valued Jess, but the undercurrents of their interest ran at different temperatures, and Tom found himself oddly fascinated by the contrast.

The group stood in a loose circle while conversation flowed about the project, tonight’s agenda, everyone’s travel schedules. Tom was acutely aware of the concentration of power in this small group and of his own place at its edge. He was one of only two spouses. Eleanor Webb occupied a similar peripheral position, though she carried it with the ease of someone who had stood in these circles for decades.

At one point he caught Eleanor watching him watch Chris Webb talking animatedly to Jess. Their eyes met in a flicker of recognition, two people in the same role observing their partners in the currents of ambition. She looked away first and turned to Margaret with a question about ADG’s next major project.

After a few minutes, Jess touched Tom’s arm. “We should circulate before dinner.”

They excused themselves and moved into the wider room. Tom leaned toward her ear. “They obviously want you so bad,” he murmured. “Both of them. They’re not even hiding it. You’ve completely charmed them.”

Jess gave him a look that was half admonishment, half pleasure. “Behave yourself.”

They spent the next thirty minutes working the room. Jess greeted colleagues, clients, and contractors, introducing Tom at each stop. He shook hands, made appropriate small talk, and played the supportive husband. What struck him most was how many people wanted a moment of her time, how conversations seemed to bend toward her, and how she handled each one with charm, never rushed, never dismissive. Throughout, they traded their own small checks, a squeeze of the hand, a raised eyebrow across a circle, a private smile when someone said something absurd. It was their own silent language, developed over years together.

Eventually the lights dimmed, signaling guests to their seats. Chris Webb made his way toward the stage. Jess leaned toward Tom. “I need to go up with Sam and Annie. We’re

being recognized during Chris's speech."

"Go. I'll be right here."

He watched her cross the room toward a small huddle near the stage, Sam, Annie, and a few people Tom didn't recognize. Then he took his seat at the ADG table beside Margaret. A server refilled Tom's glass without being asked.

The room quieted as Webb took the podium. "Welcome, everyone, to this celebration of what we've built together," he began. He thanked the contractors, architects, and city officials by name and described the vision for Skyline Austin.

When he spoke about the partnership with ADG, his praise was specific and generous. He singled out Jess, Sam, and Annie as essential to the project's success. He thanked Margaret for her support.

Tom watched Jess at the edge of the stage, relaxed but alert, her expression composed. She looked completely in her element.

A few shorter speeches followed, one from the general contractor, another from someone in city planning. Then Webb returned to the podium.

"And now I'd like to welcome the woman whose vision has shaped the penthouse space of this project, ADG's lead designer, Jessica Marshall."

The applause was immediate. Tom joined in, pride swelling as she climbed the steps.

"Thank you, Chris, for that introduction," Jess said, and let the applause settle. "When we started, Chris told me he wanted buyers to walk into these penthouses and immediately want to own them." She paused. "I told him ownership wasn't the right goal. Anyone with enough money can own something. I wanted buyers to walk in and feel like these spaces already owned them. Like they'd been waiting for exactly this." She smiled. "There's a difference between having something and being claimed by it."

Webb, at the edge of the stage, clapped loudest.

Jess credited Sam and Annie by name, with a specific accomplishment for each. She thanked Margaret for her mentorship and guidance. She thanked the construction teams. She spoke of how spaces carry the people who build them, her voice never wavering. "And to my husband, Tom, who has eaten more takeout this year than any man should, and never once asked me to choose." She found him in the crowd. "Thank you."

The applause that followed was sustained and genuine.

When she stepped off the stage, well-wishers closed around her at once.

“She’s quite remarkable,” Margaret said beside him, her voice carrying a note of pride. “I knew it from her first interview.”

Tom turned. Margaret was studying him with thoughtful eyes. “Congratulations on your promotion, by the way. Jess tells me you’re heading up a major project in Denver?”

“Thank you. And yes, that’s right. I fly out Monday morning.”

“And Jess leaves for Houston that evening.”

“We’ll be ships passing for a week.”

Margaret sipped her wine. “Tom, the design world is smaller than people realize. Word travels fast when someone exceptional emerges.” She gestured subtly at the room rather than naming anyone. “Men like these… successful, wealthy, accustomed to acquiring what they want, gather around talent like moths to a flame.”

Tom waited for her to continue.

“But men with that kind of money and influence rarely want only talent,” Margaret said. “They want loyalty. Availability. They blur lines because they can afford to.” Her gaze flicked to where Webb stood laughing with the mayor’s aide, then back to Tom. “It’s both opportunity and risk. I’ve watched a great many careers. The most promising ones often face the most complicated terrain.”

“Are you warning me about something specific, Margaret?”

“An observation.” She smiled slightly. “I stayed married to my work. I rarely regret it, but it exacts a price.” She looked toward the crowd where Jess stood among her admirers, then back at him. “Are you prepared to be married to a woman a great many people want things from, Tom?”

The question struck closer than Margaret could possibly know. Tom answered as the steady, supportive husband he was supposed to be. “I’ve always known who Jess is. Her success is something I’m proud of, not threatened by. Whatever opportunities come her way, we’ll navigate them together.”

Margaret held his eyes a moment longer than was comfortable. “That’s what I hoped you would say.” She lifted her glass, and he couldn’t tell whether she believed him.

Before he could say anything else, Greg Robinson, the firm’s senior architect, appeared. “Margaret, the mayor’s office would like a word before dinner.”

“Of course.” She rose, touched Tom’s shoulder lightly, and disappeared into the crowd with Greg.

Tom was left alone with his champagne. Across the room, he watched Jess. In the span of ten minutes, he counted five men approaching her, each with a handshake that lasted a little too long, a hand on the elbow, a laugh bent toward her ear. A man with silver hair said something that made her tilt her head. Was that Harrington?

Twenty-four hours ago, he thought, she'd been in another man's bed. Now she wore black silk and was being congratulated by half of Austin's development community. The two Jesses didn't feel like different women. That was the part he couldn't make sit still in his head. They felt like one woman, entirely at ease in both spaces.

Fifteen minutes later, Jess slid into the chair beside him, slightly flushed from the attention, her eyes bright. Tom reached under the table and squeezed her hand. She turned her palm over, and something soft and weightless pressed into his.

He didn't have to look down. It was black lace, still warm.

"Where did you…" he began and stopped.

"Ladies' room," Jess murmured, her face composed, her smile for the room.

"God, you're so sexy," Tom replied.

"So… did you have any interesting conversations while I was away?"

"Margaret had quite a talk with me while you were gone."

Jess raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And what did she say?"

"That your talent's going to make you very popular. She asked if I was ready for it."

"And what did you tell her?"

"That I was." He paused. "But you know, right now I feel like the luckiest man in the world… I can't wait to get you home tonight."

"Always thinking ahead," Jess teased.

Dinner was served soon after. Servers in white jackets moved between tables, setting down plates. The first course was a butter lettuce salad with shaved fennel, candied walnuts, and a champagne vinaigrette.

Around their circular table sat the ADG contingent, Margaret, Jess, Tom, Sam, Sam's girlfriend, Annie, Annie's boyfriend, and Greg Robinson.

The salad plates were cleared and replaced with the main course. Tom had chosen the seared duck breast with a cherry gastrique, accompanied by roasted fingerling potatoes and asparagus. Jess had ordered the halibut with brown butter and capers.

Wine flowed steadily. Servers circulated with bottles of both red and white, ensuring no glass stayed empty for long. The Pinot Noir was excellent, smooth without being heavy, and Tom found himself drinking more freely than he usually did at work events.

Beside them, Tom could see Chris Webb's table. Chris sat with his wife Eleanor to his right, James Chen to his left, along with what appeared to be city officials and senior partners from various firms involved in the Skyline project. Webb was holding court, gesturing with his wine glass as he told some story that had the table's attention. Even without hearing Chris, Tom could see the man's natural command of a room, the way conversations seemed to orbit around him.

At their own table, conversation flowed more easily as the meal progressed and wine loosened inhibitions. Annie was recounting a disaster from the Magnolia House project, some mix-up with antique fixtures that had nearly derailed the timeline.

Greg joined in with his own war stories from past projects, tales of stubborn clients and impossible timelines. Margaret listened with the slight smile of someone who'd heard similar stories countless times but still found them amusing. She contributed her own anecdote about a particularly difficult residential client from her early career, a woman who'd changed her mind about the master bathroom design six times.

"By the end," Margaret said, "I told her she could either approve the current design or find another designer. She approved it. Sometimes you have to be willing to walk away to maintain your sanity."

The conversations required little from him beyond the occasional nod or question, and he was content to observe, to watch Jess in her element among colleagues who clearly respected her.

During a lull in conversation, as servers cleared the main course plates, Tom felt Jess's hand slide onto his thigh beneath the tablecloth. Her fingers traveled upward and gave him a gentle squeeze that quickly made him hard. When he glanced at her, she was listening to Greg discuss some technical aspect of the Skyline project's curtain wall system, her face betraying nothing, her expression attentive and professional.

Tom shifted slightly in his seat, hyperaware of her hand's pressure, of what she was doing to him while surrounded by her colleagues and mentor. The boldness of it, the casualness with which she could touch him like this while maintaining perfect conversational composure, had him unable to stop smiling.

Dessert arrived, a choice of either a dark chocolate torte with raspberry coulis or a lemon tart with fresh berries and chantilly cream. Jess had chosen the chocolate, Tom the lemon. When the server set down their plates, Jess finally withdrew her hand to pick up her fork.

Tom noticed Webb's table beginning to break up slightly, people standing and moving between tables as the formal dinner portion concluded. Webb himself remained seated, leaning back in his chair with his wine glass, surveying the room with the satisfied expression of a man whose event was going exactly as planned.

Margaret set down her fork, having finished only half her dessert. "I should make a few rounds before the dancing begins," she said, rising.

As Margaret moved away, the table's dynamic shifted again. Sam and his girlfriend excused themselves to get drinks from the bar. Annie and her boyfriend were deep in a private conversation about when they needed to leave. Greg was checking his phone, his expression suggesting work emails that couldn't wait even for a Friday evening celebration.

Tom leaned close to Jess's ear. "That was bold. Your hand."

"Mmm," she said, not looking at him but smiling slightly. "Did you like it?"

"You know I did."

"Good."

Tom stood and offered his hand to Jess. "Dance with me?"

She let him lead her onto the floor. His hand spread across her lower back as they moved, and she looked up at him.

"Is Harrington here?" Tom asked, close to her ear.

"By the bar. Silver hair, enormous tan. He came over after the speech." Jess's hand slid to his shoulder. "He told me about these parties he hosts at his house in Miami. Weekends. Very discreet apparently. He said I'd fit right in."

A thought struck Tom as he absorbed her words. Parties didn't just mean parties at this altitude of wealth. It was code, the same way collections meant more than art and weekends meant something that required discretion. Everyone in this room spoke the same careful dialect, a language designed to communicate without being explicit. He wondered how many other coded offers Jess had fielded tonight that he hadn't witnessed.

“Interested?” he asked.

“No,” Jess said. She held his gaze a beat, then smiled. “Not even a little.”

“But thank you for being here this time,” she continued, changing the subject. “Last time, I felt like I was playing a role I wasn’t ready for. Tonight feels different.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for anything. You were spectacular, Jess. The speech, the way you carried yourself. Everyone in this room knows how amazing you are.”

They held each other tight as the song ended, but before they could leave the floor, Chris Webb approached, looking at Tom. “May I have the next dance with your wife?”

Tom nodded and stepped back. “Of course.”

Tom watched from a few feet away as Webb led Jess into the next song. Webb was a confident dancer who guided her with assurance. He said something that made her laugh, and Tom noticed his hand resting at the small of her back, fingers spread across silk, with nothing beneath it that Webb had any idea about.

“They make a striking pair.”

Eleanor had settled into the chair beside him, her gaze on the floor.

“They do,” Tom said, because it was true. Something about watching a man of Webb’s stature want his wife stirred pride and jealousy together.

“I understand you’re both traveling next week,” Eleanor said. “Chris mentioned Jessica will be in Houston while you’re in Denver.”

“First time we’ll both be away from home,” Tom confirmed. “Five days in different cities.”

“Hm.” She sipped her wine. “Chris and I spend more nights apart than together at this point. It stops feeling like absence after a while. It just becomes the shape of the marriage.” She said it lightly, as if remarking on the weather. “People assume that’s a tragedy. Sometimes it’s an architecture.”

Tom turned to look at her. Eleanor’s eyes stayed on the floor, where Webb was guiding Jess through a slow turn.

“Chris has taken a real interest in your wife’s career,” she went on. “He’s always been that way with talent. When he believes in someone, he invests considerable resources in them. He guides, opens doors.” She turned slightly to face him. “In return he expects loyalty.”

“Jess speaks highly of him as a client and mentor.”

“Mentor,” she repeated. “Yes, that’s what he likes being. He and I see something in you and Jessica. A young, hungry couple at the beginning of an ascent. You remind us of ourselves.”

“That’s flattering.”

“We should have you both to the house. Chris has a wine collection he loves to share with the right people.”

“The right people,” Tom repeated. Something in the way she said the right people made Tom wonder who qualified.

“Think about it. I’ll have my assistant reach out to Jessica’s office.”

The song ended. Webb gave Jess a bow that would have been absurd from anyone else yet worked perfectly from him. Jess smiled, said something, and turned toward the table. Before she’d taken three steps, James Chen intercepted her. Tom watched them exchange a few words before Chen gestured to the floor. Jess nodded and let him lead her into the next song.

Chen danced differently from Webb, more reserved, his movements precise, his hand placement technically correct, like a man who’d learned ballroom as an academic subject.

“Your wife navigates these waters well,” Eleanor observed, following Tom’s gaze. “That’s a skill in itself. Many women with her gifts don’t learn it until they’ve been burned.”

“Has that been your experience?”

“I learned it early,” she said.

They sat through another full song without speaking, watching the dancers turn under the chandeliers. Tom found the silence oddly companionable.

When the music finally ended, Chen walked Jess back to the edge of the floor, bowed his head to her, nodded to Tom, and withdrew.

Jess laid a hand on Tom’s shoulder. “Missing me?”

“Always,” Tom said, standing.

Eleanor rose as well. “I should find Chris. It was a pleasure, Tom. Jessica, congratulations again on a beautiful presentation.” She departed with a look that still held the ambiguity of everything she’d said.

Jess lifted an eyebrow at him. “What was that?”

“I’m still working it out,” Tom admitted. “But dance with me again?”

They returned to the floor and spent the next few songs in each other’s arms, holding each other close, occasionally whispering observations about guests or sharing private jokes. At one point Jess rested her cheek against his shoulder and Tom felt the whole evening settle into something warm and uncomplicated, if only for the length of a song.

At last, she leaned back to look at him. “Ready to go? I’ve made all the rounds I need to.”

“Lead the way.”

They said their goodbyes, first to Margaret, who embraced Jess and reminded her about their Monday morning call, then to Sam, Annie, and their partners, deep in conversation with contractors, then to Chen, who shook Tom’s hand firmly and told Jess he looked forward to Houston, and finally to Webb and Eleanor near the bar.

“Leaving so soon?” Webb asked, sounding genuinely disappointed.

“We both fly out Monday and neither of us has packed,” Jess said with a smile.

Webb took her hand in both of his again. “Your contribution to Skyline has been invaluable, Jessica. I look forward to our continued partnership in Savannah.”

“As do I,” Jess replied.

Webb turned to Tom and offered his hand. Tom took it.

Eleanor kissed Jess on both cheeks, then turned to Tom. “Remember what I said about having you both over. We’ll arrange something when schedules align.”

Outside, the night air was warm, the street quiet, the party muffled behind them. Tom drew Jess close with an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into him with a contented sigh.

“Successful night?” he asked.

“Very. Webb was warm, Chen seemed pleased with the Houston plans, and I didn’t spill anything on this dress, which counts as a major victory.”

Tom laughed and pressed a kiss to her temple. “The real victory is how many people in that room know exactly how talented you are.”

The Uber arrived within minutes. They slid into the backseat, and as the car pulled away, Tom reached for her hand. She laced her fingers through his and rested her head on his shoulder.

“So,” Tom said quietly. “I counted thirty-seven.”

“Thirty-seven what?”

“Heads that turned to look at you tonight. Not counting Webb or Chen, who barely looked away at all.”

Jess smiled against his shoulder. “I only got to twenty-two. I kept getting distracted.”

“By what?”

“By how many of them you were watching.”

“How did it make you feel?” he asked.

“Seen,” she said. “And you? How did it make you feel?”

“Like the luckiest man in the room,” he said. “Taking home the woman everyone else wanted.”

Jess lifted her head to look at him. “And when we get home? What happens then?”

“Then I remind you who you belong to,” he said. “And you remind me who I belong to.”

Jess leaned in until her lips brushed his ear. “I can’t wait.”

Once inside the house, they’d undressed each other. Tom had stood behind Jess, brushing her hair aside to expose the nape of her neck. He’d placed a kiss there before slowly drawing down the zipper of her black dress. The dress had fallen to the floor, leaving her in nothing but her heels. Jess had turned to face him, stepping out of her shoes as she did so. She’d loosened his tie, then unbuttoned his shirt one button at a time, maintaining eye contact.

They’d moved to the shower together, where steam had filled the glass enclosure as they kissed under the hot spray. Tom had worked shampoo into her blonde hair, massaging her scalp as she tilted her head back into his hands. They’d taken turns with the soap, washing each other thoroughly, hands gliding over wet skin. What might have turned immediately sexual had instead become a form of care, of reconnection after an evening spent partially in separate orbits.

Now, they lay on top of the covers, hair still damp, bodies pressed together in the soft glow from the bedside lamp. Tom broke their kiss and began working his way down her body, taking his time, savoring each inch of her. He pressed his lips to her neck, then moved lower, trailing kisses along her collarbone, then down to her breasts. Her nipples had already hardened, and he took the left one into his mouth, circling it with his tongue

before applying gentle suction. He maintained eye contact as he moved to her right breast, giving it the same courtesy until Jess arched her back beneath him.

“God, Tom,” she whispered.

He continued his descent, kissing a path down her sternum, across her flat stomach, pausing to dip his tongue into her navel. He moved lower, kissing each hip bone, then settled between her legs, pushing her thighs apart gently with his hands.

He could smell her pussy now, that unmistakable scent that never failed to make his cock throb. She was already so wet. Her labia glistened in the low light, pink and inviting. He looked up the length of her body, over the rise and fall of her chest, to meet her eyes.

“The speech,” Jess said. “The way everyone was looking at me tonight. It made me feel confident and powerful.” She paused. “And sexy. That’s why I gave you my panties at the table. I’ve been wet for you ever since.”

She hesitated, and when she spoke again her voice had dropped. “It’s weird. Standing up there with all those eyes on me, I felt the way I used to feel in Georgio’s studio. Like my whole body was buzzing from the inside.”

Tom remembered a conversation from years ago, back when they were still dating and she’d just stopped modeling. They’d been lying in bed in his college apartment, and Jess had told him she missed modeling, missed the feeling of being looked at. She’d told him she’d always been looked at, even as a young girl, and that the attention had made her feel important, valued. She’d laughed nervously when she’d said it, as if she’d confessed something shameful, like admitting she enjoyed her own reflection too much.

But now, lying here with her, Tom realized their exploration had done something unexpected. It had reconnected her with that earlier version of herself, the woman who’d stood in front of Georgio’s camera and felt her body buzz with awareness of being seen. That confidence wasn’t just showing up in their bedroom or at Bob’s apartment. It was manifesting at work, on stages, giving presentations. Tonight she’d held that room’s attention without a trace of stage fright, as if she’d been doing it her entire life.

Maybe she had been, in a way. The charisma she’d been born with and developed in front of cameras had translated to conference rooms and ballrooms. The comfort with being watched, with performing under scrutiny, with commanding attention through presence were old skills she’d started to use again.

“Does that scare you?” he asked.

“Not really,” Jess said. “Mostly it feels like… waking up.”

Tom lowered his head and ran his tongue along her pussy lips, tasting her. She was tangy and sweet, a flavor he’d known for years but never tired of. He repeated the motion, this time letting his tongue dip between her folds, then used his fingers to part her lips, exposing her inner pink flesh and her clit. He licked firmly over her clit and felt her hips lift off the bed.

“Yes,” she hissed, her hand finding his hair, guiding him where she wanted him.

Tom started licking up and down her folds, then closing his lips around her clit. He knew her body intimately, knew exactly how much pressure she needed, when to speed up and when to slow down.

No one will ever eat her pussy like I do, he thought. He was certain of it. He’d spent more time between her legs than any other man ever had or will. This was his domain, the one place he’d never doubted himself.

He brought his right hand up, running his middle finger through her wetness before slowly pressing it inside her. She was hot and slick, and noticeably tighter than the day before. It was as if her pussy had moved back to its original shape, almost entirely his Jess again.

“Right there,” Jess moaned, her hips moving against his fingers.

Tom added a second finger and synchronized the in and out movement of his fingers with his tongue.

“Don’t stop,” she breathed, her fingers tightening in his hair.

He had no intention of stopping. Instead, he increased the intensity, applying more pressure with his tongue, his fingers moving faster inside her. He felt her getting close when her body started trembling, when she started taking deeper breaths.

“Oh god,” Jess gasped, her back arching off the bed. “Tom, I’m coming.”

He stayed with her through it as she rode out her orgasm. Her pussy clenched around his fingers, her thighs clamping around his head, her hand pressing him against her as if afraid he might stop.

Only when she started to relax, her hand loosening in his hair, her thighs falling open, did he ease off, placing gentle kisses on her inner thighs as she came down. He slowly withdrew his fingers, looking up to meet her eyes as he brought them to his mouth and sucked them clean.

Jess watched him through heavy-lidded eyes, her chest still rising and falling rapidly. “Come here,” she whispered.

Tom was achingly hard, had been since she’d passed him her underwear at the dinner table. But as he moved to position himself between her legs, Jess placed a hand on his chest, stopping him.

“I’m a little sore,” she said softly.

He paused for a moment but backed off. He didn’t need to ask why she was sore because he knew the answer. Bob’s huge cock had been inside her for two hours yesterday.

Jess studied his face. “You were so good to me tonight,” she said. “So supportive and generous with everything.” She ran her hands down his chest. “I want to thank you.”

She pushed gently on his shoulders and Tom rolled onto his back. Jess settled between his legs, looked up at him, and in the dim light her eyes seemed to gleam. She wrapped one hand around the base of his cock, grip firm, and leaned down to lick the head, swirling her tongue around the ridge and down the underside.

The blowjob started the way it usually did, Jess using her hand in tandem with her mouth. She stroked the lower half of his shaft while her tongue swirled around the upper half. Tom propped himself up on his elbows to watch, entranced by the sight of his cock disappearing between her lips.

She pulled off his cock and let a stream of saliva fall from her mouth onto his shaft, then used her hand to spread it all around, making him slick and shiny.

She took him back into her mouth, deeper this time, accommodating more of him in her mouth. When she pulled back, strings of saliva connected her lips to his cock. She broke them with her fingers, then gathered more spit and added it to his shaft, using her mouth and hand together to create a sloppy, wet friction that had Tom’s toes curling.

Then she did something new. She pulled back and slapped his cock against her extended tongue, then did it several more times before switching his cock against her cheeks, leaving wet marks on her skin.

And through it all, she maintained eye contact, unbroken, almost challenging in its intensity. “Do you like this?”

“I love it,” Tom said truthfully.

But underneath his pleasure, questions formed. Why was she doing this? Had the party turned her on this much? Was this really a thank you? Was it an apology?

Jess took him deep again. She pushed forward until her nose touched his pubic bone, his cock fully engulfed in her mouth. She held there for a moment before pulling back slowly, her cheeks hollowed with suction. When she reached the head, she swirled her tongue around it before plunging down again.

She began to bob her head more quickly. Her hand worked in concert with her mouth, twisting slightly as it moved up and down his spit slickened shaft. Her other hand cupped his balls, rolling them between her fingers.

“Jesus, Jess,” Tom groaned. “What’s gotten into you tonight?”

She stroked him with her hand while she answered. “I just want to make my husband happy,” she said, her voice innocent despite the decidedly non-innocent things her mouth had been doing seconds before. “Is that so wrong?”

Before he could answer, she descended again, taking him all the way to the back of her throat. She swallowed around him, the muscles of her throat constricting around the head of his cock. Tom dropped his head back onto the pillow, overwhelmed by the pleasure.

“Webb couldn’t keep his hands off you on the dance floor,” Tom said. “And both Chen and Harrington definitely still want to fuck you. I wonder if that bet’s still on between them.”

Jess pulled her mouth off his cock, a look of surprise crossing her features, quickly replaced by something like mischief. “Who do you think would win?” she asked.

“Webb,” Tom said without hesitation. “I wanted to hate him, but he was charming. It actually bothers me for some reason.”

There was something about Webb that Tom couldn’t shake. The man had a way of making everyone in his orbit feel like the most important person in the room. Webb had been gracious to Tom himself, asking informed questions about his work, remembering details Jess must have mentioned, treating him like a peer rather than an obstacle.

Webb wasn’t some cartoonish villain Tom could easily dismiss. He was intelligent, successful, impressive. Webb had built an empire through vision and determination. He commanded rooms effortlessly. He wore his power lightly but absolutely. And he clearly

wanted Jess, not just as a designer but as something more, something he'd been patient enough not to push for directly but transparent enough not to pretend didn't exist.

"Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if he has a string of mistresses," Tom continued. "And I get the feeling that Eleanor's made peace with it."

Jess tilted her head, her hand slowing slightly, but never stopping. "Would it bother you if I were one of those mistresses?" she asked.

Tom considered it seriously, trying to separate his arousal from his actual feelings. Would it bother him if she became one of potentially many women Webb kept on the side, if she flew to his properties, spent weekends in his guest houses, let him fuck her in hotel rooms between design meetings?

"It would really bother me," he admitted after a beat. "But it's also hot as hell in fantasy."

"I thought so," Jess said, giving him a look. Her hand tightened around his shaft, stroking more firmly. "It's hot in fantasy." She leaned down and swirled her tongue against the head of his cock before pulling off again. "But mixing work and pleasure is too dangerous. I want to be taken seriously as a professional."

"What about Chen?" Tom asked. "He's different from Webb. More reserved."

"Mmm," Jess agreed. "He's intelligent, thoughtful. There's something almost… academic about how he approaches everything."

"Does he turn you on?"

"Mmm… a little," Jess admitted. "Chen makes you feel like you're a puzzle worth solving, like getting to you would be an intellectual achievement." She lowered her head and took him into her mouth again, sucking hard, hollowing her cheeks, before pulling back. "But the same rules apply. He's a client. It's too complicated."

"And Harrington?" Tom pressed.

Jess laughed. "Harrington doesn't even pretend it's about anything other than sex. The private jet, those Miami parties he mentioned tonight... he's not trying to be subtle about what he wants."

"You're not interested at all?" Tom asked, though her tone had already answered the question.

"God, no," Jess said. "He's about as subtle as a freight train. The whole Miami party thing sounds sleazy, not exciting."

“I totally understand… with all of them,” Tom said, accepting her position. And he did understand. The rational part of him knew she was right, knew that getting sexually involved with clients would be a terrible idea, would potentially derail the career she’d worked so hard to build.

Jess nodded, then lowered her head again as though their conversation had pushed her on. She took him deeper than before, sucking more intensely.

Her free hand moved from his balls to the base of his shaft, creating a tight ring with her thumb and forefinger that she moved up and down his shaft. The stimulation quickly started to feel overwhelming.

“Holy fuck, Jess, I’m going to come,” he warned her.

She responded by shifting her focus, pulling back until just the head of his cock remained between her lips. Her tongue found his frenulum and began working it with firm flicks of her tongue. Tom’s entire body tensed.

He recognized it then, the symmetry between them. Just as he’d learned over years exactly how to work her clit with his tongue, exactly what pressure and rhythm would make her come, she’d learned the same about him. She’d mapped his body the way he’d mapped hers, cataloged his responses, discovered his triggers. This knowledge was mutual, accumulated through countless intimate encounters, a secret language of pleasure only they spoke.

Their eyes locked as her tongue continued its focus on his frenulum. Tom felt his orgasm building to an inevitable crest, pleasure coiling tight. He kept his eyes on hers, held in her steady gaze.

“Fuck, Jess,” he managed.

Tom’s eyes started to roll back but he fought to keep his gaze locked with hers as he went over the edge.

He came hard, emptying himself into her mouth. Jess held his gaze the entire time, her throat working as she swallowed, her tongue still moving against his frenulum through each pulse, drawing out every last sensation. Tom groaned, his hips jerking as she milked him completely.

When he was finally spent, she pulled back and opened her mouth to show him it was empty. Then she leaned down to place a gentle kiss on the tip of his cock.

She immediately moved up the bed and settled beside him, her head finding its familiar place on his chest, one leg thrown over his, her arm draped across his stomach. Tom wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer, dropping a kiss on the top of her head.

“That was so fucking good, Jess,” Tom said.

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

They lay in silence for several minutes, Tom’s fingers gently stroking her shoulder, Jess’s hand resting on his chest, right over his heart.

“Tell me more about your conversations,” Jess said eventually. “With Margaret and Eleanor.”

Tom recounted Margaret’s warning about powerful men wanting more than just talent, her question about whether he was prepared to be married to a woman so many people wanted things from. Then Eleanor’s observations about loyalty, about Chris investing heavily in people he believed in, the invitation.

“I think Eleanor was trying to use me to recruit you,” he finished.

“You missed the part where I got recruited directly,” Jess said. She pushed herself up on one elbow. “On the dance floor, Chris told me the backing offer wasn’t casual. He’s had a lawyer sketch terms. Funding for the first two years, office space in his Savannah building.” She hesitated. “He said, ‘I’m a patient man, Jessica, but not an indefinite one.’”

“That’s not subtle.”

“No,” Jess agreed. “It’s not.”

“Do you want it?”

“That’s the problem,” Jess said quietly. “I do. Not him, the offer. Having my own name on a door.” She looked at him. “And you should know I didn’t say no. I said I’d think about it.”

“What about Margaret?” Tom asked, thinking of her hand on his shoulder, the question she’d asked him about being prepared. “She’s invested years in mentoring you. Leaving ADG would…”

“I know,” Jess interrupted. “That’s what makes this so complicated. She’s taught me everything, given me projects I had no business leading at my experience level. Leaving would feel like a betrayal.”

“And then there’s Webb himself,” Tom said. “Taking his backing means owing him something.”

“Exactly.” Jess’s hand moved restlessly against his chest. “Tonight made that very clear. The way he talks about investing in people, about loyalty, about being patient but not indefinite. It’s all pleasant language, but underneath it...” She trailed off.

“Underneath it, he expects something in return,” Tom finished.

“Yes.” She was quiet for a moment. “I keep thinking about what Margaret said to you. About men like Webb blurring lines because they can afford to. About how opportunity and risk come together at this level.”

“The smart play might be to just say no,” Tom said. “Keep things simple. Stay at ADG where you’re already successful.”

“I know,” Jess said softly. “But Tom, this is the kind of opportunity that might only come once. And if I’m being completely honest, part of me wants to see if I could actually do it. Build something from nothing, prove I’m not just a good employee but someone who can lead her own firm.”

“We don’t have to decide tonight,” Tom said finally. “Or even this week. We can talk about it properly when we’re both back from our trips, when we’ve had time to think through all the implications.”

“Okay,” Jess agreed, though she didn’t sound entirely convinced. “There’s too much on our plates right now anyway.”

“Tomorrow we pack,” Tom said. “Monday we both leave. Then five days apart to think clearly. When we’re back, we can sit down and really work through what this means.”

“Okay.” She pressed closer against him.

“Whatever you decide,” Tom said, “I’ll be behind you. You know that.”

“I know.” She pressed a kiss to his chest.

Tom pressed a kiss to her forehead, pulling her closer against him.

She made a small, contented sound and nestled closer to him. Neither spoke again, both drifting gradually toward sleep, thoughts of the evening’s conversations and tomorrow’s preparations for their trips mingling in the growing haze of exhaustion.

Jess looked over the rim of her coffee mug at Tom. His breakfast sat untouched in front of him, steam no longer rising from the eggs and toast. He hadn't moved in five minutes, fingers flying across his laptop keyboard, brow furrowed in concentration. His coffee had gone cold too, but he took occasional sips without seeming to notice.

She watched him for another moment, wondering if he'd notice her watching. He didn't. His eyes remained locked on the screen, scanning whatever document or spreadsheet had captured him so completely.

"Your food's getting cold," Jess said finally. "It's been sitting there for fifteen minutes."

Tom looked up. "What? Oh." He glanced at his plate with surprise, as if he'd forgotten it existed. "Sorry."

"You've been glued to that screen all morning," she said. "The Denver project has you pretty wound up, huh?"

Tom picked up his fork, took a bite of cold eggs, then set it back down. "I just need to be completely prepared," he said, running a hand through his hair.

"You were promoted for a reason," Jess said, leaning forward slightly. "They saw something in you worth investing in. You've been handling complex projects for years."

"Not at this level," Tom said. "Not with this much visibility. And not with Davis watching my every move." He took another distracted bite. "The senior partners will be evaluating this project directly."

"And you'll impress them," Jess said. "You always do."

Tom gave her a quick, distracted smile. "I know. It's just... after what happened in that meeting on Thursday, I can't afford another lapse. I need to be absolutely on top of everything."

Jess felt a flicker of guilt, knowing his distraction that day had been because of her and Bob. But the guilt was quickly replaced by the awareness of confidence she'd been building over the last few days, particularly after last night's party.

Standing on that stage had changed something in her. The way the room had looked at her, not as someone's wife or as a pretty face, but as a professional whose vision and expertise commanded respect.

"You're going to be fine," she said, reaching across the table to squeeze his forearm. "Better than fine. You've prepared for weeks."

Tom glanced at his watch, then at his half-eaten breakfast. “I should get back to it.” He gathered his laptop and coffee mug. “I’ll be in my office. I want to review the financials one more time.”

Jess watched him go, noting the tension in his posture, the slight hunch. After he disappeared out of the kitchen, she sat at the table, finishing her coffee in the sudden quiet of the kitchen. She needed to pack for Houston, but her flight wasn’t until Monday evening. Unlike Tom, who seemed to be preparing as if for battle, she felt surprisingly clear-headed about her own trip.

Maybe that was the difference between them right now, Tom’s anxiety versus her newfound confidence. Or maybe it was just that her project in Houston was a continuation of work she’d already been doing, while his Denver assignment represented a career step up.

She pulled out her phone, idly checking her schedule. Today was actually quite open. Last night’s party had been a success, her presentation for Houston was essentially complete. She had time to herself for once.

What did she need today? Not more work, not more planning, but something physical that would clear her mind.

She hadn’t been to the yoga studio in about two weeks. Between work travel, the Skyline party preparations, and everything with Bob, her routine had fallen apart. A good yoga session before five days in Houston sounded perfect.

She checked the studio’s schedule. There was a class at 11 AM. If she hurried, she could make it. It was 10:17 now. She drained her coffee cup, rinsed it in the sink, and headed to change.

In the bedroom, Jess pulled out her yoga clothes from the dresser. She slipped into black Lululemon leggings and a light blue tank top that showed off her arms and shoulders. She checked herself in the bathroom mirror and couldn’t help but notice how good she looked. The leggings hugged her ass perfectly, and the top emphasized her slim waist and toned upper body.

She twisted her hair into a messy bun, secured it with an elastic, and added a light application of mascara, just enough to avoid looking completely bare faced. No other makeup was required.

Jess packed her yoga bag with her water bottle, towel, deodorant, and face wipes. She grabbed her mat from where it leaned in the corner, unused for too long, and headed toward Tom's office. The door was slightly ajar, and she could see him hunched over his laptop, completely absorbed.

"I'm heading out to yoga," she said, leaning against the doorframe. "Back in a couple hours."

Tom looked up. "Alright babe. Have fun."

"Need anything while I'm out?"

"No, I'm good." His attention was already returning to the screen, fingers resuming their typing.

"Okay then," Jess said. "See you later."

She turned away and headed downstairs. Outside, the late morning air was already warm, promising another hot Texas day. She slid into her Tesla Model 3 and backed out of the driveway.

The drive to the studio took less than ten minutes. Jess pulled into the lot in front of the building and grabbed her things from the passenger seat.

As she pushed through the glass door to enter Lotus Flow, the reception area greeted her with its usual calm atmosphere, soft lighting, bamboo floors, the subtle scent of essential oils. The receptionist looked up from her computer and broke into a smile.

"Jess! Long time no see."

"Hey, Elaine," Jess said, setting her mat down to sign in on the tablet. "Work's been crazy. How are you?"

"Can't complain," Elaine said, her fingers tapping across her keyboard. "You're in luck catching Derek's Saturday class. His weekday sessions fill up fast now, so we added weekend slots."

"Derek's teaching?" Jess asked, feeling a small flutter of anticipation. "I thought Anika did Saturdays."

"She moved to Seattle last month," Elaine said. "Derek took over most of her classes."

"Is he that good?" Jess asked, though she already knew the answer. She'd taken his class before.

“Let’s just say his approach works for a lot of people,” Elaine said with a smile. She glanced at the clock on the wall. “You’ve got about five minutes.”

Jess nodded and headed to the women’s changing room. Inside, a few other women were getting ready, changing clothes or touching up their makeup. Jess stowed her bag in a locker and made her way to the studio, mat under one arm, water bottle in hand.

The room was filling up, about a dozen people setting up their mats in the space. Derek was already there, adjusting the thermostat on the wall. He wore simple black yoga shorts and a gray tank that showed off his lean, muscular build. When she entered, he looked up and gave her a brief nod of recognition before returning to his preparations.

She found a spot near the middle of the room and unrolled her mat. As she did some gentle stretches to warm up, she watched Derek move around the studio. There was something effortless about his calm that made her feel slightly rushed in comparison.

Other students continued to filter in, filling the room until nearly every available space was taken. Many of them greeted Derek personally, suggesting they were regulars. At precisely 11 AM, he settled onto his mat at the front of the room.

“Let’s begin by finding a comfortable seat,” he said, his voice quiet but carrying easily through the studio.

Everyone shifted into cross-legged positions. Derek closed his eyes, and the room followed suit. Jess sat up straight, hands resting on her knees.

“Today’s theme is simple,” he said. “Your body knows what it needs if you stop overriding it. Most of us spend our days ignoring our body’s signals, pushing through fatigue, tensing against stress, eating when we’re not hungry, staying awake when we need rest. For the next seventy-five minutes, try to listen instead of command.”

Jess found herself both drawn in by his words and slightly annoyed by their seriousness. There was something a little pretentious about Derek’s lecturer mode, yet also oddly appealing. Compared to Tom’s analytical approach to everything or Bob’s directness, Derek’s relationship with the body felt like a third language, one that emphasized intuition over control.

“Begin to deepen your breath,” Derek continued. “Inhale fully, exhale completely. Feel the breath moving through your entire body, not just your lungs.”

Jess followed his instructions, drawing air deep into her belly, feeling her ribs expand, then letting it out slowly.

“Notice if there’s any part of your body calling for attention,” Derek said. “Not to fix it or change it, just to acknowledge it.”

Jess became aware of tension across her shoulders and upper back, the result of too many hours hunched over drawings and presentations. She also noticed a tightness in her throat, perhaps from the strain of the past few weeks or the public speaking at last night’s event.

The class moved into warm-up poses. As Jess stretched into a wide-legged forward fold, she noticed a faint residual soreness in her hips and inner thighs, a ghost of Thursday with Bob. The awareness of her pelvis felt heightened in a way that was both distracting and oddly grounding.

“Find your edge but don’t push past it,” Derek instructed as they moved into a deeper hip opener. “The body opens when it feels safe, not when it’s forced.”

The flow increased in intensity. Downward dog, plank, chaturanga, upward dog, back to downward dog. The movements felt good, awakening muscles that had been neglected. Sweat began to bead on her forehead and upper lip. She could feel her heart rate increasing, her breathing deepening.

But as Derek guided them through a series of warrior poses, she found her attention drifting. The physical exertion was becoming automatic, leaving her mind free to wander.

Her eyes kept landing on Derek’s form as he demonstrated each pose. There was no denying he was attractive. The fluid way he moved between poses spoke of years of practice, a deep understanding of how bodies worked.

Tom would love it if she flirted with Derek. He’d actually brought up Derek multiple times now. She caught herself mentally drafting how she’d tell Tom about it tonight, how she’d describe Derek’s body, his voice, the way he’d looked at her, how she’d make it sound like the beginning of something that Tom could enjoy vicariously.

That’s the same thing she previously worried about, she realized. Performing for Tom rather than being present in her own experience.

She tried to pull her attention back to her breath, to the sensations in her body as she moved from pose to pose.

“If your mind is wandering, that’s okay,” Derek said, as if reading her thoughts. “Just notice it and gently bring your attention back to your breath. No judgment.”

Jess inhaled deeply, trying to refocus. But during a restful child's pose, her mind wandered again, this time through the gallery of men who'd shown interest in her over the past few months.

Frank at the Fleming, whose business card still lurked in her wallet. The younger man who'd walked her to her hotel room door in Savannah. The distinguished traveler at the Savannah hotel bar who'd offered dinner and stories from his adventures abroad.

There was Daniel from Whole Foods with his smooth pickup lines and perfect smile. Webb with his praise and career opportunities. Chen with his art collection and invitations. Harrington with his private jets and Miami parties.

Every one of them had offered a leap. A hotel room, a dinner, a drink, a private flight. Each proposition had been too much too fast, requiring an all or nothing decision that would have changed everything in an instant.

Bob was the only one who'd built a staircase, with small steps she could take one at a time. She'd needed room to say yes at each stage, to acclimate to each new level of intimacy before moving to the next. Bob had somehow understood this about her, seemingly instinctively.

That's why only Bob got through, she realized.

The thought settled in her mind as Derek guided them into a series of balance poses. Jess followed, her body responding to his cues even as her thoughts continued to unfold. If she needed a staircase rather than a leap, then Derek might be another possibility. The idea was both exciting and slightly nerve wracking.

"Tree pose," Derek instructed. "Find a fixed point to focus on."

Jess shifted her weight onto her right foot, drawing her left foot up to rest against her inner thigh. She found her balance, hands coming together at her heart center. Her gaze fixed on a point on the wall, but her awareness kept returning to Derek as he moved through the room, making small adjustments to students' alignment.

Would he build a staircase too? Would he understand the need for gradual progression? Or would he be another Frank, expecting her to leap?

"Switch sides," Derek said.

Jess lowered her left foot and raised her right, finding her balance again. As she held the pose, she felt strong, centered. The physical challenge brought her back to the present moment, away from speculation about men and stairs and leaps.

“Begin to bring your awareness back to your breath,” Derek said as they moved toward the end of the class. “Feel the connection between your feet and the earth beneath you.”

The final poses of the class were gentle, focused on stretching and releasing tension. As they moved into savasana, Jess lay on her back, arms slightly away from her sides, palms facing up. She closed her eyes and let her body sink into the mat.

She could hear the soft breathing of the other students around her, the distant hum of the air conditioning, a car passing on the street outside. The sensations in her body became more distinct, the pleasant fatigue in her muscles, the warmth of her skin, the steady beat of her heart. For several minutes, her mind quieted.

After what felt like both a moment and an eternity, Derek’s voice cut softly through the quiet. “Begin to deepen your breath. Wiggle your fingers and toes. When you’re ready, roll to one side and slowly come up to a seated position.”

Jess followed his instructions. People around her were beginning to roll up their mats, gathering their belongings.

“Thank you for your practice,” Derek said. “Those who signed up for the extended session, please stay. Everyone else, enjoy your weekend.”

Jess hesitated, then decided to stay. She needed this more than she’d realized. The clarity she’d found during savasana was worth preserving, and the idea of returning to the house with nothing to do felt less appealing than another hour of yoga.

As the regular students filed out, only five remained for the extended session, three women including Jess, and two men. Derek rearranged the room slightly, creating more space between mats.

“You can get water if you need it,” he said. “We’ll start in five minutes.”

Jess took the opportunity to refill her water bottle at the fountain in the corner. As she did, one of the other women approached her.

“First time in the extended class?” she asked. She was perhaps in her late forties, with silver-streaked dark hair and the lean, sinewy build of a longtime practitioner.

“No,” Jess admitted. “I’ve done it twice before.”

“It’s really worth it, don’t you think?” the woman said. “Derek really takes the time to work with each person individually. I’m Helen, by the way.”

“Jess,” she replied.

“Derek’s a great teacher,” Helen continued. “He has a good eye for alignment issues people don’t even know they have.”

Before Jess could respond, Derek called them back to their mats.

“Today we’ll work on inversions and balance,” he said, sitting cross-legged on his mat. “As with our regular practice, I want you to focus on patience. The nervous system needs time to adapt. Most people rush into poses their body isn’t ready for because they’re chasing an external form rather than listening to internal signals.”

“We’ll start with some preparatory poses to warm up the shoulders and core,” Derek continued. “Then we’ll work on headstand, forearm stand, and handstand progressions. Remember, the goal isn’t to get your legs up today. The goal is to understand where your edge is and to respect it.”

For the next forty-five minutes, Derek guided them through progressively challenging balance poses. He spent time with each student, offering specific adjustments and modifications based on their individual capabilities. Jess was impressed by his attention to detail, the way he seemed to understand exactly what each person needed.

When they reached handstand practice, he moved through the room, offering adjustments and support. Jess watched as he helped Helen kick up into a handstand, his hands providing just enough support to keep her stable without doing the work for her.

When he reached Jess, he stood beside her. “Ready?”

She nodded, positioned herself a couple feet from the wall, placed her hands firmly on the mat, and kicked up. Her legs found the wall, and she held the position, core engaged, shoulders stacked over wrists.

“Good,” Derek said quietly.

“Thanks,” Jess managed, focusing on her breath.

“Try coming away from the wall,” he suggested. “I’ll spot you.”

Jess pushed one foot off the wall, then the other. For a few seconds, she balanced perfectly, Derek’s hands hovering near her ankles but not touching. Then her balance wavered, and she came down in a controlled sequence, feet to the floor, then standing.

“Nice work,” Derek said. “Your alignment is solid. Next time we can work on holding it longer.”

Next time. The words lingered as he moved on to the next student. Jess watched him demonstrate a different approach for one of the men, who was struggling with wrist pain.

The session concluded with a series of cooling poses and a brief meditation. “Take what you learned today about your edge,” Derek said, “and see if you can apply it in other areas of your life. Where are you rushing? Where could you benefit from more patience?”

After the extended session wrapped up, Jess took her time rolling up her mat, watching as the other students thanked Derek and left. Helen waved goodbye to Jess on her way out, saying she hoped to see her again next week. Eventually, it was just Jess and Derek in the studio.

“I was wondering if you’d stopped coming,” Derek said, wiping down his mat with a small spray bottle of cleaning solution. “I noticed you in class a while back, but then you disappeared.”

“Work and travel got in the way,” Jess replied, running a hand over her damp hairline. “I’ve been in Savannah on a project, and I’m headed to Houston on Monday.”

Derek nodded. “That must make it hard to maintain any kind of routine.”

“It does,” Jess admitted. “How do you manage to stay so...” she gestured vaguely at him, “...consistently fit when life gets busy?”

“It’s about priorities,” he said. “I do something physical first thing every morning, no matter what. Yoga, running, swimming, whatever feels right that day.”

“And diet?”

“Almost entirely organic and nothing processed,” he said. “But I don’t count calories because I think it trains people to distrust their hunger. I eat when I’m hungry, stop when I’m satisfied.”

“Sounds simple when you put it that way.”

Derek smiled slightly. “I also avoid blue light at night, try to be in bed by ten, and wake without an alarm. Seeing the morning sun is important for circadian rhythm.”

There was something both enviable and slightly annoying about his approach. Jess found herself both impressed by his discipline and amused by his earnestness. Part of her wanted to ask if he ever just ate a burger and watched Netflix until 1 AM like a normal person.

“So you just... listen to your body?” she asked instead.

“Exactly,” he said. “Most people treat their bodies like machines they need to manage or fix. I prefer to think of mine as something to listen to.”

“That sounds nice,” Jess said, “but it’s hard to implement when you’re juggling clients and deadlines and travel.”

“True,” Derek conceded. “But those are choices too, aren’t they? We choose how much we take on, how we structure our time.”

His words carried no judgment, but Jess felt a flicker of defensiveness anyway. Her busy schedule wasn’t just about personal choice, it was about career ambition, about proving herself in a competitive field.

“Some choices are more complicated than others,” she said.

Derek nodded. “Fair point. I didn’t mean to oversimplify. By the way, did you have a chance to talk to your husband about the personalized sessions I mentioned?”

“I did bring it up,” Jess said, slightly surprised her remembered. “But with Houston and Savannah, my schedule’s been unpredictable.”

Derek nodded, unbothered. “There’s no urgency. The work is the same whether it starts this week or in two months.”

Something about his lack of pressure felt refreshing. There was no sense of desperation or immediacy in his offer, just a calm statement of availability.

“I really do want to do more yoga,” Jess said. “I notice a huge difference in how I feel when it’s part of my routine versus when it’s not.”

“That’s the body telling you what it needs,” Derek said with the faintest hint of a smile. “The body’s wisdom is often more reliable than the mind’s plans.”

“My body and my calendar aren’t always on speaking terms,” Jess replied, returning his smile.

“That’s what practice is for,” he said. “Creating space for that communication to happen.”

“When are you usually free for these sessions?” Jess asked. “Just so I know when I’m planning my schedule.”

“I have keys to the studio,” he said, “so I can make it work early mornings, evenings, even weekends when there are no classes scheduled.”

“Can I get your number?” she asked. The question felt loaded despite its practical surface. She was asking for his contact information, creating a direct line of communication that existed outside the studio, opening a door that might stay professional or might become something else depending on what she chose to do with it.

She told herself it was a door left open, not a commitment. She could take as long as she wanted to walk through it.

“Sure,” Derek said. He recited his number while Jess entered it into her phone.

“Great,” she said, standing up and gathering her mat. “I should probably get going. Thanks for the class.”

“Thank you for coming,” Derek replied, rising to his feet. “Safe travels to Houston.”

“Thanks,” Jess said. “See you soon, hopefully.”

She headed to the women’s locker room, her skin still warm from the practice. As she gathered her belongings, she found herself thinking about the contrast between the three men now in her orbit, Tom with his analytical abilities, Bob with his straightforward masculinity, and Derek with his mindfulness. Each represented a different approach to life, a different way of being in the world.

Tom categorized and analyzed, always seeking to understand. Bob acted decisively, taking what he wanted. Derek observed and waited, trusting natural processes to unfold in their own time.

What did that say about her, that she was drawn to all three? That she could see value in such different approaches?

Jess gathered her things and left the locker room. As she walked through the reception area, Elaine looked up from her computer.

“Good class?” she asked.

“Great,” Jess replied. “I stayed for the extended session too.”

“Smart choice,” Elaine said with a smile. “Derek’s techniques really stay with you. See you next time!”

“Definitely,” Jess said. Despite her travel schedule and work commitments, she wanted to make yoga a priority again.

Outside, the afternoon sun was bright and warm. Jess loaded her mat into the Tesla’s trunk, tossed her bag onto the passenger seat, and slid behind the wheel. She sat for a moment before starting the car, letting the events of the past two hours settle.

She had Derek’s number now. The door was open. She could walk through it or not, take the first step or leave it as a standing possibility that never materialized into action. The choice was entirely hers, which was both empowering and slightly overwhelming.

She started the car and headed home, ready to face the rest of the weekend.

Jess pulled into the driveway, the Tesla gliding to a quiet stop to the left of Tom's Lexus. Bob's faded blue F-150 occupied the space to the right. She gathered her yoga mat from the trunk and her bag from the passenger seat, then made her way to the front door.

The house was quiet when she entered, almost too quiet. "I'm home," she called out, slipping off her shoes at the entrance.

From upstairs came Tom's muffled voice. "Okay." Just the one word, distracted and distant.

She headed upstairs, passing Tom's closed office door, towards the bedroom.

Inside, she set her yoga mat in the corner and placed her bag on the dresser. She peeled off her sports bra and leggings, dropping them into the hamper before walking naked into their bathroom. The cool air raised goosebumps on her skin as she turned on the shower, waiting for the water to heat up.

When steam began to rise above the glass door, she stepped in, letting out a small sigh as hot water washed over her shoulders. She closed her eyes, letting the water drum against her scalp, and found herself thinking about Derek's words again. Your body knows what it needs if you listen to it.

What did her body need right now?

She shampooed her hair, massaging her scalp with her fingertips. As she rinsed the suds away, she considered how much had changed in just a month. She'd gone from a woman who'd held strong beliefs about monogamy to someone who was actively contemplating relationships with other men. The thought would have terrified her a month ago. Now it felt exciting.

After conditioning her hair and washing her body with her favorite lavender body wash, she turned off the water and stepped out onto the plush bathmat. She wrapped herself in a thick towel and wiped steam from the mirror, studying her reflection. Her cheeks were flushed from the hot shower, her eyes bright. She looked healthy, vibrant.

She ran a hand through her wet hair, pushing it back from her face. No need to style it immediately. She could let it air dry for once, something she rarely allowed herself time to do. She applied moisturizer to her face, then dabbed some on her elbows and knees.

Jess dried herself and pulled on a loose cotton t-shirt and comfortable shorts. She considered putting on a bra but decided against it. It was Saturday afternoon at home, and comfort trumped convention.

By the time she finished, it was almost 2:30 PM. Her stomach growled, reminding her she hadn't eaten since breakfast. She headed to the kitchen, passing Tom's office again. The door remained closed.

In the kitchen, Jess opened the refrigerator and surveyed the contents. They had chicken breasts that needed to be used soon, a jar of sun-dried tomatoes in oil, and half a container of heavy cream. The combination gave her an idea. Creamy sun-dried tomato pasta would be perfect for a late lunch.

She took out the ingredients and set them on the counter, then retrieved a bottle of Pinot Grigio. She poured herself a small glass, took a sip, and began preparing the meal.

As she diced the chicken and chopped the tomatoes, Jess found her thoughts drifting back to the yoga studio. Getting Derek's number felt significant, not because she planned to act on anything immediately, but because it represented a choice she was making consciously, not impulsively.

She decided she wanted to tell Tom about it, not as a performance designed to turn him on, but as an honest conversation about how her thinking was evolving.

She used multiple bowls as she prepared the ingredients, one for the diced chicken, another for the chopped tomatoes and garlic, a third for grated parmesan. A small pot for heating cream. She left the dirty utensils and cutting board in the sink, planning to clean them after eating.

From the cabinet, she pulled out her red Le Creuset Dutch oven, a wedding gift from her mother. The heavy pot had seemed excessive at the time, but her mother had insisted it would last forever. Now, Jess used it several times a week.

She added olive oil to the Dutch oven and turned on the heat, then added the chicken to cook. The sounds and smells of cooking filled the kitchen, the sizzle of meat hitting hot oil, the aroma of garlic, the rich scent of sun-dried tomatoes. She stirred with a wooden spoon, monitoring the chicken as it browned.

A pinch more salt, a splash more wine. She tasted the sauce, adjusting the seasoning as she went.

The pasta water came to a boil, and she added salt, then the fettuccine. She set the timer on her phone and returned to the sauce, adding the sun-dried tomatoes and a splash of their oil to the chicken. The aroma intensified, filling the kitchen with a rich, Mediterranean scent.

Around 3 PM, she heard Tom's footsteps. A moment later, he appeared in the kitchen doorway, likely drawn by the aroma of cooking food.

"That smells amazing," he said, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "What are you making?"

"Creamy sun-dried tomato pasta with chicken," Jess replied, stirring the sauce. "I figured we both needed a proper meal."

Tom nodded, eyeing the pile of dirty prep dishes in the sink. Without being asked, he rolled up his sleeves and started filling the sink with hot, soapy water. "How was yoga?" he asked as he began washing.

"Good. Exactly what I needed." Jess kept her answer short, stirring the sauce as it thickened. She could feel Tom's expectation of more details, but held back, curious whether he'd ask.

As she predicted, he did. "Was Derek teaching today?" Tom asked, scrubbing a cutting board.

"He was."

"Did you stay for the extended session?"

"I did."

"Anything else happen?"

Jess paused her stirring for a moment. "Yes," she said simply.

Tom turned from the sink, hands dripping. "Yes? What does that mean?"

"I got his number." Jess turned off the heat under the Dutch oven and reached for two plates from the cabinet.

Tom's eyebrows shot up. "You got his number?"

"Yes."

"Did he offer it or did you ask for it?"

"I asked for it." She began serving the pasta onto the plates. "I told him I wanted to schedule some personalized sessions after I get back from Houston."

Tom wiped his hands on a dish towel. “What happened to the social circle rule? You said people would notice and you’d get a reputation.”

Jess noticed he wasn’t objecting to her getting Derek’s number. He was questioning her reasoning. “It’s different with Derek,” she said. “He’s professional. Besides, I’m not planning to have sex with him. I genuinely want the yoga sessions.”

“Did he seem interested in more?” Tom leaned against the counter, watching her.

“He was respectful. He asked if I’d talked to my husband about the sessions, actually. He remembered I’m married.”

“But do you see it going beyond yoga?” Tom asked.

Jess considered the question. “Maybe. He’s attractive, and I think there could be something there. But it would have to develop slowly. Small steps.”

Tom nodded, turning back to finish the dishes. He turned off the water and wiped down the counter. “Well, it sounds like you’re approaching it thoughtfully.”

Jess carried their plates to the table while Tom poured them each a glass of wine. They sat down together, the mood still light but with an undercurrent of something more serious brewing.

Tom took a bite of the pasta and closed his eyes momentarily. “This is incredible,” he said. “I could eat this once a week and never get tired of it.”

“I’ll add it to the rotation,” Jess promised, taking a sip of her wine. The cool, crisp Pinot Grigio paired perfectly with the rich, creamy pasta. She watched Tom eat, noting how he seemed more relaxed now that he’d stepped away from his work.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before Jess decided to continue the conversation. “I’ve been thinking about something,” she said. “About why things progressed with Bob when they didn’t with other men.”

Tom looked up from his plate, interested. “What did you figure out?”

“I’ve had opportunities to meet men over the past couple of months. Frank at the Fleming. That guy who walked me to my hotel room in Savannah the first trip. The older man this time in Savannah.” She took another sip of wine. “But they all offered a… leap, a big decision that would change everything at once.”

“And Bob didn’t?” Tom asked.

“Bob built a staircase,” Jess explained. “Small steps I could take one at a time. Each time, I had room to say yes without committing to everything at once. I needed to acclimate to each new level before moving on.”

Tom considered this. “So with Derek...?”

“Same approach. Starting with yoga, getting comfortable with that, seeing where it goes. No pressure, no rush.”

“What about in Houston, or when you go back to Savannah? Are you planning to flirt with men there too?”

Jess met his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about it. Would that be okay?”

“Of course it’s okay,” Tom said. “We’ve gone over this again and again. I told you, it’s hot. It’s also slightly nerve-racking, if I’m being honest.” He shook his head with a small laugh. “I can’t believe how far you’ve come. Two months ago, you were resistant to the whole idea. Now you’re thinking about having boyfriends in different cities.”

“I guess I took your joke more seriously than you meant it,” Jess said with a smile. “But I do feel different lately. More confident. More open to flirting and seeing where things go. I’m happy with how things have developed with Bob. And I’m especially happy with how things are going at work.”

“The success at Skyline has given you a boost,” Tom observed.

“It has. Webb’s offer too. It feels like everything is opening up at once.” Jess poked her pasta with her fork, thinking about how intertwined her professional and personal growth had become. The more confident she felt at work, the more confident she became in her sexuality, and vice versa.

Tom too poked at the pasta. “So how do you want to approach this? You said you didn’t want to date but you didn’t want to have one-night stands either.”

“And I still feel that way. Rotating through strangers feels cheap and dangerous to me. I’d always worry about my safety. And I don’t want to feel like a whore.”

“You’re not…”

“I know,” she interrupted. “But that’s how I’d feel if I just picked up random men. What makes sense to me is seeing the same person over time. Building trust first. I’d be upfront that I’m married, that my husband knows, and that my loyalty to you comes first. He’d have to respect that and expect nothing beyond it. And then, small steps after that.”

“I liked what you said about exposure therapy,” Jess continued. “More low-level interactions. I can flirt and be playful without it needing to lead anywhere. It takes the pressure off.”

“It all fits together,” Tom said.

“Exactly.”

Tom took a sip of wine. “What about rule four? No emotional connections?”

Jess set down her fork and took a sip of wine before answering. “That’s where I’m not sure the rules make sense. You’re my rock, Tom. I’m never going to leave you. But I can’t be sexual with someone without some kind of connection. It doesn’t have to be love. It won’t threaten our marriage. But there has to be trust and comfort.”

“So, you’re saying…”

“I’m thinking out loud,” Jess admitted. “I don’t have it all figured out yet. I want your help with this. I want complete transparency between us. Maybe you’d even communicate with the man too. Maybe you’d become friends.”

Tom was quiet for a moment, processing. “Let me see if I understand,” he said finally. “You want a staircase rather than a leap. You want to build trust first. You want openness about our marriage. And you want time to acclimate at each stage.”

“Yes,” Jess said.

“Let me pose a stress test,” Tom said. “Say you meet someone while you’re traveling. The chemistry is strong. You’ve only known him a few days, but you feel that connection. What would you do, given that you already have my blanket permission?”

“I still don’t like the blanket permission,” Jess said. “It feels like pressure. I still want small steps. But in that scenario... I’d go with my gut and tell you about it right away.”

Tom laughed. “That’s a cop out.”

“I know,” Jess acknowledged with a smile. “But we’re still only really starting this exploration. It’s hard to say exactly what I’ll do in every situation.”

“What about Bob?” Tom asked. “Are you planning to see him before you leave for Houston?”

“I’m leaving Monday, so no. We’ll pick up after I’m back.”

“Do you think Bob is getting emotionally attached to you?” Tom asked.

Jess considered the question. “I don’t think so. He seems to understand the parameters. He’s never tried to see me outside our arranged times, never texted me inappropriately. He’s always been respectful.”

“What if he did develop feelings?”

“Then we’d have to end it,” Jess said. “I don’t want to hurt anyone. This only works if everyone is on the same page.”

Tom nodded. “And what about you? Are you developing feelings for him?”

Jess thought about Bob, about their encounters. “I like him. I enjoy his company. The sex is pretty freaking good if I’m being honest. But no, I don’t have any romantic feelings for him. It’s different from what we have, Tom.”

“Good.” Tom reached across the table and took her hand, squeezing it gently. “I want you to be happy, Jess. I want you to explore. But I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” Jess promised. “Ever.”

They finished eating, and together they cleaned up the kitchen. Tom loaded the dishwasher while Jess wrapped the leftovers and put them in the refrigerator. She wiped down the counters, and he swept the floor.

When they were done, Tom kissed her on the forehead. “I should get back to work,” he said. “I want to finish reviewing those projections before dinner.”

“I need to start packing anyway,” Jess replied.

As Tom headed back to his home office, Jess refilled her wine glass and carried it to their bedroom. She opened her closet and began pulling out clothes for her trip, suits for meetings, casual clothes for evenings, workout clothes for the hotel gym. She folded each item carefully and placed it in her suitcase.

In the bathroom, she gathered her toiletries. She’d learned to travel light over the years, bringing only what she needed rather than her entire beauty routine. She placed the items in a clear travel bag and added it to her suitcase.

Back in the bedroom, she sat on the edge of the bed, sipping her wine and reviewing her packing list. Had she forgotten anything? She’d need her laptop, her tablet. Professional accessories, her good pen, business cards, portfolio. She checked items off mentally as she confirmed they were packed or set aside to pack in the morning.

She thought about her conversation with Tom. It had gone well, better than she’d expected. They were finding their way through this new territory together, adjusting their

boundaries thoughtfully. For the first time since this new chapter began, Jess felt they were truly on the same page, partners navigating uncharted territory together rather than two people with competing visions of what their marriage should be.

She finished her wine and set the empty glass on the nightstand. There was still plenty to figure out, still conversations to have and boundaries to establish. But for now, she felt content. She felt like herself again, not Tom's fantasy wife, not the perfect professional Jess, not the adventurous woman exploring new desires, but all of these things at once, integrated and whole.

With her packing nearly complete, Jess stretched out on the bed. Outside, the afternoon light was beginning to soften. She closed her eyes, letting herself drift, not quite napping but not fully awake either.

In this liminal space, she felt grateful for everything, for Tom's understanding, for her own courage in exploring new aspects of herself, for the professional success that had given her confidence, even for Bob and his "staircase" that had helped her take those first tentative steps into a new way of being.

Whatever came next, she felt ready for it. Not fearless, exactly, but willing to face her fears. Willing to take small steps forward, one at a time, until she found herself exactly where she was meant to be.

Jess sat across from Tom at their kitchen table. The pasta was even better the second time around. She'd added fresh basil and a sprinkle of parmesan to revive the leftovers from lunch. Outside, darkness had fallen completely.

"Make sure to pack thick socks" she said, taking a sip of water. "Denver gets cold at night, even in summer."

Tom nodded, his mouth full. He swallowed before answering. "I checked the forecast. Looks like perfect weather, actually."

"Lucky you. Houston will be like walking through soup." She made a face. "Ninety percent humidity."

"Pack those sleeveless dresses you just got," Tom suggested. "The ones that don't wrinkle."

The conversation continued like this, flight times, weather forecasts, restaurant recommendations near their respective hotels. No mention of Bob, or Webb, or their

evolving arrangement.

After dinner, they cleared the table together. Tom washed while Jess dried.

By the time Tom dried his hands on a dish towel, Jess was leaning against the counter, watching him. Neither spoke. He stepped toward her, and she reached for him, her fingers curling into the fabric of his t-shirt.

Inside their bedroom, they both undressed slowly. When they came together on the bed, Jess looked directly into Tom's eyes and kept looking. No fantasies intruded, no thoughts of other men, just Tom's face above hers, his expression open and vulnerable. She matched his intensity, allowing herself to be fully present, holding nothing back.

"I love you," she whispered against his mouth.

"I love you too," he answered.

Their bodies moved together. She arched her body to meet him, hands pulling him closer. When she came, she kept her eyes open, watching Tom's face as he followed her over the edge.

Afterward, they lay tangled together, her head on his chest, his hand stroking slowly up and down her spine.

"That was nice," she murmured.

"Very nice."

Sunday unfolded at a leisurely pace. After breakfast, Tom retreated to his office to tie up some loose ends before his trip. Jess spent the morning cleaning, vacuuming, wiping down neglected surfaces. She double-checked that she had everything she needed for her presentations.

They reconvened for lunch, simple sandwiches eaten at the counter, then moved to the living room couch to see a movie neither of them had seen before. Tom stretched out along the couch with Jess nestled her body in front of him, her back against his chest.

Halfway through the film, Tom's hand, which had been resting innocently on her stomach, began to wander. Jess turned in his arms, the movie forgotten as they kissed. They made love right there on the couch.

That evening, they went out to dinner at Jess's favorite Indian restaurant. Over plates of vindaloo and butter chicken, they talked about work, friends, and their respective trips.

Back home, they barely made it through the front door before they were reaching for each other again. This time, there was an urgency to their lovemaking, as if they were both aware of the approaching separation and were trying to store up enough physical closeness to last the week.

Afterward, as they prepared for bed, Jess thought about how the entire weekend had been marked by this physical reconnection. She wondered if Tom felt it too, this need to affirm their bond before their paths diverged, even temporarily.

They fell asleep with Tom's arm draped over Jess's waist, his breath warm against the nape of her neck.

The alarm's shrill beeping pierced Jess's dream. For a moment, she was disoriented, unable to remember why she needed to be awake at such an ungodly hour. Then she felt the empty space beside her and remembered Tom's early flight.

She fumbled for her phone to silence the alarm. 3 AM glowed on the screen. The bathroom light was on and she heard water running.

Jess pushed herself upright, still groggy. She reached for her robe at the foot of the bed and pulled it on, tying the sash as she padded barefoot to the kitchen.

The house was quiet except for the distant sounds of Tom moving around in the bathroom. Jess flicked on the small light above the stove rather than the overhead lights, creating a small pool of warm illumination in the dark kitchen.

She filled the coffee maker and set it brewing, then took eggs from the refrigerator. Tom would need something in his stomach before the long travel day ahead. By the time he appeared in the kitchen doorway, freshly showered, hair still damp, she had scrambled eggs with toast waiting.

"You didn't have to get up," he said, coming over to kiss her.

"Of course I did." She poured coffee into his travel mug. "Can't send you off without breakfast."

They ate together in the dim kitchen, both still half asleep. Tom checked his phone for the Uber's status.

"Five minutes," he reported.

Jess nodded. "You'll text me when you land?" she asked.

“Of course.” Tom reached across the table to squeeze her hand. “And I’ll call when I get to the hotel later tonight.”

Minutes later, Tom’s phone buzzed. “Uber’s here.”

They both stood. Tom stuffed the rest of his scrambled eggs into his mouth and rinsed his plate in the sink while Jess topped off his travel mug with the last of the coffee. She watched as he grabbed his suitcase and laptop bag from beside the staircase where he’d left them the night before.

“I’ll wait here,” she said, standing in the open doorway as Tom wheeled his suitcase down the front walk to where the Uber waited at the curb.

The pre-dawn air was cool against her skin. Jess wrapped her robe tighter around herself, watching as Tom loaded his bags into the car’s trunk. The driver, a shadowy figure behind the wheel, waited patiently.

Tom walked back up the driveway to where she stood. In the dim light from the porch, his face looked solemn.

“Five days,” he said, pulling her into a hug.

“Text me when you land,” she said when they broke apart.

“I will.” He brushed her hair back from her face. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Tom kissed her once more, briefly, then turned and walked back to the waiting car. He slid into the backseat with a final wave.

Jess stood in the driveway as the Uber pulled away from the curb. She watched until its taillights disappeared around the corner, leaving her alone in the quiet darkness of the early morning.

With a small sigh, she turned and went back inside, closing the door behind her.

---

1 Like