

“**Wow**...
nonstop twists
and turns.”

—FREIDA
MCFADDEN

“Shockingly
clever.”

—LISA
GARDNER

JESSIE
GARCIA

THE BUSINESS TRIP

A NOVEL

THE BUSINESS TRIP



JESSIE GARCIA



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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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Dedicated to my mom, who gave me a love of the written word

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Jasmine

The Day of the Flight

I had to move carefully, quietly, grabbing only what I could in the dark without waking Glenn. He snorted and rolled to his side, and I froze, hand in midair above the suitcase, ready to abort the mission and slip back under the covers if needed. I could always lie and tell him that I had just gotten up to use the bathroom. If that happened, I was praying that he wouldn't notice I was wearing jeans.

His mouth began to gape open in a comical way, and he lightly snored. He seemed to be solidly asleep, perhaps thanks in part to Ambien, his sleeping medication. He hadn't exactly taken one by choice last night. I had crushed up a pill and put the powder into his beer can. He kept the Ambien in the bathroom cupboard. They came from a buddy on the black market and were extra strong, he told me, more than any doctor would prescribe. These would usually put him out like a light.

But even with him asleep, I couldn't risk opening a dresser drawer. That old wooden dresser creaked with every tiny move. I also couldn't take the chance of the clatter of hangers in the closet, so I would have to select from what was on the floor or in the laundry hamper to take with me. A pair of sweatpants and leggings, some underwear and a bra from the hamper, a couple of shirts of mine, and one warm red flannel button-up of Glenn's I had always liked. It was January, after all, and I

was headed from Wisconsin to Denver. Giving me his flannel shirt was the least he could do.

I couldn't find any matching socks, so I took a few orphan ones and threw them in. I could buy new socks in my new city. Same with a toothbrush and other necessities. I wanted my patchouli perfume, though, and quietly I plucked the small sample bottle from the drugstore off the top of the dresser, dabbing my wrists gently with the familiar scent that so reminded me of my grandma before securing the lid tightly so it wouldn't leak in my purse.

Slowly I slipped on my tennis shoes, keeping my gaze on Glenn the entire time. His eyelids were fluttering in REM sleep. My heart seemed to be going just as fast. He usually wasn't up until around eleven a.m., six hours from now. I had tried to time it perfectly, to make my escape two hours after he fell asleep.

Glenn would never guess that I was at the airport. If he was suspicious, he would probably check the bus station in downtown Madison, maybe the train depot in nearby Columbus. More likely he would think I was at a friend's or coworker's and just pouting for a night, and he would go storming around looking for me, as he had in the past. No way he would believe that I had money for an airplane ticket, but I did. I had been squirreling away my tips at the bar for more than a year, and grabbing the occasional ten or twenty from Glenn's wallet when I thought he wouldn't notice. Paydays and lucky nights at the casino were usually prime times.

As I stood up, my eye caught the outline of my face in the mirror above the dresser, moonlight illuminating half of it. Long blond hair, a pair of fake circular glasses from Goodwill that always reminded me of John Lennon. They didn't have real lenses, just clear plastic ones, but I liked the way I looked in them and would put them on occasionally. I was proud that at my age of forty-four I still didn't need real glasses.

Easing one of my shirtsleeves up, I winced looking at the deep bruise with the finger marks that Glenn had created a few nights ago. Our last fight. The one that broke me. He accused me of flirting with

guys at the bar, called me a “fucking whore,” and pushed me onto the bed, forcing sex. I turned my head away and shut my eyes. When it was over, he grabbed my arm, the one now bruised, and squeezed it until it became numb.

“What’s wrong? Are you thinking about one of the guys at the bar instead of me? Huh? Don’t fucking lie to me ... bitch.”

He kept the pressure on until I begged him to stop. Finally, he tossed the arm back down to the bed hard and went to shower. He liked to tell me I was dirty. I would always curl up into a ball while he was in the shower, crying softly, biting my fingernails, and plotting my escape.

I had tried twice before to leave him, but he found me, dragging me by the hair, throwing me into his pickup truck, and bringing me back to his trailer. He didn’t allow me to have my own car. He would pick me up and drop me off for work, and often he spent most of his night in the bar too, ostensibly playing pool or darts, but I could feel his eyes on me, especially as I waited on other men.

How had it gone so wrong? When I first met Glenn, he was one of those bar guys. I’d had a series of jobs I never enjoyed over my life but had landed at a large, rollicking Midwestern tavern thanks to my old high school friend Anna, who worked there. It was the kind where the beer and laughs flowed freely late into every night. I was feeling like I could begin to stand on my own two feet coming off a long, tumultuous relationship. It was just three months after the breakup, in fact, and I wanted to spend time alone to heal and *then* try to meet someone decent. But my alone time didn’t last nearly long enough.

Glenn was a burly guy who made an entrance wherever he went. He had broad shoulders and long hair in a ponytail, and he caught my eye right away. Before I knew it, we started flirting as I brought him his bottles of Miller High Life.

He seemed so kind at first, offering to walk me to my car after closing time so that I would be safe, politely asking me if I would share my phone number with him. On our first date, he insisted that I not get

out of the pickup truck until he could walk around and open my door. It was so old-fashioned it made me giggle.

At first, I didn't know if he'd actually be into me. He wasn't even forty yet, and I felt like a much older woman next to him. But we both liked live music, so we had gone to concerts and shows, and in the dancing and sweat and heat, we had our first kiss, and I spent the night at his trailer.

For months, things were great. I thought I had found my Prince Charming. We would stay up late, sleep in, make love before breakfast and sometimes after, and take rides out to the country on weekends on his Harley. I moved out of my place and into his in short order, my original plan to be alone for a while fading at the prospect of new love.

But the first sign of things going awry was when my car broke down. Glenn insisted that we just sell it for scrap and that he would drive me wherever I needed to go. I didn't like the idea of losing my car. She had been with me for almost ten years. I nicknamed her Motoring Maeve, and I didn't relish the idea of Maeve being gone, forcing me to depend on Glenn. But he insisted that it made the most sense since he had a flexible construction job and could come and go as he pleased. The scrapyard gave us \$600 for dear Maeve. Glenn declared it would go to "household expenses" and pocketed it.

Then his jealousy started. If I talked to a salesclerk at a store, Glenn would press me for whether I found the stranger attractive. He also started telling me what not to wear at work: "That top shows too much of your tits" or "That color makes you look even older than you are."

He didn't like me to be alone, not even for a Sunday stroll. "Why would you need to go without me?" he would ask. "Aren't we in love?" He always kept his arm tightly around me the entire time. At first, it felt loving, but as time went on, it morphed into possessiveness.

The rough sex was next. He wanted to try tying me to the bed and I balked. He said I needed to please him and we would try whatever he wanted, and then he pushed me down and just did it, my arms pinned to

the bedpost. After that, it was sex whenever he wanted in whatever way he wanted, no matter how exhausted I was when I got home from work.

But the worst of it happened unexpectedly in the middle of the night. I was sleeping when suddenly I felt a deep pressure around my head and an inability to breathe. Realizing with horrifying clarity that there was a pillow on my face, I heard Glenn laughing as I began to flail. Just as I tried to belt out a scream, he lifted the pillow and fell over on his side, cackling uncontrollably.

Tears came to my eyes as I coughed and sputtered, finally gaining enough breath to blurt, “What the *fuck*?”

“Oh my God, Jasmine. Your face, your face when I took the pillow off. Your eyes, holy shit, I’ve never seen your eyes look like that...”

He continued to belly laugh, clutching his side and falling over, as I reached over and pounded his arm with my fists, crying and coughing.

“That. Is. Not. Funny. Jesus Christ, Glenn.”

“Come here, baby, I’m just joking around.” He pulled me into his arms and started kissing my head and face.

That’s when I decided to take part of my tip money each night and hide it in a tampon holder in my fringed purse. He always wanted some of my tips to go to those elusive “household expenses,” but I could manage to slide a bit away without him noticing. I would then transfer the cash into a photo album I kept in a cardboard box in the storage area of his trailer. He would never look there. He didn’t care about my childhood pictures or the cards and mementos I had in the box. I figured he would just trash the whole thing or throw it into a firepit once I was gone.

To make room for my ever-growing stash of cash, I removed the plastic holders from the circular metal hooks in the photo album, taking the aging pictures out of their liners and keeping those loose-leaf. With no full page holders, I had space for bills. Using a box of matches, I set the holders on fire out back while Glenn was at work, the scent of burning plastic and paper overwhelming my nose and making my eyes water, but also smelling like freedom to me.

It went on like this for over a year, me faking that things were normal with Glenn while plotting my escape. I had become a robot around him, a shell of the former lively Jasmine that I was. Jasmine Veronica was my name. What my mother was thinking I never knew. Then again, she had felt like a stranger to me for much of my life. Mom had three kids with three different men, and for some reason she decided early on that I was the bad seed. I must have been only eight or nine when I overheard her tell a friend that she *never* should have had a third, that my dad was the worst of the bunch, that I was too much like him. Rumor had it he was in jail somewhere. Not that any of our fathers were ever around. Mom resented being saddled with kids—that much was clear—or at least she resented being saddled with me.

I was five years younger than my sister and seven years younger than my brother. I grew up feeling like a constant outcast. Skinny and awkward, I needed years of braces while my siblings were blessed with near-perfect teeth. Mom complained constantly about the cost. I struggled mightily in math and science while they both seemed to find everything about school easy. It got so bad for me that I was almost held back a year. Mom told a friend, in front of me this time, how mortified she was.

Everything I did or wanted seemed like a bother, even basic needs such as food. “You’re hungry *again*?” she would say with a deep sigh and a long stare, even at what felt like normal mealtimes to me. She nicknamed me “Little Piggy” and would call out “This Little Piggy went to market...” when I came hunting for a snack. My siblings were no help. They never seemed to find me anything but annoying, telling me to leave them alone when I tried to initiate play or talk about any emotions.

As I grew up, I had some run-ins with the police in high school. Wasn’t that normal? Then I got knocked up and had an abortion that Mom had to pay for when I was eighteen. Wasn’t that better than bringing an unwanted kid into this crazy world? So I didn’t go to regular college like my brother and sister. I tried cosmetology school

because I had always liked playing with makeup, but Mom told me that she was done paying for stuff, and I had to drop out when I couldn't afford tuition.

The truth was she just didn't like me and never had. The fact that she worked as a nurse's assistant at an old folks' home was the ultimate irony. She could care for complete strangers with tenderness, but not show an ounce of TLC for her own daughter.

Mom and I really drifted apart after the abortion and the cosmetology school mess. For some years, we exchanged perfunctory Christmas cards, the writing increasingly stilted and formal, as if we were talking to a long-lost neighbor, not a close family member.

"Have a very Merry Christmas," Mom had written on the last one. It didn't even have my name on the inside, and she had signed it "Your Mother" and not "Love, Mom." I couldn't help but mentally compare it to what I thought she would be writing to my brother and sister, and I decided then and there to stop exchanging cards, or words. When I moved to a new apartment in town, I didn't give her my address. We hadn't talked since. Last I heard, my brother lived in Chicago and my sister somewhere in upstate New York. He did something with computers, and she was one of those businesswomen who worked as a pharmaceutical rep and who I imagined jetting around the country to important meetings and stuff. I hadn't shared my new address with them either. The same year I moved on from Mom, I moved on from them as well. It was just easier for me all around to harden my heart.

I tried not to think of them or Mom very often. It made me angry and sad. I was mostly OK being away from all of them now, but sometimes I wished I had a family to lean on. This was one of those times. Instead, I would have to rely on my own smarts. I might not have been book-smart, but I was street-smart, I knew that.

It was my time.

The city of Denver sounded attractive to me. I didn't know why, didn't know anyone there, had never been, but a place with mountains and a bunch of laid-back outdoorsy people seemed glorious. Why not

make a new start there? I didn't have much of a plan beyond getting to Denver with enough money to live until I found a job. I just needed to leave Glenn safely first. I had my cell phone, the huge wad of cash that I had retrieved from the photo album after Glenn had fallen asleep, some clothes, and a plan to fly that afternoon.

My big dilemma was how to get from our trailer to the airport without a car. Having never used Uber before, I asked Anna, the high school friend who had secured me the job at the bar, to show me how to install the app. We did it in the women's restroom after we were done cleaning up the night before. Anna was good at this sort of stuff, always had been. Back at Madison North High School, she liked to show us all kinds of technology that kind of blew our minds. At first it was stuff on a desktop computer. Now it was iPhone tricks, AI art, and what types of questions you could ask ChatGPT.

In the darkness of the trailer now, I nervously slipped my phone from my purse and cupped my hand around it so the light would not be too bright for Glenn. I was trying to summon a ride to the end of the drive where Glenn's trailer was parked. If this Uber app didn't work, I wasn't sure what I would do. Maybe abandon the plan for another day or week until I could get Anna to show me what I had done wrong. But as I searched for nearby cars, it seemed to function perfectly. It put a dot on my exact location and said a car driven by someone named Carlos was fifteen minutes away.

Fifteen minutes. *Breathe, Jasmine, breathe.* Confirming the pickup, I looked over at Glenn. He was naked, the way he always slept, with a thin sheet haphazardly flung over him. I was always cold and needed warm pajamas and sometimes two blankets, especially in January in Wisconsin. He called me an "old fucking lady" and tried to get me to sleep naked too, but I would shiver all night if I tried.

Bending down, I pushed the bulk of my cash into the suitcase and started to carefully zip it closed. This might be the trickiest part, other than actually sneaking out the front door without making too much noise. Carefully, I inched the zipper a centimeter and waited to see if he

had any reaction. Another centimeter and I waited again. I tried an inch the next time, but he flipped onto his back, his arm going up over his head, and I stopped and waited until he fully settled into sleep again.

I glanced at my side of the bed, and a fantasy flashed into my head: What if I grabbed my pillow and smothered *his* face while he slept? What if I didn't release it as he had to me? I could just leave him there, dead. But I wasn't sure I could overpower him, and the prospect of a life in jail was too much. Everyone would know it was me.

No, just pure escape was best. Back to the centimeter plan with my suitcase. It took me over five minutes to get it fully zipped. Picking it up in my arms so as not to roll it, I backed out of the bedroom like a thief, eyes trained on Glenn the entire time.

The front door was next. It had a heavy main door and a squeaky screen door, but I had played a trick on Glenn a few days ago, taking a box cutter from his toolbox and slashing a gash into the screen that I said was from the recent winter windstorm knocking it open. That forced Glenn to take it to his buddy at Monona Storm and Screen for repair. With the screen door out of the picture, the front door wouldn't be as bad to open.

And I was the stupid one? I'd show him, my family, everybody.

Suddenly, I thought of the coming Uber and wondered if I needed to hurry. Would the driver honk if I wasn't there right at the appointed time? My heart went even faster, and my hands began to sweat, causing the suitcase in my arms to slip for a moment. I righted it, wiping each palm quickly on my jeans as the other arm held the suitcase.

I could still hear Glenn's rhythmic breathing down the hall of the trailer, the rasp of air in and out of his lungs. He was such a heavy breather. My right hand went to the door handle and turned it a millimeter at a time, listening for that final click as it yielded open.

An owl hooted in a nearby tree, and the sound both startled and calmed me. With renewed purpose, I pulled the door open and stepped outside the trailer. Breathing in the cold air, I shut the door behind me

as carefully as I could. A blast of winter shouldn't be the thing to wake Glenn.

It was so frigid outside that my breath crystallized, but it would be quiet weather for flying. A snowstorm would have foiled my plans. I had been watching the forecast on the local CBS affiliate for a week to be sure. Their main meteorologist was my favorite. He was good-looking and funny. Glenn had once asked me if I thought the meteorologist was sexy. I lied and said no.

There was the sound of a car rolling along the gravel in the distance, and I saw a sweep of headlights. Glenn didn't like full-blown RV places—too many people, he said—so he had gotten a small plot of land and set up his trailer there. We had some neighbors within walking distance but not close enough to see on a daily basis.

Cocking my head to listen for any movement from Glenn over the gravel sound, I was filled with relief that the trailer remained silent. Wrapping my arms around my suitcase, I straightened up to walk as upright and confidently as I could toward this waiting Uber. I had to look in control, not like a madwoman on the run. Taking deep gulps of air and composing my face into a bright smile, I made my way to the car.

I planned to tell the driver I was going on a business trip if he asked. I thought of my sister with what I imagined to be fancy clothes and all the makeup she wanted and expensive shoes on her feet. I could act like I was important and fantasize that I would be wowing some room with my business savvy later in the day. Maybe it wasn't too late for that life for real. Maybe I could take some business classes in Denver and eventually find my way to a job like that. This was the new me.

Carlos was a heavyset guy whose unkempt hair made me wonder if he had just woken up, but he was chatty, asking me lots of questions. I started in on the lies. Why was I flying? "Business trip." What did I do? Channeling my sister: "I work for a pharmaceutical company." Where was the trip? I didn't want to say Denver, just in case Glenn somehow

tracked this man down, so I picked my sister's state too: "New York." I figured there had to be plenty of conventions and meetings there.

Deftly, I turned the conversation to him, and he started droning on about his kids and their extracurriculars. Perfect. Zoning out, I stared out the window, making only small comments of affirmation when I felt I should be responding.

Carlos pulled up to Delta departures. As he was retrieving my bag from the trunk, I had a sudden flash of fear. What if I saw someone I knew at the airport who happened to be flying the same day? Someone from the bar or from my other previous jobs around town, including gas station attendant and maid at several places? I had a plan, but it didn't feel very foolproof.

A blue Los Angeles Dodgers baseball cap from a thrift shop sat in my purse. That, plus those fake round glasses, would be my partial disguise. I could also hide in a corner chair or even in the women's bathroom for as long as I needed to before the flight took off.

Quickly, I slipped on the cap and tucked my hair up into it as best I could, keeping my eyes low as I made my way to the ticket counter. A perky woman with a flawless bob and way too much eyeshadow greeted me.

"Good morning! Checking in today?"

How could she be *this* awake at 5:30 a.m.?

"Yes, I actually have to buy my ticket. It's OK to pay cash, right?"

"Sure is," she answered, but I thought I could also feel her eyeing me. What woman shows up in a baseball cap and pays cash? "And where are we headed today?"

"Denver," I replied and mustered up fake enthusiasm. "Bachelorette party. Girls just want to have fun, right?"

"Yes, they do," she said, taking my driver's license and typing in the information as I carefully reached into my purse and removed some of the cash. Not enough for her to see the wad that remained, of course. I didn't want her to get suspicious. I set the bills on the counter and added, "I've been saving up tip money for this. I can't wait!"

“Do you need a return ticket too?” she asked.

I hadn’t anticipated that question. I had to think fast.

“Uh, no ... I’m driving back with one of my girlfriends Monday.”

She nodded and counted the bills, then hit a few buttons and a ticket started spitting out, the whir of electronic printing sounding like further freedom to me. My shoulders began to relax just a touch.

“You’re here awfully early.” She cocked her head slightly to the side. “Your flight doesn’t leave until this afternoon.”

My shoulders tensed again. I tried to act as if I were laughing it off.

“Oh. I have some work to do, so I thought I would just do it here.” I gestured toward the carry-on. “My laptop is in my bag. And another girlfriend is joining me for lunch before we board.”

She handed me the boarding pass. “Terrific. I hope you have a great girls’ weekend!”

“Thanks.” I smiled and wheeled my carry-on filled with mismatched socks and dirty clothes to the security area, picturing Glenn, still deeply asleep. But what would happen when he woke up? Nervous energy began to settle in, and I started to chew my fingernail. He might or might not report me as missing. I was pretty sure he wouldn’t because he wouldn’t want to be the center of a police probe. They could find out he never paid taxes and got paid mostly in cash from his construction buddies. Nor would he want the feds to see the pot plants he kept in the window by the sink. Marijuana was still illegal in Wisconsin. Would he care enough about me to file a missing person’s report? Or would he chalk it up to “oh well, the bitch is gone” and move on to find someone new? I guessed the latter.

I figured I had maybe a week before he would do anything too big. In the meantime, he would be calling me, texting me, trying to track me down across town, threatening me, telling me I had better fucking get home. But after a week, I could imagine him reaching a decision point. Would he inform the police, or would he think that was too risky on himself? Continuing to mull this over as I got through security and

found the gate, I slid into one of the black vinyl chairs and found a different nail to chew.

Squeezing my eyes tight, I thought of my grandma, the one person in life who I had felt truly close to. Grandma had died right before I hit high school. Mom later said that Grandma would roll over in her grave if she saw how I had turned out, but I didn't believe that. The Grandma I remembered brought me presents and candy and let me sit on her lap as long as I wanted as a young child, the smell of her patchouli perfume comforting me. She used to tell me I was smart and pretty, in that order, and not to confuse the order. That was even after my struggles with schoolwork, and those words meant so much to me. Now I needed her to look down from heaven and help guide me. I wasn't the praying type, but I shut my eyes and sent one up to Grandma anyway.