The doorbell rings just as Tessa gets out of the shower. *Shit! It’s the plumber!* Their guest toilet has been backed up for days while they’ve waited for this guy to make space for them in his schedule. Needless to say, the situation was fast becoming dire; they’re now desperate for some help. *So there’s no way I can let him slip away now!* Frantically she tries to hunt down her bathrobe but, typically, it’s suddenly disappeared off the face of the earth. The second ringing of the doorbell calls for a quick decision so she hastily wraps a towel around her still-wet body and dashes down the stairs.

“I’m coming! I’m coming!” Tessa yells when the doorbell rings a third time. Agitated and slightly out of breath, she jerks the door wide open and immediately starts apologising. “I’m so sorry I was in the—oh! It’s you!”

Standing in the doorway is not the plumber but rather James - life-long best friend to Matthew and comparatively recent friend to Tessa. For a moment they stand gaping at each other: Tessa because she’s still expecting to see the plumber in front of her and hasn’t yet fully realised that it’s in fact James there instead, and James because Tessa *is in a goddamn towel!* As if this thought was spoken aloud, they simultaneously glance down at Tessa’s state of undress, then hastily avert their gazes, both Tessa and James blushing a startled red.

James is the first to stutter out a sentence. “S-so…er…hi Tess! Um… sorry if I came at a bad time! I could—er,” he gestures vaguely behind him, “I could, you know, um…leave and come back later? Uh...”

Tessa’s mostly dormant hostess skills suddenly erupt to life, causing her to repeat several times that “no, no, it’s no trouble, really”, and “please do come in”, until James finally acquiesces and crosses the threshold. In an effort to ignore it till it goes away, Tessa makes no move to change her attire, and James, seemingly of the same opinion, makes no move to suggest she should clothe herself in a more decent manner. So it is that the awkward pair enters the kitchen, saying many things without saying anything at all. For instance, James wasn’t saying how the sight of Tessa in *just a towel* was driving him to almost disastrous distraction, and Tessa certainly wasn’t saying just how much James’ furtive, yet heated, glances, seen from the corner of her eye, were both unsettling and exciting her.

“Would you like something to drink? We’ve got coffee – decaf or regular – and lots of tea: Earl Grey, chamomile, green tea, honeybush and ginger, pomegranate and raspberry—I guess you could say we really like tea!” she giggles nervously, then immediately resumes her panicky babbling whilst sticking her head in the fridge. “There’s also Coke and lemonade, even some dry lemon if you fancy something different. Although I don’t think there’s any gin… but anyway, it’s too early to drink in any case. I mean it’s like, what, nine in the morning? Definitely not a good idea to start drinking this early, unless you’re an alcoholic, of course!” Another uncomfortable laugh, this one erupting from inside the fridge, which ends very abruptly when Tess suddenly recalls that James’s father was an abusive drunk. Slowly emerging from the fridge, her face contorts into a stricken mess and she finds herself desperately wringing her hands.

Strangely, Tessa’s discomfort inspires some confidence in James and he is able to dismiss her panicked chattering with a soft smile and a firm, but friendly, “I’ll have some coffee, please. Regular, no sugar, a splash of milk.”

James’s sudden calm helps to alleviate Tessa’s panic, and with a far more composed air, she starts the kettle boiling for his coffee. James leans nonchalantly against the kitchen countertop, watching Tessa move about the kitchen. As is more normal for them, they start chatting and joking easily as Tessa putters about the kitchen preparing all the necessary bits and bobs for a mid-morning tea. The overwhelming awkwardness of moments before seems an almost laughable thing now, and all seems set for a calm, comfortable situation.

That is, until Tessa’s towel unexpectedly drops from her body while she’s reaching for a coffee mug. Both bodies still in utter surprise and several seconds pass before either makes a move. Still rigid with shock, Tessa slowly turns to James, her eyes stretched impossibly wide. The thought of retrieving her towel never enters her blank mind. James, meanwhile, moves from the countertop towards Tessa. Her eyes stretch even further, and her mouth curls into a petite, startled ‘o’. It is only as James nears that Tessa realises that he is not reaching for her, but for the towel draped around her feet. He grips the towel’s edge with both hands and slowly unbends till he is face-to-face with Tessa, the towel the only barrier between him and her naked skin. The disaster seems yet avertible but once more Chance withdraws her favour and binds both bodies to an inevitable, yet wicked, path.

It happens, almost accidently, when Tessa’s fumbling grab for the towel results in her hands clamping down over James’s fingers where they grip the towel. The skin-on-skin contact, normally such a minor thing, once again causes stillness in their bodies, and an almost involuntarily lifting of their gazes till eyes meet eyes and remain locked together. This time there’s no ignoring what is said, so clearly, through these locked gazes.

*I can’t stop looking at you. This is wrong! But if it’s so wrong, why am I so excited? Why can’t I look away from your eyes? All I want to do is rip this towel out of your hands and press myself against you. But the consequences! This will change everything…EVERYTHING! I don’t know if I can live with the guilt of what’s about to happen. Well I say, fuck it all. To hell with the rest. It doesn’t matter.* They *don’t matter! Only us, there is only us…Yes…only us…*

James’s mouth is on hers, soft and warm and inviting. She can’t help but react. She slides her arms around his neck and presses herself more closely against his body. Absently she notes that the towel is gone, but such practical thoughts soon leave her head when he starts kissing his way past her jaw and down her throat, coming to rest in the nook where her neck connects to her shoulder. Once there, James lifts his lips slightly and rests his nose less than a millimetre from her skin. He inhales slowly and deliberately. Once he is filled with her scent, James releases his breath in a contented sigh. The sudden rush of warm breath over that sensitive spot sends shivers racing down Tessa’s body, leaving a trail of goose bumps in their wake. James trails his fingers down her arms, tracing the goose bumps raising her skin. The soft, subtle touch leaves Tessa trembling with a sudden influx of scorching sensation. As if branded by flames, wherever James’s fingers pass, Tessa feels their passage like a mark upon her flesh – hot and deep. She buries her fingers in his hair, nails clutching at his scalp as he heightens her senses with small, feather kisses across her shoulders, over her collarbones and, finally, on her breasts. A soft moan escapes her lips when James’s questing mouth touches lightly, teasingly, on her nipple. Though Tessa arches her back to bring her breast more firmly against James’s lips, he resists her movement by retreating from her skin. Tessa makes a disappointed sound, but is silenced by a flicking up James’s gaze. His mouth twists in such a wicked grin that her breath catches for a moment.

Spurred by the searing heat in her eyes, James straightens once more to bring his mouth to hers. No longer content with gentles kisses, James moulds his lips against hers, then sends his tongue along her lips till they open and allow him entrance to her mouth. Tessa cannot keep a groan of pleasure from her throat. Their kiss deepens, their hands clutching at each other as an almost desperate desire possesses them. Time passes – seconds, hours minutes, they know not – and still they remain locked in each other’s arms. After an interminable time of fevered clutching and kissing, they part slightly, ragged breaths coming from their mouths as they lean their foreheads against each other.

In this brief moment of rest, a sudden clarity returns to Tessa’s thoughts. Before James can lean in for another kiss, Tessa grasps him by the shoulders and stops his motion.

“James, wait.”

“What’s wrong, Tess? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just…” She hesitates, then tries again. “Jem,” her eyes hold his with an imploring gaze, her voice soft and frightened. “Jem, this is wrong. You know it is. What if Lillian finds out? Or Matthew? Oh Jem, I don’t know what I’d do…”

She sounds almost close to tears, and James finds his heart contracting painfully at her tone. He gathers her in his arms and holds her tightly against his body. He runs a soothing hand over her hair as he gently rocks her trembling body.

“Hush, Tess, hush. We can stop. We can stop right now. It’s not too late. It’s not too late, okay?”

“But it is, Jem. I can’t stop now. Not now.” Her voice quiets to an almost reverent hush. “I want you too much,” she whispers in his ear. “I’ve always wanted you. I wish… so often I wish…”

“Wish what? Tell me, Tess, please.”

She inhales deeply, as if preparing for a deep plunge into dark, unknown waters. “I wish,” she breathes softly, “that I’d met you first.”

Everything stops. Sound. Movement. Sensation. The world stops. Nothing seems important, or relevant, or *real*, after those words. James becomes absolutely blank and removed. Nothing penetrates the complete shock arresting his surroundings.

“Jem? Jem?! James!”

“Huh—what?” His eyes focus suddenly on Tess’s concerned face. “Sorry… I…”

“Are you okay?”

“I… No. No, I’m not okay.” He grasps her upper arms strongly. “How could you say that? Do you know what you’ve done—what you said! I can’t believe…” Words elude him and he releases her arms suddenly to run his hands through his hair as his head lifts, a gesture that somehow seems as if he is imploring the heavens.

“I don’t understand. Jem, what’s going on? Talk to me, please!”

Again he grips her upper arms, shaking her as he does so this time. “How can you not *understand*, Tessa? How do you not *know*?” James’s eyes bore into hers, pleading with her to understand. But she remains uncomprehending. “Tess, I have spent almost every day of the last *five years* wishing you were mine. Whenever you enter a room, I can’t help but notice – even more so when you leave. What you wear, what you say, when you laugh – EVERYTHING!” He stops, breathing heavily.

Tessa’s eyes are wide and her mouth is hanging open slightly. It looks as if she wants to speak but before she can, James puts his finger to her mouth.

“I will never forget the first time I met you. Do you remember?” Tessa nods mutely, and he continues. “Matt had been talking about you non-stop for weeks. Tessa this, Tessa that, Tessa Tessa Tessa. It was annoying the shit out of me. And then I met you. I don’t have to tell you how stunning you looked – that’s pretty obvious.” He acknowledges her slight snort and rolling eyes with a half-smirk. “Anyway, your good looks weren’t what broke me, though. There are plenty of pretty girls. But *you*, you were special. You were interesting, and clever, and amazing. This was the first time you were around this group of people and you just owned it.” His eyes blaze at the memory, and his voice softens, becomes close and intimate. “I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.”

His eyes darken suddenly, and the corners of his mouth drop perceptibly. “But it was too late. You were Matt’s girl. Even if you’d broken up, like, a week later, you still would have been out of reach. But you didn’t break up. Not even close. You got *married*,” his voice breaks slightly. He closes his eyes quickly, gathers strength, then carries on. “After that, any possibility that might have existed before disappeared entirely. And I knew I had no choice but to live with that.”

James finally grows quiet, and feels suddenly very self-conscious of what he said. The silence lengthens and a sudden wish for the earth to open up and swallow him whole fills him. *God, I’m such an idiot!* He is just about to turn around and leave – never to return again, he vows to himself – but Tess starts talking before he moves.

In fact, not only does she start talking, she also lunges desperately for him and embraces him. “I can’t believe this! I can’t believe this is true!” He looks down at her in confusion. This was not the reaction he was expecting. When she looks up, her eyes hold a strange combination of joy and abject sorrow. The latter he can understand, sort of, but the first confounds him entirely.

“It’s your turn to explain now, Tessie,” he says, smiling slightly.

She thrills at the nickname. It’s one only he uses – or did, at the beginning, before things changed – and she loves that he’s returned to it now. The thrill doesn’t last long, though, when she works through the implications of his words and her feelings. The joy leaves her eyes, to be replaced by confusion, though the sorrow remains. He notices the change, and stills in anticipation of her next words.

“But Jem, if…if this is how you felt—”

“*Feel*,” he stresses.

“Okay, feel…then, why…well…how did you and Lilly happen?” Tessa sounds almost cautious to be asking, as if she’s afraid of what he’ll say.

“I had to find someone, Tessie. Even if she could never match up to you, it’s better than no one at all.” He looks almost pitying when he answers.

“Oh Jem, that’s *awful*. I hate this, I hate this so much! If only we’d known before…”

She’s shaking her head, eyes closed and fists clenched. Something unsettling – *surely not possible* – was taking shape at the edge of his mind. It couldn’t possibly—

“Tessie, do you mean to tell me that…that…” he couldn’t even voice his suspicion, it was so outlandish.

“That I love you, Jem. *I love you!* I never knew you felt that way about me. If I had, I would never have kept dating Matt, never mind *marrying him*! Oh God, Jem! Why? Why?!”

Again, James reels at this revelation. His mind is a jumble of emotions: superb joy – *she feels the same!* – But also the most intense regret – *why didn’t we figure this out earlier? Before it was too late…* and underneath it all, barely a whisper of a thought, there is a small, flickering hope. *Maybe, just* maybe*, there’s something we can do…*

He latches on to that hope with an animal-like ferocity. They *would* do something about this. Things *will* be different. *It’s not too late!* “It doesn’t matter, Tessie! We know now, that’s all that counts. And now that we know, we can do something about it. Right? We can do something.”

“Like what?”

“Like this.” He kisses her softly, slowly, lovingly. “I love you, Tessie. Always have, always will.”

She kisses him back, putting all her ardent love into the gesture. “Then what are we waiting for, Jem? We don’t need to hold back anymore. Never,”—kiss—“again.”

Her words fan the flames burning in his veins to an almost unbearable heat. His hands tighten on her body as he buries his face in her neck once more. What was once a slow-burning craving, ever-present yet never imagined as attainable, now becomes an urgent need – irrational, unreasonable, almost unquenchable. Fuelled by his fervour, Tessa decides to abandon all pretence of control and, instead, sets to the task of parting James from his clothing. His shirt is easily pulled over his head but the button on his jeans proves more difficult and, in her haste, Tessa fumbles at it. With a growl of frustration – a sound that leaves him quietly amused – she finally yanks the damn button open and pulls the zipper down. No longer so constrained by the tough denim, the evidence of James’s enthusiasm becomes immediately discernible through the thin fabric of his white boxer shorts. Tessa finds her body unconsciously responding to the sight, her inner thigh muscles clenching and unclenching sporadically.

“Oh God, Jem! I can’t remember the last time I felt this horny.” She licks her lips invitingly as she looks back into his eyes. “Tell me what you’re going to do to me. I want to hear you say it.”

Powerless to resist her demands, James bows his head till his lips lightly touch her earlobe. Deliberately, and precisely, he whispers into her ear. “I am going to push you against this wall, pull your thighs around my hips till you’re wrapped around me. And then, I’m going to push my hard cock into your wet, warm pussy.” She thrills at those words and tilts her head back while pushing her pelvis into him, a clear invitation for him to start fulfilling the promise of his intentions. But he is not quite done with her. He moves his grip from her hips around her body to her ass, pulling her even harder against him. As he speaks his next words, he grinds his erection against her groin, punctuating his words. “And then”—grind—“finally!”—another grind—“I’m going to fuck you hard till you cum shivering and hot around my cock.” A long, slow grind accentuates his last word.

Tessa imagines that once, long ago, when the infamous serpent whispered so to her of old – the original sinner – it too was in such gorgeously seductive tones. Tones that melt the soul and leave willpower and choice two quivering, useless things. She cannot but sympathise with she who defied divine mandate when confronted with such persuasion, since Tessa felt what little resolve might have been left her melt like salt in water at the words of a comparative novice.

The “-ck” barely has time to leave Jem’s mouth before Tessa once more claims his mouth, harshly and hungrily. Writhing in anticipation, her hands push urgently at Jem’s jeans and boxer shorts, wanting them gone *now*! In no mood to wait either, Jem steps out of his shoes then helps Tessa to lower his remaining clothes until he can step out of them as well. Finally without any barrier between them, the lovers are free to roam each other’s bodies with lips, limbs and hands. Although they revel in the novelty of this skin-on-skin intimacy, both their needs prove too great to linger on any form of foreplay. So, mere moments after undressing James, Tessa finds herself exactly where he promised her she would be: pushed against the kitchen wall, her bare legs wrapped around his hips, making it deliciously easy for him to slip – slowly, so, so slowly – into her waiting warmth.

“Oh God! Jem, oh God! That feels amazing. Don’t stop! Please, don’t stop!”

“I’m not going to stop,” he breathes heavily against the skin of her neck, “till you are dripping down me.”

She clenches uncontrollably at his words, tightening her inner grip on his penis. The extra pressure shoots through James like an electric shock, making him gasp and shudder. He takes a moment to savour the sensation of being buried all the way in Tessa – *Tessa!­* – before withdrawing almost all the way.

“You ready?” he asks, unnecessarily. She nods, words beyond her now.

Hands gripping her ass, and chest pressed against her breasts, James starts thrusting incessantly into her welcoming wetness. Her hands on his shoulder blades grip ever more strongly, nails digging into his skin. Tessa’s head is thrown back against the wall as she rides the building waves of blistering pleasure. It starts in the soles of her feet – an almost uncomfortable burning sensation – that builds up her body with every thrust of James’s hips. Soon a second burning sensation starts in her fingertips, and, with every cusp of the wave, conspires to meet with that building heat spreading up her legs. At last they meet, these two searing forces, only to pool in the vee of her legs, a slow roiling mass of barely-contained combustion. The sensation grows too strong and, as she senses herself reaching her own cusp, Tessa starts bucking her hips at an arrhythmic pace. She is matched in movement by James’s own rocking hips, as he too nears his own climax. Their desperate, enraptured moans intermingle as the driving of one body into another carries them to unimaginable heights. Almost in unison, they reach that delicious pinnacle that is almost more pleasurable than the plummet that follows. They hover mere moments in that almost-state but, inevitably, they climb the cusp and start plunging down the other side. Loud, earnest cries of hedonistic pleasure punctuate their fall, until they are both hoarse and trembling. James keeps Tessa against the wall a few moments more, enjoying the irregular spasms of her inner muscles around his spent cock. It’s as if her body is stroking his in a most intimate manner, and he treasures it almost more than the act that preceded it.

Finally, the lovers prove too exhausted to keep their position. Instead they retire to the large sofa in the adjoining TV room. James lies down first then pulls Tessa to his side and cradles her against him. With her free arm, Tessa pulls the afghan draped over the back of the sofa over her and James. Once covered, she snuggles contentedly into James’s warm body. For that precious moment, all is perfect.