*Author’s Note:*

*Please take note that this instalment involves non-consensual sex, which certain readers may find disturbing. Please do not read further if this genre of writing is distasteful to you.*

*To my regular readers, this part of the story is really dark and gritty, but be assured that it gets better so stick around for the happy ending ;)*

*\* \* \**

*What have you done?*

Tessa stares into her wardrobe mirror. Although it’s difficult, she meets her reflection’s gaze and holds it. In this gaze she sees a world of accusations and reprimands. What seemed so right and logical yesterday is glaringly wrong in the light of a new morning. She would cry but her conscience allows her no such respite. What happened with *him* is her mistake, her fault, her burden.

*You don’t deserve the luxury of tears.*

She flinches at these words, but can’t deny their truth. Tears belong to the betrayed, not the betrayer. And she is unequivocally the latter. Her eyes narrow in hatred of herself as she contemplates her actions.

*Betrayer… Adulterer… Judas.*

Every word wrenches her heart and magnifies her guilt. But even guilt is a scapegoat, and her suffering an undeserved relief. In punishing herself she might move towards forgiveness. To be punished for one’s wrongs implies that penitence can occur and, eventually, forgiveness can be attained. But Tessa is wholly undeserving of forgiveness. She can never atone for this act. She’s not sure if she should even try…

*What have you become?*

With increasing sorrow, Tessa realises she cannot answer herself.

\* \* \*

For what feels like the hundredth time that day, James dials Tessa’s mobile. As with every preceding call, it rings exactly twelve times then shunts him into voicemail. He doesn’t bother leaving a message; he’s already left about six and gave up about four calls ago. He knows it won’t make a difference. Although he’s been trying to deny it since the seventh call, it is glaringly obvious that Tessa is ignoring him. He tries, again, to cling to delusions, to deny another obvious conclusion, but after this last call he has to face another truth: Tessa regrets yesterday. Even the mild denial that he didn’t expect this is a lie. He knows Tessa like the inside of his heart – for she is that very inside – and being thus informed, he knew the moment they had given in to their base desires that this would not end well.

Perhaps her most alluring trait, more than her wit and her humour, is Tessa’s *goodness*. In a world full of cynics and liars, she has managed to stay relatively pure. Although she too falls prey to the uglier side of human nature, it happens so rarely that James could probably count it on his fingers. Not one of the many people who love and admire Tessa – friends and family – would ever expect her of any kind of betrayal, least of all the most terrible kind: adultery. And yet, yesterday happened.

*And now, I have made Tessa into exactly the villain that none would expect her to be. I have desecrated something sacred, spoiled a precious gift, and robbed the world of a rare purity.*

James hangs his head in his hands as he sinks into his sofa. Most of the day, he’d been able to separate his greater consciousness from that niggling piece of guilt growing in the corner of his mind. He’d been able to lull himself into believing that his deeds had been right. He and Tessa love each other, really *love* each other, and what they did yesterday was a result of this love. Surely that meant it wasn’t wrong…

*I’ve been such a fool!*

He’s finally realised that he’d been feeding himself the lies he needed to hear to validate what they’d done yesterday. Now, with the shield of lies removed, James finally admits that he has made a terrible mistake. *They* have made a terrible mistake. And because of their thoughtless, selfish act, they have created the potential for a wide-reaching destruction of bonds and friendships. This truly *will* change everything.

*What have we* done…

\* \* \*

“Honey, I’m home!”

What started out as a joke between them – a sign of their shared love for corny American TV sitcoms – is now routine. Whenever Matthew walks through the door to his home, and knows that his wife is there and not working late or running errands, he bellows out this greeting in a terrible American accent that never fails to get an adorable little giggle out of Tessa.

Today is different, though. She’s in the kitchen, as she often is when she’s home before him, but she isn’t busy preparing dinner as she would under these circumstances. Although they had no hard and fast routine concerning food-making and such, the general agreement was that whoever got home first rustled up a meal, unless a prior plan had been made. So it’s with no small amount of surprise that Matthew approaches his wife where she stands leaning over the sink, manifestly *not* making dinner.

“Hey, butterbuns—” another American-inspired private joke “—what’s wrong?”

She doesn’t respond. Worried now, Matthew gently grips her shoulders and turns her to face him. Once she’s turned around, he realises she’s quietly crying. His worry quickly becomes alarm when he notices her tears.

“Hey now, what’s this?” he asks rhetorically while running his thumb softly over cheeks. “Did the mean TV producers threaten to discontinue the reruns of *Dallas* again?”

Usually this would at least make her smile, even if only a little, but her face remains stricken and tear-stained. His joking manner is swiftly replaced with real concern. He cups her face and bends slightly till they are eye to eye.

“Tess, please tell me what’s wrong? You’re scaring me.”

A small sob escapes her lips and she throws her arms around Matthew’s neck, and then nestles into his chest. He automatically holds her tightly while muttering soft words of comfort and love. Her sobbing becomes more pronounced as he speaks. Her body begins to tremble violently. Matthew is truly terrified now. *What could’ve happened to make Tess so sad? I’ve never seen her cry like this before. Oh God, what has happened?*

“Tess, please,” he insists, “*please* tell me what’s wrong. I can’t handle seeing you like this. Please tell me, darling, please. I want to help you.”

He gently pulls her arms from around his neck and stands back a little until they are once more face to face. He stares earnestly into her eyes, willing her to speak. He’s sure that once he knows what the matter is, he’ll be able to fix it. Whatever’s bothering his Tess, he’ll fix it. Anything for her.

Staring into her husband’s eyes, despair written across her face like a neon sign, she starts to speak. “Matt, I need to tell you something. I don’t want to. At all. I’ve been trying to convince myself all day that I shouldn’t tell you, that it’ll only makes things worse if I do. But I can’t. I can’t pretend, not even for a day…” she trails off.

Instead of relieving his worry, every word Tessa speaks winds him tighter and tighter. Even though he has no clue what she’s talking about, the sorrow and—strangest of all—*guilt* in her tone of voice has him fearing for the worst. Almost unconsciously, he braces himself as if for a blow.

“First of all, before I say anything else, you have to know that this wasn’t planned. It happened by accident. Completely by accident. You know I would *never* even *think* about doing something like that. I love you so much, Matt. You have to believe that. And what happened doesn’t change that at all. You *must* know that!”

She’s staring into his eyes still, although she’s sorely tempted to confess her sin to the walls instead. Because she’s staring into his eyes, she knows immediately when the slightest suspicion of what may have happened creeps into his mind. He’s still disbelieving. He still thinks it must be something else. She wishes with her whole heart that she could avoid turning that disbelief into an awful certainty. But she can’t. Opening her mouth, Tessa releases the words that will damn her, irrevocably, and change her life—*their* life—forever.

“Yesterday, while you were with Thom and Will, Jem came over unexpectedly. I thought it was the plumber so I was surprised but determined to answer the door, even though I’d just gotten out the shower. Normally I wouldn’t prance around in a towel, but you know how desperate we are for that damn plumber to fix the toilet…” she trails off, waiting for his confirmation. He nods once, eyes becoming increasingly wary. “Well, it wasn’t the plumber, as I said. It was Jem. I invited him in, because you know, it’s *Jem*. Everything was alright and normal. I started making coffee and we were chatting happily as always. I thought this would just be one of those times that we’d look back on and laugh about. You know: *There was Tess, absolutely starkers except for a towel!*” She smiles slightly, expecting Matthew to mirror her small expression. But he remains immobile, in body and in face. The look in his eyes is no longer speculative. It is slowly distilling into a chilling certainty.

Tessa stops. She doesn’t want to continue. She doesn’t want to confess. She wants desperately to pretend it never happened. She almost convinces herself to change the story, to make the ending happier, to keep them all from plummeting into the abyss.

But Matthew removes that possibility when he says roughly, “What happened then, Tess?”

She hesitates. “What. Happened. Then.” His voice is hard, his eyes like flint. She’s never seen him like this before. He knows. He *knows*. She doesn’t need to tell him; he already knows. But at his words, she tells him what he knows anyway.

“Jem and I... we slept together.”

\* \* \*

*That’s it! I can’t carry on like this. I* have *to see her.*

James has been prowling around his house the whole day. Several times he’s tried to sit down and divert his attention somehow, but nothing works. He’s picked up several books, only to discard each one within five minutes of picking them up. He’s tried to watch TV—sport, series, movies, anything—but nothing could occupy his mind for more than a few minutes. He’s even tried finishing all the little DIY projects that need attention around the house. *Maybe if I do something productive, I’ll think of something else for a while*. But even that failed, although he managed to finish every task on the list. Finally, he decided to go jogging. He kept running, on and on, as if he could run away from what was bothering him, but the thoughts stayed. In fact, the more he ran, the more malignant they became. So he swiftly returned home, showered, and started pacing again, thoughts brooding and dark.

Luckily Lillian is out of town this week, touring with the exhibition. He wouldn’t have been able to hide his agitated state from her for very long, and he has no idea what he would’ve said had she been there to remark on it. So James is free to pace and prowl and mumble under his breath. Just before he goes completely out his mind, James makes the decision to go see Tessa.

*We have to discuss this before it gets out of hand. And since she’s not answering her phone, I’m forced to go see her. There’s no other way.*

James jumps into his car, starts the engine and backs out of the garage. Checking that the street is clear of other cars, he turns his car left and roars down the street. His face is a mask of grim determination and his knuckles are bone-white where they are clenched around the steering wheel in a death-grip.

\* \* \*

Matthew sucks in a sharp breath and bends his body inwards, as if a powerful blow has just struck his abdomen. His eyes pinch closed and his face becomes a grimace of pain. Body bent, he turns towards the island counter and rests his clenched fists on its countertop, head hung low. Tessa slowly becomes aware that Matthew is shaking all over. *Oh God, he’s crying!* She walks forward and rests her hand on his shoulder in comfort; it is an automatic reaction to his pain, one she doesn’t even think about. Only once her hand rests on his shoulder does she wonder for a fleeting instance whether this is a wise move. But it is too late to stop the gesture. *Besides, perhaps it will do some small good in this horrible situation*. It is only when Matthew’s hand strikes hers, fiercely, from his shoulder that she realises this is not the case.

“Don’t *touch* me.”

His voice is foreign and strange. She’s never heard this tone of voice come from him before. At first she cannot make sense of the sounds; they are too outlandish, too *other*. It is with a sudden clarity that she realises what lies in his voice is a bitterly cold rage. There is no heat in his voice. Instead, he sounds menacing in his quiet, frozen rage. *A killing rage…* For the first time in her life, Tessa knows the touch of true terror.

She makes to step away, place any kind of distance between herself and this terrifying voice, but his head snaps up at the movement and his eyes zero in on hers. Matthew’s look is blistering as liquid nitrogen; it burns as it freezes. Tessa finds herself catching her own breath at that look.

“Matt, please. Can’t we just—”

“Shut up!” he hisses through his clenched teeth.

He straightens his bent body and strides towards her. Instead of stopping before her, he keeps walking, forcing her to retreat backwards until her back hits the kitchen wall. Once there, Matthew raises his arms to her shoulders, placing his flat palms to either side of her body on the wall, caging her between his arms. He leans down, close to her face, and glares at her with narrowed eyes. He is still trembling fiercely, and Tessa now knows it is with uncontrollable anger.

“I don’t want to hear your empty excuses or listen to your empty apologies. Nothing you say will change the fact that *you are a back-stabbing whore!*”

He bellows the last words into her face, loudly and filled with pain. Such is his volume and ferocity that Tessa is forced to turn her face away and close her eyes. Immediately his hand takes painful hold of her chin and forces her face back to his.

“Don’t you *dare* look away. You will face this! You will suffer like I do! You will feel pain like I do! Like you deserve, you fucking slut!”

His hand digs deeper into her chin, nails gouging her skin till blood is drawn. She yelps at the pain and automatically tries to pull away, but he only strengthens his grip and pulls her back. Matthew’s eyes are no longer cold with rage, but rather burn with a kind of feral madness. He seems almost beast-like, robbed of rational thought or behaviour. Tessa’s heart starts to pound in her chest as adrenaline floods her system. Her fight-or-flight instinct is urging her to run away, but she is powerless to move. So instead, when Matthew presses a savage kiss on her mouth and bites into her bottom lip hard enough to draw yet more blood, Tessa doesn’t try to flee but rather starts screaming and hitting him instead. Her blows are completely ineffectual, however; Matthew is so much bigger and stronger than her that her struggling barely registers for him. When Tessa swings for his face, he quickly grabs her hands in both of his, then wraps one of his big hands around her slender wrists and pins her arms against the wall above her head. He returns his other hand to her chin while a purely savage smirk spreads across his face.

“Oh so you want to fight, do you? You want it *rough* then?” he digs his nails even more cruelly into her skin till she whimpers pitifully. “Is that how *he* likes it? When that son of a bitch *fucked my wife*, did he treat you rough, huh? Did he fuck you hard and rough, Tessa?” his hand around her wrists tightens further, grinding the small bones together painfully. “Answer me, you filthy bitch! ANSWER ME!”

Tessa starts crying. She can’t form words. She’s shocked and terrified and in pain. She never imagined her loving husband could become *this*.

Instead of engendering sympathy, her tears only anger Matthew further. Staring at her tear-stained face, his blood boils hotter and he starts to see red. *She’s not allowed to cry! I’m the victim! I’m the one who’s been fucking betrayed!*

“Stop crying, whore! You don’t *deserve* to cry! You *deserve* to hurt, to suffer, to be punished!” he stops for a moment, a speculative look entering his eyes for a moment, before being replaced by a bloody glee. “In fact, that’s exactly what I’m going to do. Punish you. You’ll even enjoy it, little slut. Since sex is all you can think about, all you can *do*, then that’s what we’ll do. And then you can tell me who’s better, your *loving husband*—” sarcasm drips bitterly from his words “—or that piece of shit.”

Tessa’s eyes stretch with terror at his words, and she starts struggling and screaming in earnest, desperate to get away. Again her efforts prove fruitless. Matthew merely grunts slightly, then moves his hands to her shoulder. Once there, he grips her tightly then throws her to the floor with enough force that her head bounces off the floor. Momentarily stunned, Tessa can do nothing but lie there as Matthew stretches his large body on top of hers, pinning her down. He takes her wrists once more into a grip with his left hand while his right hand starts tugging down her sweatpants and underwear. Her head finally clear, Tessa starts bucking wildly in an effort to get Matthew off of her but he barely budges an inch. The more she screams and pleads with him to stop, the more forceful his gestures become. Tears of helplessness stream down the sides of Tessa’s face into her hair as she understands she cannot escape this terror. Her husband is going to rape her, and there is *nothing* she can do to stop him.

\* \* \*

It’s only when James is about to pull into the driveway, next to Matthew’s car, that he realises the folly of his actions.

*Of course I can’t talk to her now. Not while Matt is home. Tess and I will never get the privacy we need to discuss this. Not without making Matt suspicious, anyway. I’ll have to make another plan.*

He starts turning the key to start the engine up again when he stops suddenly at a strange noise.

*Funny…I swear that sounded like a scream…*

He stills completely and listens carefully. The sound comes again.

*That was* definitely *a scream.*

James quickly exits his car. Once outside the vehicle, he can hear the screaming far more clearly; it is then that he recognises that it’s coming from inside the house.

*What the fuck?! That sounds like Tessa!*

Needing no other motivation than that, James sprints to the front door, whips it open, and runs into the house, heading in the direction of the increasingly louder screaming.

\* \* \*

*Oh God! Oh please God, don’t let this happen!* Please *don’t let this happen! I can’t… Oh God, I can’t survive this… Please…* Please*…*

Tessa’s throat is hoarse from her loud protests. She can no longer make a noise much louder than a despairing, grating whimpering. She’s long since stopped appealing to Matthew’s reason, and instead is repeating desperate supplications, begging Matthew to stop. But he remains deaf to her pleas. Tessa steadily loses hope of salvation. With her decreasing morale, she abandons her attempts to escape and instead lies crying, resigned to her fate.

Matthew laughs harshly when Tessa stops bucking and struggling.

“See, you *want* this. Can’t say no to sex for long, can you Tess? Eventually, your inner whore takes over and you give up. Isn’t that right, my slutty little wife?” He laughs again, a cruel, cutting sound. “Now lie still while I give you what you want so much, you fucking whore.”

Matthew forces her pants and underwear down past her knees, giving access to her groin. Still gripping Tessa’s wrists in his left hand, he uses his right hand to unbutton his trousers and then pulls them, and his boxer shorts, down to mid-thigh, exposing his rigid penis. For the first time since the start of their physical relationship, Tessa is disgusted by the sight of Matthew’s arousal.

*I can’t believe he’s getting off on this. This is so wrong…*

“Open wide, my whore.”

With one strong thrust, Matthew enters Tessa to the hilt. Without even the slightest trace of lubrication, the friction of his entry burns. It feels as if he has ripped off the upper layer of her vagina. She cries out in pain at the excruciating sensation. Tessa can tell by Matthew’s ragged breathing that her dryness and pain excites him greatly. Mercilessly, Matthew starts thrusting ever deeper and ever harder into Tessa’s unprepared pussy. The burning friction increases, as well as the pain of Matthew’s pounding into her cervix. He’s always been too long for her but usually he takes great care not to thrust too deeply. Today he takes no such care. With each thrust, another pained cry rips from Tessa’s dry throat. This, too, excites Matthew. He starts driving in to her more quickly. Despite the atrocity of her circumstances, Tessa recognises the tell-tale signs of Matthew’s impending climax. A small relief spreads through her body; it’s almost over.

“What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing?!”

Lost in her misery, it takes Tessa a moment to realise that the voice wasn’t in her head but had come from someone real, outside in the real world that is not her small universe of suffering. A few moments later she also realises that not only is the voice real, it belongs to James.

*Jem! Oh God, Jem!*

A strange cocktail of relief and shame floods her body; she hates that he’s seeing this, seeing her being demeaned like this, but at the same time she hopes that he can save her from this torture. She means to cry out, to beg him to help her, but her parched throat makes no sound. He seems to understand her silent pleas, though, because before even Matthew can react, James has him in his grip and flings him bodily off of Tessa. In any other situation, Tessa might have found the sight of Matthew flying through the air with his exposed dick flapping around rather comical. Now, however, all she can feel is relief that she is at last free to move. Still in a deep state of shock, Tessa tries to draw her underpants and sweatpants back up her body, but her hands don’t seem to be working right, though, because she doesn’t get anywhere with her efforts. James notices her fumbling and immediately rushes to her and kneels next to her.

“*Tessie*.” His voice is ragged and broken. It’s almost as if she can hear his heart tearing to pieces. Strangely the urge to comfort him blossoms within her. She lifts her hands to his face and gently strokes his cheeks while whispering small words of comfort. He catches her hands and presses his mouth against them, tears rising in his eyes.

“Oh my Tessie, what has he done to you?” With consummate gentleness, James reaches down and eases Tessa’s clothes up her body until she is once more properly covered. Just as gently, he lifts her by her shoulders and leans her against the nearby kitchen cupboard. Before he can offer any more comfort, his attention is diverted by Matthew struggling to his feet. James also rises and prepares to beat the living shit out of the bastard.

“What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing, you fucking bastard!” James repeats. His face is twisted with anger and disgust.

“Ha!” Matthew scoffs. “You’re one to talk! You fucked my wife, you piece of shit! And now you come into *my* house and tell me how to treat *my* wife as if you have any right to do so?!” Matthew’s mirthless laugh is hollow. “Fuck off, mate. This bitch deserves everything she got tonight, and more. When I’m done with her, there won’t be a man left on the plant who’ll want to come near her dirty little cu—”

James roars with anger and hits Matthew square in the jaw with ounce of his strength before Matthew could finish saying the word. Matthew staggers into the wall, clutching his jaw. He spits blood onto the floor.

“You’re going to regret that, you son of a bitch.”

Matthew lunges low towards James, trying to tackle him, but James steps to one side and knees Matthew in the face as he passes. There’s a very satisfying crunch sound then Matthew bellows in pain as he clutches his broken, bleeding nose. Belatedly, Matthew remembers that James has always been the better fighter. Normally this is a good thing since James has always been on Matthew’s side – a really good guy to have in a fight. Today, however, Matthew is on the receiving end of James’s skill, and he knows he’s going to suffer for it.

With a vague notion of getting away from James, Matthew turns towards the hallway and tries to make a run for it. Before he takes even two steps, James has him by the shoulders again and hurtles him head-first into the kitchen countertop. Matthew sinks to his knees, almost blacking out from the impact. He grips the countertop with trembling hands, but once again he is foiled in his attempt to get away by James’s swinging foot connecting painfully with Matthew’s side. He rolls to the side, clutching his burning ribs, wondering if James broke anything. He doesn’t even try getting up again, in too much pain to do anything but wheeze in short sharp breaths.

Towering above the pitiful heap of man curled on the floor, James wonders how he ever called such a villain friend. Narrowing his eyes, James draws back his foot again, preparing to kick this despicable bastard to death.

“Jem, stop.” Her voice is tiny and breathy, but he hears it. “Please Jem, stop. Don’t become like him. Please…”

He hesitates for a long moment, desire battling with conscience. Finally he lets his foot fall back to the floor. James returns to Tessa where she’s still leaning against the cupboard. He crouches next to her, places his one arm under her knees and the other across her shoulders, then lifts her as he stands up. Too weak to do much else except be carried, Tessa leans her head against James’s chest, relieved that it’s all over.

“Come, Tessie, we’re going home. You’re safe now.”

He cradles her lovingly in his arms as he steps over the man he once called friend, and approaches the doorway, never to return.