



CAUGHT

BETWEEN

*Dragons*

2

MEG RIPLEY

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## 2

The hotel bed was extra firm, but Jeremy's arms were soft and warm as they held Becca close against him. She breathed in his warm, musky scent and buried her nose into the base of his neck to warm it up from the cold air conditioning. Even though her eyes were open, the heavy curtains blocked out the morning light and left them in an abyss where Becca could see nothing.

On the other side of Jeremy, she felt another figure stir as Jadon began to wake. He stretched and groaned as his body twisted to sit up on the edge of the bed.

Jeremy grumbled and held Becca tighter as she whispered into the void, “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Bunny,” was Jadon’s reply.

Jeremy squeezed Becca tightly and kissed her neck. “It’s too early. Go back to sleep.”

Jadon chuckled as he turned on his phone and shined the light from the screen on his brother. “It’s after nine, you lazy bum. Let’s go get breakfast already.”

“I have breakfast right here,” Jeremy responded as he rolled Becca on top of him to block out the light and playfully nibbled on her neck. She let out a small shriek of laughter as Jeremy tickled her sides, throwing her back down onto the bed as she squirmed.

Jadon threw the curtains open to let the morning light stream in, temporarily blinding them all as they collectively groaned at one another.

They all went through their morning routines; the brothers headed off to the gym for their regular work outs while Becca grabbed her sketchbook and headed out to sit at one of the patio tables by the pool. In the past few weeks since the incident with the Maltech shipment and Nate Stanley, Becca had found an abundance of time to get back to her sketchbook—as well as an abundance of material to draw.

Becca gazed out over Lake Erie and how it sparkled in the late morning light. They had been taking their time traveling, making sure that they weren't being followed by Nate or any of the people he was working with. Right now, they were in downtown Buffalo, New York; in a few days, they'd be making their way to an apartment that Jadon owned in New York City.

Her pencil moved diligently across the paper as she thought about the morning she discovered the Ladon brothers' little secret. She wasn't entirely comfortable with the thought of them being shape-shifting dragons, but she had at least accepted that it was, in fact, the reality of the situation. She pressed and the tip of the pencil ground into the paper, flattening the point and leaving a dark spot in the eye of the figure she had drawn.

Becca looked away from the lake and the families out enjoying the last weeks of summer vacation before children had to return to school. The sketchbook page resembled the previous pages that she had drawn for the last two weeks: dark shading illuminated a lanky figure with elongated appendages and talon-like claws on the ends of each finger and toe. A slender tail wrapped itself around the feet while sleek wings framed the rest of the figure.

Flipping back through the previous pages, she noted the slight variations of the dragon drawings. Some of them more closely resembled traditional drawings of European dragons, while some were drawn in mid-transformation and had faces that resembled humans or other qualities. The very first ones she had sketched had angular bodies that lurched grotesquely in the drawn shadows, and she remembered how she'd been so shaken up during those first few days that she couldn't stand to share a bed with Jeremy and had to have her own separate hotel room.

Gradually, the drawings became less like the thrashing scribbles of a nightmare and more refined; the figures were more posed, like concept drawings for a character in a movie or video game. In fact, the draconic form that the Ladon brothers took on had grown on Becca in the last few weeks as she had mulled it over in her mind and through her sketches.

The scent of sweet, hot blueberries filled the air around Becca as a muffin appeared in her peripheral vision. Turning, she saw Jadon holding out the delicious treat and smiled broadly as she took a bite of it. The muffin was made from scratch with real berries that burst with warm juices as her tongue pressed them against the roof of her mouth.

“Is this my breakfast?” she asked as she took the rest of the muffin from him.

“Not hardly.” said Jeremy as he appeared with a whole serving tray with three individual plates piled high with French toast, bacon, sausage, fruits, cookies, and more muffins. He unloaded the plates onto the table along with a cup of coffee for Jadon, tea for himself, and orange juice for Becca.

“Mmmmm, you’re too perfect,” she said, taking a bite of a plump strawberry. “So what are we going to do today? More sightseeing?”

Jeremy shrugged, “I don’t know. I thought it might be nice to spend the day here and just relax before we go on any adventures.”

While they ate, they continued to talk about what they should do while they stayed in Buffalo before continuing on to New York City. Jadon provided an update about the new security upgrades that were being installed his apartment before they arrived; Becca felt a heavy pressure settle on the air around them as the brothers casually looked around for anything or anyone out of the ordinary, but when they spotted nothing, the air cleared and their playful banter ensued.

“What is that look for?” Becca asked as she finished off her orange juice and noticed a mischievous gleam in Jeremy’s eye.

“Nothing.” He sipped his tea with his pinky out as if to feign being fancy.

“You’re up to something.”

“Never.”

Becca eyed both Jeremy and Jadon with a skeptically raised eyebrow. They seemed to have that unspoken communication going on between them again, their blue eyes sending signals that she couldn’t read.

“Well, since we don’t have any plans for the day, I’m going to go see what’s on Netflix. I could use a good binge since we’ve been on the road for the last two weeks.”

Becca stood, but before she could gather up her sketchbook, she was swept off of her feet and flung into the hotel pool. As she flew through the air, she let out an indignant scream before being swallowed up by the water.

Bubbles swirled around her head as her body tumbled and turned to right itself. Distantly, the sound of boisterous laughter cut through the water. Becca kicked her feet to propel herself to the surface where she found Jeremy and Jadon both reeling in amusement.

“Real cute.”

Jeremy composed himself first as Becca reached the edge of the pool and he squatted down to extend a hand to help her get out. Taking his hand, Becca pushed off the wall and pulled with all of her weight.

With the least amount of grace possible, Jeremy let out a confused cry for help as he fell face first into the pool. Jadon’s howls of laughter only increased as he breathlessly tried to congratulate Becca, but could only manage a slow clap and a thumbs up.

Jeremy surfaced and picked up Becca, lifting her mostly out of the water before letting go. Her arms latched around his neck and they both went under, both of them laughing before Jeremy pulled her close, kissing her underwater.

They were laughing when they reached the surface again, playfully splashing water in Jadon's direction. While Jadon retreated the minimum safe distance, Jeremy pulled Becca against him and nibbled on her ear.

“No fair. Now I'm all wet.”

Becca turned around and brushed his dripping dark hair back from his eyes. “That's what *she* said.”

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Becca threw herself onto the overstuffed bed and sighed; finally, their travels were over. No more suitcases to pack, no more looking over her shoulder to see if she was being followed. She was exhausted, both mentally and physically.

The trip had been fun, though. Jeremy and Jadon had gone above and beyond to keep her entertained, but it didn't change their situation. Here and now, safe inside Jadon's New York City apartment, Becca felt safety and relief. It was as if she'd been constricted by an invisible python for the last few weeks and only now realized how tightly she'd been wound.

"You're supposed to take your clothes off first," Jeremy said as he came in the room and jumped on the bed, sending Becca flying in the air for a moment.

“Why would I do that? I was just taking a moment to relax.”

“Which you should definitely do with your clothes off.”

Jeremy knelt over Becca and kissed her. Reaching up, she wrapped her arms around him, pulling their bodies close together. She smiled as they laid there for a minute, just enjoying the comfort of being held in each other's arms. Jeremy's head was buried in the base of her neck and her hands absentmindedly ran over the taut muscles of his back.

“ ‘Lotta help you two are,” Jadon said from the doorway.

Becca and Jeremy righted themselves on the bed. Jeremy smiled impishly, “At least we didn't start without you.”

“Come on,” Jadon said as he tossed the kitchen towel from his shoulder at his brother. “You can set the table while Becca helps me finish up dinner.”

Jeremy sat in the dining room and folded the napkins into roses while Becca tossed the arugula salad and Jadon put the finishing touches on dinner. The three of them sat down at the mahogany dining table and Becca felt like she was home, eating roasted chicken and herbed potatoes just like her grandmother used to make. The only difference was the view of the city from Jadon's penthouse apartment.

The open floor plan of the apartment gave Becca a lot to take in while she ate: the beautiful view of the city, the apartment full of gorgeous antique furniture, paintings from every era of history and shelves of huge old books.

"Where did you get all of this stuff," Becca asked between bites of her meal. The chicken was succulent, filling her mouth with its juicy flavor.

"Family heirlooms, mostly." Jadon winked as he told her, "We're not immortal."

Becca laughed, “Well, I didn’t think you were. Don’t you age like normal people?”

“Well...sort of. We do live a little bit longer than normal humans,” Jeremy explained.

“How long?”

“Just a couple hundred years,” he said nonchalantly with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Becca almost dropped her fork. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Well, not really,” Jadon intervened. “We were born 1886; right here in New York, actually.”

“So you’re telling me you’re almost a hundred and thirty years old?”

Becca had stopped eating completely at this point and rested her fork on the

edge of her plate. She had finally felt like she'd come to terms with most of what was going on, and then they decided to throw something new at her.

“*Almost* is the key word there,” Jadon winked. “Our birthday isn’t for another month. September 28th.”

Shaking her head, Becca asked, “What else do I need to know about you guys that you haven’t told me?” She rested her head in her hands; they certainly didn’t *act* like they were over a hundred years old. Taking a couple of deep breaths, she decided that age was a minor factor compared to the fact that they transformed into terrifying winged lizards.

“Alright,” she said picking up her fork again and stabbing a potato. “I can handle that. After all, I’ve always had a thing for older men.”

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The Ladon brothers gave Becca a tour of the city the next day. They began with the Statue of Liberty, the brothers bragging about how it was a month younger than they were. Becca laughed and pointed out that its construction had begun a year earlier, in which case the statue was technically older.

They thought about this for a moment and did some mental math before Jeremy whispered, “Dammit, you’re right.”

Becca laughed, “I half expected you to tell me you were in your egg long before that.”

Both of the brothers laughed. “We weren’t born in that kind of egg. We’re born just like humans, nine months in the womb of our mother.”

“No nest?”

“No.” Jadon thought for a moment, “I’m pretty sure there was no nest.”

“We used to have races to fly up to the top of the torch,” Jeremy said.

“Do you remember that?”

“Yeah,” Jadon reminisced, “and you always lost.”

“Did not! You always cheated!”

“Never.”

Becca shook her head with a smirk, “Well, you can always race again to see who’s faster now.”

“That’s a brilliant idea,” Jeremy said as he kissed her cheek. “And you can be at the finish line to make sure Jadon doesn’t cheat again.”

Laughing, Becca agreed that she’d keep the two of them honest when they decided on a time to have the race. After shaking on it, they all left and headed for the next tourist trap of the city.

Even though Becca had grown up in a city, she found New York to be completely different from anywhere else she'd ever been; everywhere else seemed so quaint in comparison to its constant hustle and bustle.

People didn't acknowledge each other here, but moved about with their eyes straight ahead, focused on their own business. Even the homeless panhandlers didn't let their attention linger for more than a fleeting second before they were asking the next person for spare change or to bum a cigarette.

Becca felt like a wide-eyed child as she took in all the sights, sounds and smells of the city. Every block of the city had a very distinct scent; it was a sensory experience that she found she mostly enjoyed, except for the few places that smelled particularly foul—like the subway.

They bought some hot dogs from a cart, and Jadon handed their change to an old bearded panhandler that the cart owner had been yelling at before they arrived. The look in his eyes was as grateful as much as it was terrified.

Becca gave a questioning look to Jeremy who whispered, “We knew him when he was a child. Maybe he still recognizes us.”

She hadn’t thought of that. An extended lifetime and their slowed aging would probably make things difficult when it came to having long term friends who didn’t know about their true nature.

As they took the subway back home, Becca stared idly at the other passengers. Jadon and Jeremy stood since it was so crowded and allowed her to have the one available seat next to an old woman who had been having a conversation with herself. Becca saw all of the little unique quirks about these

people that made them New Yorkers and smiled to herself. Reaching into the little satchel, Becca pulled out her sketchbook and started to draw.

As they traveled down the rails, the bumps made it a bit difficult at first until she discovered the rhythm and was able to incorporate it into the drawing. Every line on the page shook with vibrating movement and she broke the tip of her pencil lead more times than she could count.

When they reached their stop, Becca stood and put her things back into the satchel. Jeremy held her hand as they exited and Jadon walked behind them. She noticed a tension in Jeremy's grip but was too afraid to ask about it. He squeezed her hand gently to let her know that he'd caught her glance and that everything was going to be alright.

A voice behind the trio called for them to stop, but Jeremy pulled her along without a single hesitation; Becca tensed as she heard the click of metal.

*Was that a gun?*

There were a few small gasps from passersby who registered what was going on behind Becca and Jeremy. She heard a sickening thud and another click before the weapon clattered on the ground.

Turning, she caught a glimpse of Jadon standing over an unconscious body, the clip from the gun in his hand and the weapon on the ground. Her heart pounded furiously in her chest as Jeremy put his arm around her and told her to keep her head down and to keep walking forward.

Doing as she was told, Becca continued forward, her arm circling Jeremy's waist for support, and he placed a firm kiss on the top of her head.

As they reached the street, Becca felt that the cars and people were overwhelming. She wanted to hide from them all.

As they reached their building, Jadon caught up to them and they all rode the elevator up to the top floor in silence. Once they were inside the apartment, Jeremy looked to his brother and asked, “Well?”

“Just a random mugger,” Jadon said. “Nothing to worry about. He thought Becca was pretty is all.”

Jeremy nodded, and the discussion ended there. But Becca couldn't help but conjure her memories of the two brothers in a dimly-lit basement; her memories of Nate Stanley as they tried to beat information out of him.

Sitting on the couch that Jeremy swore came from Versailles, Becca looked at the drawing that she'd sketched on the train. She had drawn Jeremy and Jadon as people, looking like anyone else on the train—except

for their fiery eyes, their clawed fingers, and the leathery wings that sprouted from their backs.

In her drawing, they were demons.

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“What do you think that man was really up to yesterday,” Becca asked in the middle of breakfast the next morning.

Jeremy and Jadon looked up from their plates. Their eyes met and they looked as if they were debating how much she should be told about the situation. Jeremy sighed and Jadon asked, “Would you like to accompany me to the Met later?”

Becca started to question why, but then thought better of it. “Of course.”

After breakfast, she asked Jeremy why he wasn't coming. “Believe it or not, I do still have a business to run,” he told her as he kissed her forehead and told her to enjoy herself at the museum.

Jadon held her hand as they wandered through the galleries and stopped her in front of a 15th century engraving of *St. George and the Dragon*. She noted how the dragon before her bore a strong resemblance to the dragons she had drawn in her sketchbook.

“Our ancestors, well, our grandparents, basically...”

The words escaped Jadon for a moment, and Becca took him to a nearby bench to sit down. He was shaking; she put her arm around him, drawing him close to her until he composed himself.

“We got really popular during the medieval years,” he said. “Dragons tried to live amongst the rest of society. But that didn’t work out very well.”

Becca squeezed his hand to comfort him. “What happened?”

“*He* did.” Jadon nodded towards the engraving. “They called him Saint George after he started killing our kind. He was convinced that dragons were

demon hell spawn and that it was his duty, bestowed upon him by God, to kill as many dragons as possible. The only individuals they hunted more than dragons were witches.”

“I’m sorry.” Becca didn’t know what else to say in the moment, and despite his obvious pain, she wanted Jadon to tell her more.

Taking a couple of deep breaths, he sighed and looked at Becca. “A following started not long afterwards called The Knights of the Order of St. George. Their whole existence was based on finding all dragons and sending them back to hell. They’d use any means necessary to draw them out and trap them.”

Becca clasped his hands in her own as he struggled to continue.

“Many dragons were noblemen, well respected and wealthy. They had noble wives; sometimes princesses. The knights, they...well, they would

kidnap them and hold them hostage, often demanding that the dragon die right there before his own wife or lover. Then, they usually forced these women into marriage with one of the knights of the order.”

“That’s awful.”

Jadon shook his head, his fists clenched in anger. “We may live for a long time, but we’re just as mortal as anyone else.”

Becca looked back at the engraving and then to Jadon. His eyes were averted, too ashamed of his anger to look at her. She opened her mouth, afraid to ask the next question. In truth, she was afraid of the answer. “Do they still...well...?”

“Yes.”

Jadon was visibly shaking as he stared pointedly at the floor. Becca put her arms around him and held him as other visitors passed by them, paying

no attention. She had one more question to ask, although she was fairly certain of the answer. “Was Nate Stanley part of the Order of St. George?”

Jadon nodded, unable to say the words out loud. He had served with Nate when he was a marine, and the level of betrayal he must have felt was unimaginable to Becca.

“And I know that I’m what drove him to seek the Order in the first place,” he said. “When I began to shift, I told them to run and not look back. We were under heavy fire and we’d already lost Gus and Brandon. Afterwards, Nate asked me about it and I told him he must have been seeing things—too much sun and the adrenaline—but he didn’t back down. I didn’t think he’d ever try to...”

Becca hugged Jadon tightly before the tears in his eyes could spill over. She understood now why he’d seemed withdrawn in the last few weeks.

Initially, she had thought it was because he wasn't comfortable with her knowing that he and his brother were dragons. Now she knew that it was because he felt guilty. He felt responsible for putting her in danger and making her a target for the Order of St. George.

Silently, he cried into her shoulder and Becca gently rocked him back and forth as the soundless sobs racked through his body in miniature convulsions. She kissed the top of his head and his neck and his shoulder as she held him and rubbed his back.

"I'm sorry," she heard him whisper over and over again. "This is all my fault."

"No, it's not," she told him firmly.

Jadon looked up at her, his blue eyes sparkling brightly from the tears. They were clear, not all red and puffy like her eyes got when she cried.

Reaching up, she brushed the wetness from his face and pushed his hair back from his eyes. “None of this is your fault.”

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When they arrived back at the apartment, Becca and Jadon found Jeremy in a flurry of activity. Caterers moved about the place as he talked on one phone, texted on another, and made social media announcements from his laptop. Jadon sighed and rolled his eyes as Becca stared in amazement at all of the white-uniformed people moving about the apartment.

A champagne tower and a chocolate fountain were under construction on either side of the entrance. The dining table was covered in an ornate cloth and antique candle holders while empty dishes were spaced around them, waiting to be filled.

“I thought we were doing this next week,” Jadon complained.

“What’s wrong with now,” Jeremy asked, placing his hand over the phone.

“What about Becca? I thought we were waiting ‘til she was more accustomed to the city?”

“She’ll be fine,” Jeremy said catching her eye and winking devilishly.

“Besides, I think we could all use a party to lift our dreary moods. You know how long it’s been since I’ve had a good party—and drinking at Dave’s did not count as partying.”

Jadon rolled his eyes again and gave an exaggerated shrug before leaving for the bedroom. The caterers parted for him like water and he disappeared.

Becca wanted to follow him and comfort him more, but Jeremy had just finished his phone call and wrapped Becca in a giant hug.

“How did it go?” He held Becca at arm’s length to inspect her, as if the knowledge she had received would have somehow changed her physical appearance.

“He told me about the Order of St. George.”

Jeremy nodded. “It’s been eating him up ever since the Maltech shipment. It’s why we didn’t want you involved, but of course you found out everything anyway.”

Becca nodded and leaned into Jeremy. “I’m sorry if I make things more difficult for you guys.”

“Nonsense,” Jeremy said sharply, lifting her face towards him. “You make our world shine brighter and we don’t ever want to face a world without you by our sides.”

Becca looked away and blushed. She still felt a new responsibility weighing on her shoulders as she thought about the Order of St. George and the horrible things they did to eliminate dragons.

Jeremy distracted her from this by insisting she help him make all the key decisions for the party, such choosing his attire and what hors d'oeuvres to serve. To his disappointment, she did not approve of his AC/DC T-shirt and insisted he wear a dark blue silk button down instead.

“And what should I dress *you* in,” Jeremy mused as he played with the hem of her shirt.

“I don't know; any ideas?”

“Ideally,” he said while his hands explored underneath her shirt, “I wouldn't have you wear anything at all.”

“Oh really?”

Jeremy spun her around and lifted the shirt over her head, revealing the white lace bra underneath. His brow furrowed as his hands fondled her breasts. “Hmmm,” he said, “this definitely has to go.”

Becca laughed as he unhooked the clasps in the back of the bra and pulled the straps down.

“Much better,” he said as his mouth took turns teasing each nipple and Becca let out a sigh.

Turning her back to face the mirror, they both contemplated her image. Jeremy let out dissatisfied hums as he circled her and looked her over with a comically raised eyebrow.

“Nope, this has to go,” he said, stopping in front of her and undoing her pants while he kissed her stomach. With a firm yank, her jeans were around her ankles and Jeremy gently lifted her feet out of them.

“What else,” he said as he sat back on his heels and looked up at Becca.

She blushed as she stood there wearing just a pair of boy shorts, unsure if she wanted to cover herself or just have him take away that last bit of fabric.

It was hard to explain, but somehow, even after months of being with him, she still sometimes felt deeply exposed when she was naked in front of Jeremy. Her blush deepened as he stared up at her and she almost wanted to turn away and cover herself.

“I’ve got just the thing,” he said springing up to his feet and dashing off to the other side of the room, leaving Becca there to look at herself in the mirror.

Returning, Jeremy reached around Becca and draped a beautiful necklace around her. The pendant was a simple teardrop sapphire in an ornate silver setting held by a delicate chain.

Becca gasped and reached up to stroke the gem as he fastened the clasp behind her neck. She caught Jeremy's eyes in the mirror and smiled, provoking a grin in response.

"It comes with a matching dress," he whispered in her ear.

She bubbled with excitement as she breathlessly answered, "It's stunning!"

Jeremy took her hand and led her over to the closet so he could dramatically fling the doors open and reveal the dress hanging inside. It was the same shade of deep blue as the sapphire and strapless. The top was corseted and laced up the back with a silver ribbon. The skirts ruffled in five tiers that reached the floor. Next to the dress was a pair of white Mary Jane heels.

“I know how you hate stilettos,” he whispered in her ear and Becca eagerly turned to kiss him.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Just wait ‘til it’s on you,” he said with a wink.

Becca giggled as she picked up the dress and slid it on. The silk was soft against her skin and she enjoyed the way Jeremy’s hands moved over the dress and herself as he laced up the corseted back. She felt like a princess as she spun around in front of the mirror.

Jeremy had one last surprise as he pulled the hair elastic from her ponytail and let her tresses fall around her shoulders. He placed a small sparkling headband atop her head and declared her his masterpiece.

Becca kissed him ardently and almost wanted to skip the party, but Jadon took that opportune moment to announce that guests were arriving

and that their presence was needed for the evening. As they left the bedroom, Jadon caught Becca's hand and kissed it, whispering, "You look beautiful, Bunny."

Becca blushed. The apartment was filled with amiable jazz music, courtesy of a live band arranged on a small raised platform in the far corner. A handful of the catering staff wore sharp black dinner jackets and served hors d'oeuvres on gold plated trays, and the kitchen area had been turned into a full bar where a dapper young man in a jacket mixed and poured with efficient expertise.

Guests were filling the room and Becca found herself star struck as she was introduced to models, designers, artists, photographers, musicians, business CEOs, actors and other celebrities. She sipped champagne and held surprisingly normal conversations with all of these people as they accepted

her unquestioningly into their community. Becca laughed with them as easily as she would with anyone else and was pleased to find that she didn't have even a slight nervous flutter in her stomach with Jeremy at her side all night.

“Becca, this is Alex Harmon,” Jeremy said, introducing her to a spectacled blonde man in his late thirties. He wore a tweed jacket, a crisp white shirt, and a polka-dotted bowtie that Becca thought was absolutely endearing, if not a bit hipster.

“He's a designer for Dior. No, no,” Jeremy corrected himself, “Alex, you're working for Louis Vuitton now, aren't you?”

“That's right,” Alex said as he shook Becca's hand. He had the most charming grin and Becca blushed as Jeremy told him about her own artistic talents.

“I’d love to see your work sometime. We’ll set up a lunch later this week,” he promised before releasing her hand.

“Thank you,” Becca smiled.

“I’ll take you out and we can look over your portfolio. I’m sure I know someone in this city who could use your talent.”

They talked a bit more before Becca and Jeremy moved on through the guests and found Jadon surrounded by a pack of models. He seemed to fit in well with them and Becca thought about how they would make a beautiful magazine cover standing there together, the whole bunch of tall beautiful people laughing, holding drinks, and just existing.

A platinum blonde talking to Jadon seemed otherworldly with her pale porcelain skin and a flowing white gown with flecks of gold in the trim. Becca

felt like she was gaping at the woman, but then felt the muscles in her face smile as Jeremy brought her forward and introduced her.

“Victoria Drake,” she said shaking Becca’s hand vigorously and exposing a mouth that seemed too full of teeth. “You are absolutely adorable, darling. I want to carry you around in my purse like a toy poodle.”

Becca laughed as Victoria went on about taking her down the catwalk with her sometime, making Becca blush. She was very excitable, just like Jeremy and Jadon, and talked animatedly about bringing the three of them to photo shoots and movie premieres.

“Maybe we should move outside,” Jadon finally suggested, giving Jeremy a wink.

“That sounds like a good idea,” he agreed as his hand moved from Becca’s back to clasp her fingers tightly in his own.

They headed out the glass door onto the balcony before leading the crowd to the far end of the building where a staircase that Becca hadn't noticed before led up to the roof. The summer air swirled her hair around her shoulders as she climbed the stairs to find that they had their own private pool on the roof.

Looking back at Jeremy, she noted his childish grin.

On the other side of the pool was another bar set up in one corner and a deejay set up in the other. Dance music started playing as soon as they reached the top of the stairs and Becca stopped for a moment by the pool to take it all in while the guests filled the rooftop, moving and mingling with one another.

"Here, sweetie," Victoria said as she appeared and handed Becca a margarita. "Won't you come dance with me?"

“Of course she will,” Jeremy answered for her, laughing, as he extended her hand towards Victoria’s.

Becca found herself being led into a pack of models; they reminded her of a great forest with their slender limbs gracefully outstretched towards one another. Looking back, she found she could no longer see Jeremy or Jadon. She was lost in this sea of beautiful bodies and was unsure of what to do aside from drink what was given to her and move her body in rhythm to the music.

The margarita turned into a martini, and from there a cosmo. Beyond that, Becca lost track of what she drank, simply thanking whoever provided the next beverage until she found Jeremy, who handed her a glass of water.

“Where have you been,” she admonished as she blinked wide and did her best to appear serious in her state of stupor.

“You looked like you were having fun,” he replied and she noticed that he seemed to have had a few drinks as well. Behind them, there was a splash as the first person—brave or drunk, they couldn’t tell—jumped into the pool.

They laughed together as others followed suit. Jeremy’s arm slipped around her as she finished off the glass of water and handed it off to one of the wait staff who was promptly at their side.

“Do you want to join them?” Jeremy’s whisper tickled the back of her neck.

“No,” she said. “I want to finish what we started earlier before you put me in this dress.”

“I like that idea,” he said as he kissed her cheek, leading her around the edge of the pool to the staircase that would take them back down to the apartment.

Inside, a few guests lingered in conversation while the jazz musicians finished up for the night. A couple made plans for the remaining midnight hours as they sat at the bar and ordered a couple more drinks, their hands testing how far they could travel on each other.

As they neared the bedroom, a drunk model stumbled out of the bathroom followed by an artist Becca remembered talking to earlier in the evening. The girls paid no mind to Becca and Jeremy as they began to make out in the hallway.

Opening the bedroom door, Becca was pleased to find that no other couples had found their way here. Jeremy locked the door behind them and followed obediently as Becca pulled him over to the edge of the bed.

Becca turned around, presenting her back to him and pulled her hair around her shoulders. Jeremy kissed the back of her neck and down the top

of her spine, ever so softly. Her head felt heavy from the alcohol; she wondered how much she'd actually had to drink until she felt Jeremy's arms laced around her.

Becca leaned back so he could kiss her exposed neck, murmuring, "I kind of wanted you to get me out of this dress."

"I'm getting there," he promised as his hands wandered over her, stroking her throat and cupping her breasts.

Becca felt a shudder run through her as her drunken arousal sparked something inside of her that was far more aggressive than she was accustomed to. Turning around, she threw her arms around Jeremy and guided him firmly over to the bed.

As she kissed him, she began to methodically unbutton his shirt, kissing the exposed skin as she worked her way down to his pants. Once they

were undone, she pushed him down onto the bed, grinning mischievously as she took a step back from him, enjoying the mixture of surprise and enjoyment on his face.

Her fingers grasped at the lacing behind her and managed to pull the knot free. Jeremy was content to lean back and enjoy the show as she loosened the top of the dress and let it dramatically fall around her feet. Becca felt empowered as she stood before him wearing nothing but her heels and panties.

She watched him as he reached in his pants to make an adjustment for his swelling cock. Locking eyes with him, she leaned forward and slid her panties down around her ankles, taking a step out of them.

“Do you want me,” she asked seductively.

“Yes.”

The word hung in the air as the moment lingered between them. It seemed as if everything darkened around the edges of Becca's vision. She focused solely on Jeremy where he sat, breathing heavy with anticipation.

Stepping forward, she gently pushed him down to lay on the bed, pulling his pants off of him. She kissed his knees, up his thighs and around his hips to his stomach as she climbed on top of him.

Jeremy moaned as she lowered herself, their fingers locking as she balanced herself on him. She rocked her hips forward and back before lifting herself and lowering back down on him again. Becca felt a liberated sense of authority as she set the pace and watched the anguished pleasure that crossed his face.

His moans encouraged her as he took hold of her hips and thrust hard and deep inside of her, making her gasp with pleasure. Jeremy's hands

guided her as he sat up to suck on her breasts while his hips thrust deeper and harder.

“Faster,” she commanded, her hands around his head; her fingers twisting themselves into his thick, dark hair.

Jeremy obeyed and increased the rhythm. Her back arched and he lifted her up without missing a beat before she found herself on the bed underneath him.

His moans began to take on a new pitch and she noticed the shimmer of his skin as his body quaked with pleasure, threatening to transform. She gasped in intrigue and delight as his body writhed above her, lingering in a transitional limbo.

Reaching up, she pulled him close to her and kissed him deeply. She stared into his eyes as dragon fire danced on the edges of them, fighting to hold on to her ecstasy before he took her over the edge.

“Together,” she whispered as she released him. “Now.”

Jeremy gripped her hips tightly as he grunted and pumped hard and fast. Becca’s back arched off the bed as she moaned and called out his name.

Gasping, he collapsed on top of her, holding her close as she trembled with the aftershocks of her orgasm.

“God, I love you,” he whispered, rolling over to her side and cradling her as they both fell into a deep, satisfying sleep.

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Becca's head was pounding when she woke up the next morning. Jeremy was in bed next to her snoring softly, still deeply asleep. On the nightstand, there was a glass of water, a glass of orange juice, and an aspirin. Smiling, she took each of them in turn before she stood up from the bed and slipped on one of the silk robes that hung from the back of the bedroom door.

Stepping out into the hallway, she was surprised to find that there wasn't a mess of passed out guests littered throughout the apartment. Instead, she found Jadon in the kitchen preparing breakfast and stopped to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm guessing it was you who left the aspirin out for me," she said as she climbed up on one of the bar stools next to the counter.

"Yeah," he smiled. "Did you sleep well, Bunny?"

“Yes. Did I miss anything exciting after I left the party?”

“Just an orgy with the models,” he said with a sarcastic wink as he flipped the bacon and cracked eggs into another skillet. The hiss of the grease turned her stomach and Becca realized she was craving hangover food after all of the alcohol she had consumed the night before.

Between flipping eggs and stirring gravy, Jadon poured a cup of strong black tea with a splash of bourbon. He asked Becca to wake Jeremy and handed her the entire bottle of aspirin. She kissed his cheek and thanked him as he began to turn off the burners and fix everyone’s plates for breakfast.

Returning to the bedroom, Becca set the tea and aspirin on the nightstand and crawled over to Jeremy.

“Wake up, sleepy head,” she cooed as his arm wrapped around her and pulled her close. “Come on, get up. Jadon made us breakfast.”

“Can’t. Drunk.” Jeremy grumbled as he squeezed her tightly.

“Well, if that’s the case, I’m going to eat all of the bacon,” she teased as she kissed him.

“Then I’ll eat *you*,” he smiled.

“Come on,” she pressed the bottle of aspirin into his hand, kissing him again. “I brought you tea, too.”

Groaning, Jeremy sat up and held Becca for a moment before kissing her and finally getting up. He took a long sip of the tea before donning a robe and followed Becca out to the dining room where Jadon was just setting the plates on the table.

“So how did it go?” Jeremy asked as he sat down and began to drown his waffle in syrup.

“It went well,” Jadon said. “I managed to get everyone either home or to a hotel room. Next time, *you* get to chaperone, though; it’s no fun having a bunch of wet and drunk models fresh from the pool if you can’t enjoy them.”

“Fair enough,” Jeremy agreed.

“I’ve got to go and meet with the Maltech reps today, and Alex Harmon set up a lunch with Becca tomorrow to check out her work,” Jadon said, checking his phone for the notes he had put into his calendar. “And for you, Jeremy, Ricky and Sal are going to be coming back to work soon. Let me know if you wanted the guys to set up some sort of welcome back party.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy nodded. “I’ll set the guys up with a tab at Dave’s and tell them that the night is on me. They should enjoy that.”

Becca remembered the drivers who had been assaulted by Nate Stanley and the people he had been working with when he intercepted the Maltech

weapons shipment from the Ladon brothers' company. She was glad they had recovered fairly well, and from what she had seen and heard of them since, they were ready to get back to work.

“Sounds good,” Jadon said as he finished his breakfast and took his dish over to the sink. “I’ve got to head to that meeting now, but how about we all go out and catch a show somewhere tonight.”

“That’d be nice,” Becca said and Jeremy nodded in agreement.

“Great.” Jadon left a kiss on the top of Becca’s head on his way out the door.

As they finished their breakfast and washed the dishes together, Becca asked Jeremy to help her put her portfolio together to show to Alex.

“Just fill it with nude self-portraits.”

He winked as she laughed, “Surprisingly, I haven’t done too many of those.”

“Not many? So you’ve done them?”

“I don’t think I’ve done any.”

“Well then, you’re welcome to draw *me* nude.”

They spent the remainder of the morning sorting through boxes that had yet to be unpacked before they found Becca’s physical portfolio. She had digital copies of most of her work, but they agreed that laying out the physical copies would be much easier to visualize together in a portfolio.

“I like these,” Becca said pulling out a set of fashion illustrations she had done with brush pen and watercolor.

“Yeah,” Jeremy said as he flipped through some of the patterns she had drawn. “You should also include some of these if you’re wanting to go for design work, even though I like those narrative pieces you did.”

Becca stuck out her tongue. “I don’t like narratives. I’m awful at keeping a consistent character. Besides, I enjoy making patterns.”

“Fair enough,” he said, setting aside a few of the pages he liked.

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“These are really good,” Alex said as he flipped through the pages that Becca and Jeremy had spent the better portion of yesterday putting together.

“So, what sort of work are you interested in? Freelance? Or do you want to work in house?”

“In house would be ideal,” she admitted as she took a bite of her salad, “but I know how hard it can be to get into a position like that.”

“True,” Alex said giving her a wink, “depending on who you know.”

“Any name brand would be huge for me since I’m fresh out of school,” she said.

“I’ll ask around,” he promised. “I’m sure someone has an opening, and your portfolio is spot on. I’ll make some calls and let you know in a day or two.”

“Thanks.” Becca felt herself blushing.

“You’re too cute,” Alex laughed. “Where did Jeremy find you?”

“He hired me as his assistant,” she told him and he burst out laughing.

“So he decided to promote you to girlfriend and move you up here to the city?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, it’s a good thing he brought you to New York,” Alex assured her.

“I think you’ll fit in just fine.”

Over the course of their meal, he entertained her with stories of his adventures in the city and made a list of all the best clubs to go to. He even showed her some of the work he was doing for Louis Vuitton.

As they got ready to leave the restaurant, Alex noticed Becca’s sketchbook peeking out of her purse and asked if she would mind if he took

a look. Blushing hot with embarrassment, she handed over the sketchbook and waited as he slowly flipped through the pages.

His lips were pursed and he nodded to himself. His brow furrowed and Becca was sure that he disapproved of the drawings. She could hear her nervous pulse throbbing in her ears as she waited for Alex to proclaim a verdict about her private work.

It seemed like forever passed before he looked up and said, “This is an interesting body of work. You sure you want to work in design and not get these into a gallery?”

Becca shook her head as she grabbed her sketchbook and hid it deep in her purse. “No, it’s just some weird stuff I’ve been dreaming about. I really don’t think it’s gallery-quality—”

Alex placed a hand on her shoulder and looked her in the eye. “Becca, I’ve seen so-called artists sell crumpled copy paper on the floor of a gallery for thousands of dollars. I think you’re work is a hell of a lot better than that.”

Becca smiled bashfully. “Thanks, Alex.”

Outside, he called them a cab and escorted her home. In the lobby of the building, he kissed her hand and promised to call as soon as he had news about a position for her.

The elevator dinged and Jeremy stepped out to shake Alex’s hand. “Find her a job,” he said cajolingly, “she’s wearing me out in the bedroom.”

They all had a good laugh and the next day Jeremy came up to the pool where Becca was attempting to get a tan to tell her the good news.

“At Louis freaking Vuitton!?!”

“Yes,” Jeremy confirmed as he caught her in his arms and swung her about while she squealed with joy.

“I’m going to be designing for Louis Vuitton!” The words seemed unreal even as they left her mouth.

“How should we celebrate?”

“Not another party,” she declared.

Jeremy smiled, “Okay, no party. Especially since he wants you to go into the office tomorrow to meet the team.”

Becca beamed with excitement. “We’ll have to find something for me to wear.”

“Well then, I believe we should go shopping,” Jeremy declared, taking her hand and leading her down from the pool to the apartment.

Becca felt giddy as she changed out of the high-waisted bikini she was wearing and into her regular street clothes. She stopped just before putting on her shirt and caught Jeremy's eye in the mirror.

“Yes?”

“Oh nothing,” he said nonchalantly as he leaned back on his elbows.

“Nothing?” Becca held her hands on her hips and raised a suspicious eyebrow towards him.

“What? Can't I just watch a pretty girl change her clothes?”

Becca laughed and turned back away from him to put on her shirt, but before she could get it over her head, Jeremy was behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist.

“Well, I'll never get dressed like this,” she laughed as Jeremy began kissing her neck and nibbling on her ear.

He pulled gently on her ear with his teeth, meeting her eyes in the mirror. “I won’t complain about that.”

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With the new job, time seemed to fly by for Becca. The weeks of traveling and the time she spent at Jadon's apartment were fun, but she was grateful to have a sense of purpose again. She had been idle for too long and, despite how exciting the city was, it wasn't entertaining when she felt like she was just existing without any direction.

Her co-workers had all accepted her as part of the team from the moment she walked through the door. They were great at brainstorming and building off of each other's concepts as if they were all working from the same mind.

Alex was their team leader and he was always enthusiastic to have Becca's input. She was glad to be a part of something outside of Jeremy and Jadon; she would never have told them, but she was beginning to feel a little

isolated from the rest of the world. Having coworkers was a nice change of pace and it was refreshing to be invited to hang out with them after work and meet people from other departments.

“So, what’s it like living with the Ladons,” asked Rhonda, a lanky redhead who always wore vibrant orange lipstick that was the same shade as her hair.

Becca was sitting at her desk before work drawing Jeremy and Jadon in her sketchbook, attributes of their dragon forms highlighted in ghostly outlines. Rhonda was leaning over Becca’s shoulder, watching her draw. Becca wasn’t shy about her sketchbook with her design team since they had all taken turns passing it around the first day and she had explained that it was more of a dream journal. In return, they had all been open with their

own personal work. After only a few weeks of working together, she was perfectly at ease with them.

“It’s...” Becca shrugged as she searched for the words. “It’s interesting.”

Rhonda laughed. “I bet. How can you even tell the two of them apart?”

“It’s the subtle things,” Becca explained, “mostly how they behave and how they talk.”

Rhonda shrugged. “Makes sense. Is your apartment really filled with all sorts of old antiques? I heard you guys have paintings worth millions just hanging on the walls.”

“Yeah,” Becca laughed. “One of Van Gogh’s sunflowers is actually right there in the entryway.”

“Amazing,” she proclaimed. “I couldn’t imagine walking by that every morning.”

Becca chuckled, “It takes a little getting used to.”

Rhonda laughed with her. “Well, I know it’s not as fancy as the Ladons’ apartment, but Joey and I are having a little gathering at our place tonight if you want to come by. Bring Jeremy and Jadon if they’re free.”

“Of course,” Becca promised. “That sounds great.”

“Perfect,” Rhonda said, giving Becca a surprise hug and a kiss on her cheek that left a sticky orange print.

Becca rubbed at the mark with her sleeve after Rhonda left the room, but felt the residue clinging to her skin. Giving up, she texted Jeremy and Jadon about Rhonda’s invitation before turning back to her sketchbook.

She noticed that the dragon sketches had begun to migrate out of her sketchbook and onto sticky notes and scraps of paper around the edges of her desk. Some of them resembled the Ladons and some of them had begun

to take on the image of her coworkers or the models that the team worked with. Alex had jokingly warned Becca the other day that if she continued, someone higher up might notice and put her in charge of designing a whole collection based on her dragons.

Just then, Becca's phone buzzed across her desk as a picture of her and Jeremy lit up on the display screen. Swiping her finger across the glass, she read the message and texted Jeremy back with Rhonda's address.

Rhonda was ecstatic when they had shown up. "The Mysterious Ladons," she called them, her eyes roaming over them like a predator sizing up a meal that was already plated and being served to her on a silver platter.

A few other guests showed up, but Rhonda was keen on keeping Jadon and Jeremy at the center of attention, engaging them in a longstanding verbal headlock as they drank their way through a number of bottles of wine.

Becca smiled to herself as she watched her coworker devour the brothers and quietly sipped her wine.

“She’s something else,” Alex said as he took a seat next to her and watched the spectacle. “I don’t know how Joey has been with her for the last eight years.”

Becca nodded in agreement as she looked over at the quiet mouse of a man who sat next to Rhonda. They were an odd couple to behold, but the more she thought about it, the more Becca thought they belonged together. Joey grounded Rhonda, the wildfire that she was, and gave her a solid foundation to fall back on when she exhausted herself with all of her crazy antics.

“I think he enjoys it,” she mused as they sipped their wine. “He must feed off of it in some way.”

“I could see that,” Alex agreed.

Jeremy excused himself from the gathering once he realized there was no other way to escape Rhonda’s clutches and warned Becca not to stay out too late, kissing her briefly before he left. Jadon followed him out the door as Rhonda scoped out her next target to interrogate, landing on another coworker’s girlfriend.

Becca and Alex watched, dissecting the psyches of their coworkers as they drank glass after glass of Chardonnay, doing their best to dodge Rhonda’s gaze. After an hour, Becca realized that it was getting late and decided it was probably best for her to get home before Rhonda ran out of guests to interview.

“Good idea,” Alex said. “I’ll go with you.”

In a shower of hugs and kisses from their coworkers, they made their exit. Rhonda playfully booed them for leaving as she left her sticky orange mark on each of them, and Joey thanked them for coming as he escorted the pair to the door.

Becca giggled as she stumbled out the door with Alex and they waved down a cab. He chivalrously held the door open for her, giving the driver her address as they began to relive the highlights of the party, cackling for the next ten minutes until the driver stopped in front of Becca's building. Alex offered to walk her in, and as he held the lobby door open for her, Becca pointed out the orange smudge of Rhonda's lipstick on his cheek, laughing as Alex feverishly attempted to rub it off.

"Come here." Becca licked her thumb and began to somewhat remove the sticky residue.

Alex smiled and brushed her hair away from the mark on her own cheek. “Should I get yours?”

“If you feel so inclined,” she laughed.

They giggled like school children as they rubbed wet thumbs furiously over the lipstick that refused to leave. Impulsively, Alex leaned forward and licked the side of her face, pulling away with a look of disgust and rubbing his tongue on the collar of his shirt.

“That was disgusting,” he proclaimed, sending Becca into a fit of laughter.

“I guess I should head up and wash this crap off,” Becca sighed as she reached her arms around Alex and hugged him.

“Take care of yourself, sweetie,” Alex said and kissed the top of her forehead. “And if you find yourself in any trouble you can always call me, unless it has anything to do with Rhonda—then you’re on your own.”

Becca laughed and kissed his cheek on the sticky orange mark. “See you Monday.”

Climbing into the elevator, Becca giggled to herself as she reminisced about the evening, feeling fuzzy as she watched the numbers on the elevator panel climb higher and higher. Although she felt a little guilty for subjecting Jeremy and Jadon to her coworkers, she was content when she saw these two very different parts of her life merged together. It was an accomplishment, she thought as she held onto the wall to keep the floor from tilting too far beneath her.

The door slid open with a ding and she triumphantly stumbled into the apartment to find Jeremy waiting up for her.

*To Be Continued...*