



CAUGHT

BETWEEN

Dragons

3

MEG RIPLEY

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“Selfish and arrogant!” Becca yelled as she paced back and forth across the living room of Alex’s apartment. Her fists clenched and unclenched as she grasped at the intangible feelings inside of her that she wanted to strangle.

Jeremy had gone off on Becca when she’d gotten home, lecturing her about how late it was and how worried he had been. She’d retorted by informing him that he knew *exactly* where she was, and that he was the one who had left the party early because he couldn’t handle being put on display.

“She’s a small-minded woman,” Jeremy spat, “self-absorbed and immune to the feelings of other people.”

“*She* is my friend,” Becca said defensively, not admitting how loosely she was using the term.

“Just like Alex is your friend?”

The accusation had taken her aback. He brought up the cameras that Jadon had installed in the lobby and played back the images of her and Alex in the lobby, stopping at the moment where he had tried to lick Rhonda’s sticky lipstick off of her.

Seeing the playback, Becca could understand how he could mistake the interaction for what it really was, but she was too upset about Jeremy’s lack of faith in her to find the words to properly explain herself. He interpreted her drunken stammering as admission and tore off on a rant

about all of the other nights she stayed out late with her coworkers, spinning them into secret rendezvous with Alex.

At some point, Becca had reached her threshold and had stormed out the door without even a word. Stepping inside the elevator, she heard Jeremy's voice call after her but was too furious to bother listening to what he had to say anymore.

When the elevator doors opened again, she marched right through the lobby and headed down the street. She walked twelve blocks in heels, too angry to bother with a cab, halfway hoping someone would try to mug her or give her any reason to pound her fists into them.

Alex was confused when he heard pounding on his door, but when he peeked through the tiny peep hole, his mind registered the fiery ferocity that burned in Becca's eyes and he immediately made way for her.

Dutifully, he sat on the couch wearing his pajama pants, listening as she vented and tore down every minor annoyance Jeremy had ever committed. She even went so far as to blame him for uprooting her entire life, bringing her to a place as vibrant and alive as New York, only to keep her isolated from life's possibilities.

“Can you believe that he would even suggest such a thing!?! After all that I've done for him, the *secrets* I've kept for him, he thinks that I'd just go gallivanting off with *you* of all people!” Her hands flailed in violent gestures as she talked and paced across the room.

“Does he know you're here,” Alex asked, coming forward to take her hands in his before her violent temper manifested itself further.

“Don't know and don't care,” she insisted spitefully.

“Alright,” Alex said. “Let me grab a blanket, I’ll sleep on the couch and we’ll see if we can sort this out in the morning.”

“No,” Becca said when he returned with the blanket, “I’m already invading, I’m not going to kick you out of your bed.”

“It’s no trouble.”

Becca placed a finger over his mouth to quiet him. “I’ll sleep on the couch,” she declared as she took the blanket out of his hands. “I’ve already been intrusive enough. Go on, I don’t want to keep you up any longer. I’m sure you’re tired.”

“Alright,” Alex agreed and held out his arms for a hug. “Promise me you won’t run off in the morning without telling me where you’re going.”

“I promise,” she said as she squeezed him tight. “Thanks for letting me stay.”

“You’re always welcome here.”

She waved him off to bed and made herself comfortable on the couch, wrapping herself in the thin blanket before she turned off the lamp on the end table. Her body and mind were so weak that she couldn’t even feel the blisters aching on her feet. Her exhaustion and anger had drained her, easily allowing her to fall comfortably into a deep, dreamless sleep—despite the stiffness of the couch and the scratchy texture of the pillows.

It never registered to her when the front door clicked open and the shadowy figure moved inside.

Becca woke up under soft, plush blankets with her head resting on a memory foam pillow. The pulse of the hangover was a dull throb at the base of her skull; an intense, stabbing pain seared through her eyes, which was only magnified by the brightness of the white light that poured into the room.

Gradually, her mind began to piece the puzzle together and Becca understood that she was no longer on the couch in Alex's living room; instead, she was in a white walled room that was furnished with nothing more than a bed, a small table and a chair. On the table was a pitcher of water, a glass, one aspirin and her satchel.

In the far corner of the room, next to the only door, she noticed a tripod with a video camera that had a blinking recording light. Cautiously,

Becca stood and stumbled over to the table, eagerly gulping down the aspirin and water.

The turning of a key in the door's lock caught Becca's attention and she zeroed in on the sound. It swung inward as she retreated to the bed and pulled the covers protectively around her. She watched as a quiet young man carried in a silver tray that she assumed held breakfast.

His slow, deliberate march, shaved head, and military fatigues told Becca everything that she needed to know.

When the door closed behind him, she walked back over to the table. In her satchel, she found her sketchbook and a pen. She scribbled a message on a piece of paper, tore it out of the book and stuck it into the seam where the back of the chair joined the leg. She then positioned the

chair so that it was in front of the camera and the video feed could no longer see anything else in the room.

Hours passed. Becca did her best to remain calm by drawing in her sketchbook; a while later, she began to write apology letters.

First, she wrote to Jeremy and explained all of the things she had meant to before she had stormed out on him. Next she wrote to Jadon, then to Alex and the rest of her coworkers.

Becca had just begun writing to Rhonda when the door unlocked again. She looked up and watched as a familiar figure entered the room.

Nate Stanley walked over to the chair, plucking off the paper before kicking the chair out of the way. Holding her message and waving it triumphantly, he complimented her. "Clever."

Becca stared him down, too stubborn to give him a response.

Unshaken, he directed his attention to the note and read it out loud.

“Jeremy. It’s a trap. Don’t bother coming after me. Take care of yourself. I still love you. Becca.” He turned to meet her defiant gaze as he crumpled the note and tossed it on the floor. “Cute, but do you really think he can resist coming to save you?”

She maintained her silence as he moved closer, waiting for an answer while she bided her time.

“You’re such a pretty little thing,” he told her. “You’ve got damsel written all over those soft curves of yours.”

His hand reached out and she resisted recoiling from his callous touch as his fingers trailed down her cheek. He held her chin as his thumb grazed across her lips. “Such a scared little bunny.”

Becca seized the opportunity and bit down hard on his thumb, her teeth cutting into the flesh of his finger joint as he screamed in surprised pain, attempting to wrestle his hand free. The blood seeped into her mouth and she felt the palm of his hand come down hard, sending her reeling as his bloody finger was released.

Another soldier appeared and held her down as she kicked and screamed with a wild fury until another came in with a sedative. She continued to struggle until the blackness pulled her under and her body could no longer move.

When she awoke the second time, Nate was already sitting in the room, his bandaged finger comically large as he flipped through the pages of her sketchbook. When Becca tried to sit up, she found that she'd been restrained to the bed.

“What is it about them,” he asked. “What is it about evil that attracts women? These monsters are just damning your soul, Becca.”

“But theft and violence are totally redeeming yours,” she spat at him.

Nate clicked his tongue disapprovingly at her. “My violence is in the name of St. George, as a warrior against the evils of hell that take the form of your demon lover.”

“Whatever you tell yourself to help you sleep at night. You assaulted those innocent men just to get Jeremy and Jadon’s attention.”

“War is full of many innocent casualties,” he said. “Sometimes sacrifices have to be made for the greater good.”

“You’re so full of yourself,” she said with disgust. “What did either of them do to you besides save your life? Jadon told me about what happened

that day you saw him for the first time. He saved your life that day and this is how you repay him, by hunting him down like an animal?”

“He is a beast and a monster,” Nate said, slamming her sketchbook shut and throwing it onto the table. “He and his brother. They’re abominations that need to be erased from the face of the Earth.”

“You’re the abomination, asshole.”

“You’re too innocent to see how they’re corrupting you,” he insisted. “You think that you’ll vanquish that evil that lives inside of them with your optimistic love. The only way to truly defeat that is to cut off the demons’ heads and send them back to hell.”

“You’re insane,” she muttered.

Nate stood and walked over to Becca. His form towered over her as he looked down on her. “It’s not too late to repent.”

“Then get on your knees and get to it,” she told him.

She told herself that the disgusted sneer on his face was all of the satisfaction that she needed. Nate leaned down over her, his palms on either side of her head. “Why are you being so obstinate? I’m trying to save you from these demons.”

“You’re the only demon here,” she said as she spat directly into his eye.

“Fine,” Nate said as he righted himself and turned away from the bed, wiping the spit from his face with a handkerchief from his pocket. “You had your chance, but now we’ll consider you as one of them.”

“Good,” she sneered in a last bit of defiance as she watched him leave the room.

Again, another soldier came in with a sedative in hand. She stared him down with a seething glare and caught a tremble of fear in his eyes before he injected the drugs and watched her fade away.

As she drifted back into the darkness, Becca desperately hoped that Jeremy and Jadon had gotten her initial message and were on their way to someplace safe, not planning some half-baked attempt at a rescue. In her heart though, she silently contradicted herself and prayed that she'd get one more chance to see Jeremy and apologize to him for everything.

This time when Becca awoke, she knew she wasn't going to be receiving any more visits from Nate, or anyone else, anytime soon. The table had a basket full of fruit, jerky, and granola bars to keep her fed, and when she tried the single door, she found that it had been attached to a functioning bathroom with sink, toilet, and shower.

Between the sedatives and the unchanging light of the room, Becca had no idea how much time had passed since she'd been kidnapped. It could have been hours, or it could have been a week. Time was inconsequential, she told herself. She needed to focus on keeping herself busy so that she appeared normal and safe.

Becca whiled away the hours by filling her sketchbook, creating a workout, reciting song lyrics to herself and sleeping. It felt like days passed

and the white walls of the room began to mock her, so Becca decided to draw a mural on them.

She began at the corner directly across from the camera, pulling the bed away so she could work. Her pencil sketched onto the drywall easily enough. The rhythm of drawing created a much needed routine for Becca. Eat. Sleep. Draw. Eat. Sleep. Draw.

She'd hum and sing to herself while she drew, her pencil moving in time to the tune that was on her mind. She would fill her water pitcher from the bathroom sink and showered every time she woke up just to keep in routine. Every fourth or fifth shower, she'd wash her clothes, making sure she wrapped herself protectively in the blanket on the bed so that she wouldn't give the perverts of the Order the satisfaction of seeing her naked.

Gradually, Becca began to fill the wall with her drawings. She drew dragons upon dragons, along with life-sized drawings of Jadon and Jeremy. She drew strangers as dragons. And she drew herself as a dragon so many times that she wished the power to transform was hers.

At some point while she slept, someone had come in and replenished her supply of food. As she sketched, Becca explained to the camera how the Order of Saint George was full of cowards if they were too afraid to enter the room while she was awake.

“It’s really quite sad,” she prattled on while her pencil moved back and forth. “You’d think a bunch of big strong dragon slayers would be able to handle a harmless girl like me.”

Her dreams were always filled with fantasized escapes where she tracked down Jeremy and apologized to him for everything leading up to

her kidnapping. What she wanted most was the opportunity to explain how he'd gotten everything wrong between her and Alex. She couldn't bear the thought of him believing that she wasn't in love with him anymore when he was the very reason her heart was still beating.

After her routine wore on, Becca decided that it had to have been over a week and began to comfort herself with the idea that maybe Jeremy and Jadon had listened to her after all: perhaps they had gone into hiding from the Order of Saint George. Not only was it a comfort, but it made her vaguely proud to think that they had actually listened to her for once.

A contentment settled over Becca as she began to imagine that she could be released if they didn't see any sign of the Ladon brothers coming to her rescue any time soon. The thought kept her morale and her sanity as

she continued to draw, the elaborate mural taking shape in the otherwise empty room.

Finally, there was a knock at the door. Becca turned towards the noise, almost forgetting where she was for a moment. There was a long moment of silence, and then she called out, "Hello?"

Another long moment stretched and she hesitantly got up from the bed to investigate. She thought she heard other muffled sounds outside the door as she approached but was unsure. Briefly, she thought that she might have actually started to lose her mind.

She halted with her hand hovering above the handle of the door and told herself that if she saw the bathroom beyond this then she was definitely crazy. Becca inhaled deeply as her hand rested on the cool metal of the doorknob. As she exhaled, she gripped the knob and turned it.

Standing in the doorway was Jeremy, dressed sloppily in a disguise of army fatigues, hand poised in the air, ready to turn the doorknob. His blue eyes sparkled brighter than she remembered as he stood there with an awkward grin on his face.

“Becca...” He held out his arms as he searched for the words he had rehearsed saying to her ever since she’d been taken from him.

Becca’s heart constricted with joy and horror. She froze for a second and immediately slammed the door shut in his face. Staring at the white painted wood, Becca told herself that she was crazy and that it was just a hallucination on the other side of the door.

Taking another deep breath, she flung the door open again and to her dismay she saw Jeremy standing there still, although this time he looked much more confused.

“What are you doing here?”

“Rescuing you?” He seemed unsure of his mission after witnessing her reaction to his presence. “Didn’t you want me to?”

“No,” she said bluntly. “You were supposed to go somewhere safe and not fall into this trap!”

“But I love you,” he said, grabbing hold of her as he stepped into the room, kissing her deeply.

Becca melted at his touch and kissed him back, her arms wrapping around his neck as the pain of her separation from him flooded her nerves and she was overcome with the urgency to be with him.

From outside the room, orange and red lights began to flash. She heard Jadon curse as the sound of steel doors slamming shut and locking into place echoed all around her.

Becca ran out of her prison and stared in wonder at where she was being held: it was a small, empty warehouse and the room had been constructed on a moveable stage. The same was true of the bathroom. The plumbing fed into a drain in the floor of the warehouse, but the unit itself was moveable and could be locked to the floor through a series of anchoring latches.

Turning around, she planted her hands on her hips as she looked at Jeremy and said, "I told you so."

"Did you really think I was going to leave you locked up here?"

"How long have I been here?"

"Two weeks," he said as he came forward and took her hands in his.

"I'm so sorry I overreacted about Alex. When you left, I tried to follow you, but you were gone... and then, the next morning, all of these emails started

flooding my inbox. One of them had a link to a live video feed with the address; Becca, I couldn't *not* come for you."

"I told you not to," she said. "They couldn't have kept me here forever once they realized you weren't coming for me. You knew it was going to be a trap."

"I couldn't leave you here thinking that I was upset with you or that I didn't love you. Becca, I can't live without you."

A sound system in the warehouse crackled as it turned on and they heard the familiar voice of Nate Stanley as he greeted them and congratulated the Ladon brothers on finding their manhood and turning themselves over to the Order.

“We need to stall for two more minutes,” Jeremy whispered in Becca’s ear as Jadon shouted a reply to Nate that involved more expletives than she knew could be included in a single statement.

“Let Becca out of this,” Jadon insisted.

“When he offers you an out, you have to take it,” Jeremy told her.

“Of course I’ll let her out,” Nate’s voice crackled from of the speakers, echoing through the empty building. “But we’re going to have to work on that biting issue of hers.”

Becca opened her mouth to shout something obscene, but Jeremy’s hand stopped her, despite the glare that she gave him.

“She’ll behave,” he promised for her. “We just want your word that the Order of Saint George will never interfere with her life again.”

There was a pause while the static of the speakers crackled before Nate's voice came back. "I can give you that. Send her over to the east door of the building and I want the two of you to get inside the room she was in."

Becca looked up at Jeremy and shook her head, mouthing *no*.

Jeremy gently brushed a strand of hair back from her face, his fingers as soft as she remembered. She closed her eyes and leaned into the touch as he answered, "Deal."

He caught her up in a tight hug and instructed her in a harsh whisper, "When all hell breaks loose, run to the left and keep running straight until you get to a black Range Rover. The keys are in the ignition; just drive."

Turning around, Jadon held her shoulders tightly and gave his own instruction. "Run fast, little Bunny."

Her footsteps echoed in the warehouse as she walked towards the designated door. Glancing over her shoulder she watched as Jeremy and Jadon entered the room. She turned back around, squared her shoulders and leveled her gaze at the door to keep herself from turning and running back to the room.

When she reached the door, Becca stopped and stared haughtily up at the security camera, crossing her arms over her chest. After a moment, there was a loud click as the lock was drawn back; the metal shuddered as the door creaked open on its hinges, letting in the bright afternoon sunlight.

Nate stood on the other side with smug satisfaction written across his face in a twisted smirk. Behind him were half a dozen men in army fatigues with automatic weapons in hand. A couple of them she recognized as the men who had restrained and sedated her at the beginning of her captivity.

“At least it’s nice to know they were capable of one act of decency before they died,” he mocked.

Becca dropped her arms and glared at Nate, willing the hatred that radiated from her to burn his flesh.

“Going to actually do what you’re told for once? Anything your beastly boyfriend tells you to do?”

Her utter disgust for the man was too much for her to control; she hauled off and slapped him with all the force her body could muster, sending him stumbling back into his men who caught him and stared in stunned silence. Their gazes shifted back and forth between their shocked leader and Becca.

Just as Nate recovered, a deafening roar tore through the air as a silver flash struck like lightning, hitting the ground and sending men flying

as it retreated back up the sky. The soldiers began to open fire as two shadows streaked past Becca and moved amongst the men.

Just as she had been instructed, Becca turned and ran down the gravel road that led past another warehouse and into a tree line. A hundred yards past the building, she spotted the Range Rover.

She jumped in, turning the key as the engine roared to life. Her foot was already on the gas as she slammed it into gear and took off down the road, spinning a shower of gravel in her wake. For two solid minutes, she drove down the winding road, skidding through turns and kicking up an impossible amount of dust before a solid thud hit the roof of the car and Becca slammed on the brakes. As a cloud of dust billowed past her, she saw a figure approach the passenger door and lift the handle.

“Damn,” she heard Jeremy’s voice as he appeared through the dust, climbing into the car. “If we ever rob a bank, I’m gonna have you be our getaway driver.”

Becca exhaled the breath she had been holding and fell back against the seat. The two back doors opened and Jadon climbed in along with Victoria Drake.

“Hi, Sweetie,” she greeted with her usual amount of excitement.

The four of them rode in the car silently except for the directions that Jeremy gave her to find the highway. Becca was intrigued to discover that they'd been holding her captive in Pennsylvania. Three hours passed before they agreed to stop and check into a cheap rundown motel off the highway.

They sat in the double room, Becca and Jeremy on one bed and Jadon and Victoria on the other. The silence stretched on for an awkward minute as they all looked at one another. Victoria finally spoke up.

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay, Becca.”

“Thanks. So...you’re a dragon, too...?”

“Yeah,” she smiled with that mouth full of too many teeth as she nudged Jeremy with her foot.

“I suppose you’ve guessed we can’t go back to New York,” Jeremy told her.

“I figured...so what are we going to do?”

“Well, for now, we’re going to have to stay on the move,” Jadon said.

“But that doesn’t seem fair for us to keep uprooting your life like this.”

“I made my choice when I moved to New York,” Becca declared. “I think it’s a little late for me to turn back now.”

Jeremy squeezed her hand. “Well, then I guess we’d better figure out where we’re going to go next.”

“You can always head out west,” Victoria suggested. “You know Seattle is a safe haven.”

Beside her, Becca notice Jeremy tense up at the mention of the city. She glanced at Jadon to see if he had reacted similarly, but he was unreadable as he watched his brother.

“That’s just my two cents on the matter,” she declared. “They don’t know my identity yet, so I’m going to get out of here before they have any reason to suspect me.”

As she opened the door, she turned back to give Becca a rueful smile. “Take care, sweetie. I hope I get to run into you again.”

Soon after Victoria left, Jadon excused himself to find dinner. As the door shut behind him, the tension in the room rose exponentially.

Becca stood and began to pace the room, glancing at Jeremy with each turn. After a minute, she couldn’t stand the quiet and turned to face him as he turned to look up at her.

“I’m sorry,” they both said in unison.

Becca sighed and smiled and began to cry all at once. Jeremy was instantly on his feet, holding her in his arms as the tidal waves of emotions crashed over Becca, making her quake uncontrollably. She was both angry and scared, happy and relieved—yet, so terribly lonely that she didn’t know how to cope.

“I’m here,” Jeremy repeatedly reassured her as he held her close and stroked her hair, kissing the top of her head. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I was sure I’d never see you again,” she told him. “I was convinced you’d leave and they’d have to let me go and I’d never see you again.”

“I’m right here.”

“I wrote you letters,” she sobbed. “In my sketchbook.”

“I saw them,” he said as he pulled the book out from his back pocket.

“I haven’t read them all yet, but I have a general idea of what they say.”

Becca smiled through her tears as he placed the book in her hands.

The binding was worn and the pages more ragged than she remembered.

Jeremy kissed her forehead and wiped the tears away as he sat her down on the bed. “I still love you, Becca. I always will.”

Becca glanced around the room. The quilts on the bed were handmade and the wallpaper had begun to curl at the corners of the room where water stains had started to form on the ceiling tiles.

“I guess I should call Alex and let him know I’m not coming back to work,” she said.

Jeremy laughed, “I think he knows.”

She looked up into his face; those impossibly blue sapphires stared back at her. “Where will we go?”

“I don’t know yet,” he told her. “We have the whole world to choose from.”

Becca smiled and leaned against Jeremy. He laid back on the bed and pulled her on top of him. The minutes seemed to last forever as they laid like that, and Becca wished that she could just live in this moment for the rest of her life.

Outside, they heard the crickets take up their evening symphony. Becca rolled over to adjust her arm to keep it from falling asleep. Looking back over at Jeremy, she asked, “What’s in Seattle?”

Jeremy was silent for a long moment before letting out a long sigh. He looked over and met Becca’s eyes. “My father.”

ONE MONTH LATER

Becca stared up at the sky, watching as the sunlight glinted off of the obsidian fragments that made up the dragons' scales. Above her, Jeremy and Jadon wheeled and whirled as they chased crows. The birds shrieked and squawked until they had had enough of the game and hid in the green and gold autumn treetops to escape the strange creatures.

Next to her head, tiny blue wildflowers were still in bloom. They waved in the gentle breeze that crawled across the field from the east. Breathing in deeply, Becca closed her eyes and soaked in the warm afternoon sunlight.

She still felt like she couldn't get enough of the sunlight even though it had been a whole month since she'd been rescued from the Order of St.

George. Though they were still on the run, things had relaxed since they'd gotten away from New York. After Becca's rescue, they had headed straight south to Virginia and from there they had started to make their way gradually west.

Their winding journey alternated between crowded cities—where they could get lost in the crowds—and secluded areas such as this, where they could be physically lost. Becca enjoyed being out of the cities and in places like this field in the middle-of-nowhere-Missouri because Jadon and Jeremy could freely alternate between their human and dragon forms.

Since her rescue, Becca no longer shied away from the dragons' scales when they could be seen rippling underneath skin or surfacing beneath her hands. She had no more nightmares about the great scaly serpents, either.

Her sketchbook had also evolved. At first, the dragons she drew had hid in dark shadows, but over time, she began to portray them in an almost

angelic light. Spots of color had even started to creep into the pages, brightening them even more.

Briefly, she closed her eyes as shadows passed over her, giving her momentary relief from the warmth of the sun. When she opened them again, Jeremy was lying on the ground next to her. Half of his face was framed by the green grass and clover, with a couple of the wildflower blooms pressing against his cheek.

His hair had gotten longer in their weeks of travel; it was casually swept back from his face and spilled into the grass. Small worry lines had also begun to form around the edges of his brilliant blue eyes—apparently, Becca was not the only one who had changed after her kidnapping.

Both of the Ladon brothers were still playful creatures, but there were subtle changes in their demeanors. They certainly never left Becca alone for

long, and they were constantly looking over their shoulders. She could tell that the stress was wearing on them.

Jeremy had turned over all of the moving company's day-to-day business to two of his best employees who were glad to be off the road for a while, and Jadon had taken a temporary leave of absence from Maltech.

The brothers had been very careful to avoid the subject of Becca's kidnapping. She herself did not talk about it, just as they never talked about the fate of the men who had held her captive. She took their silence as confirmation that those men would not be of further concern to her, and that was all she needed to know.

"It's too bad we can't stay out here," Becca said, her eyes squinting at Jeremy. He was backlit by the golden afternoon sun and it gave him a lopsided halo, like a rebellious angel.

"If only." His hand reached out and clasped her own.

The crows continued to call out at Jadon as he circled around them in his continued harassment.

“Where are we going next?”

“We’ll probably make it to Kansas City, but we’ll need to switch cars again before we get there...just to make sure no one is still following us.”

“Why don’t we—”

“No,” he cut her off before she could ask for the millionth time if they would head up to Seattle, where there was supposedly a safe haven for dragons.

“Why? Jeremy, wouldn’t it be nice to stay somewhere for longer than forty-eight hours and not have to constantly look over our shoulders?”

“We will get to that point,” he promised as he squeezed her hand, “eventually.”

Becca nodded. In her mind, she tried to imagine why Jeremy would have a problem with a dragon sanctuary. She'd come up with numerous theories, but the only hint she had been given was that their father lived there.

Her imagination had twisted the unknown image of their father into a cruel man, a giant scaly beast that reared its head and spat fire at the brothers. Becca knew this picture was in no way accurate, but without any true knowledge of the man—aside from the brothers' aversion to him—she had no other images to conjure up.

“Come here,” Jeremy said suddenly. He pulled her to her feet and began to sprint through the field with a bewildered Becca in tow, stumbling behind him.

Once in they reached the tree line, he slowed down minutely, but this didn't help Becca; she continued to trip over roots of cedars and other obstructions on the forest floor as she followed along.

“Jeremy,” she wheezed.

“Just a bit further,” he promised as he led her deeper into the woods, ducking under a low-hanging branch.

The trees began to thin, and just ahead of them, Becca noticed a glimmer of late afternoon sun shining brightly, like an invitation to another world. Her breath was heavy and her lungs burned from her gasps.

Jeremy finally slowed just before the opening of the trees and turned to block her view. Taking both of her hands, he waited for her to catch her breath. Becca tried to peek over his shoulder as her chest heaved for air, but he shifted to keep his surprise hidden.

“Close your eyes,” he finally instructed when her breaths were almost back to normal.

She raised an eyebrow skeptically, but did as she was told.

Slowly, Jeremy led her forward until she could feel the sunlight on her face again. She was tempted to open her eyes, but trusted him and kept them closed, even when she heard the snap of a branch above her.

They stopped in what Becca assumed was the middle of the clearing, and her heart fluttered with anticipation. Her ears sharpened and focused on every sound of the forest: the wind rustling through the treetops, the crunch of animals moving through the underbrush, the songs of birds perched high above...

A moment later, Becca realized that she wasn't able to hear the cawing of the crows that Jadon had been heckling earlier. She began to

open her mouth to ask Jeremy about this when he dropped his hands away from hers and told her to open her eyes.

Above them, wildflowers of every color began to rain down in the small clearing they were standing in. Looking up, Becca saw that the brightly colored autumn trees were filled with crows diligently tossing flowers out into the air. She gasped as she realized that the brothers had been gathering and instructing the birds to create this surprise for her.

Overcome by their gesture, she flung her arms around Jeremy, who had a crown of flowers forming on his head, and she kissed him deeply while the flowers continued to fall around them.

It was just before dawn when Becca sat up in bed, her heart racing as beads of sweat poured from her forehead and the back of her neck. Her hands were cold and clammy as she wiped the moisture from her face.

The sheets around her were soaked, and as she reached down to feel them, she realized that the bed was empty. A sick churning began in her stomach as she tried to look around the dark motel room in hopes of seeing the figure of either Jeremy or Jadon. Tentatively, she called out for them, her voice shaking and her lips quivering.

When there was no answer, Becca climbed out of the bed and picked up the first item of clothing she found on the floor. She slipped the t-shirt over her head and began to creep around the room, her hands reaching in search of either brother as she softly called out their names.

Suddenly, her chest seized as a scream tore through the air outside, ending in a thunderous crash. Fearing for Jeremy and Jadon, she ran out to see the crumpled body of a stranger stuck in the shattered windshield. His limbs were turned at unnatural angles and blood began to pool where shards of glass protruded from his head, arms and torso.

Jeremy appeared out of the sky, transforming to his human form as his feet hit the ground, and rushed over to Becca. He held her shoulders tightly as she stood there in shock, trying to comprehend the scene in front of her.

“Becca, are you alright?”

After two more repetitions of his question, Becca was finally able to muster her voice to speak. “Wh—What is going on?”

“The Order of Saint George,” he explained. “We need to get out of here.”

Everything was a whirlwind as she was ushered back into the hotel room. Becca felt as if time had slowed; she was moving at a snail's pace as Jeremy and Jadon rushed past her in a flurry of activity. In the time it took her to pack up and put on a pair of jeans, the brothers had already moved the man's body and had completely reset the room to its original state.

"Get in," Jeremy said as he took the bags from Becca and threw them into the back of the Escalade they had been driving for the last few days.

Becca felt as if she had been watching all of this from afar, like a movie being played out right before her eyes. As she climbed into the back seat, she'd

finally been able to connect the puzzle pieces of what had just happened. Despite their diligence to remain hidden, the Order of Saint George had somehow picked up on their trail.

After their previous encounter with the Order, Becca wasn't entirely surprised that they had still been on their radar. What *did* surprise her, however, was the Ladon brothers' handling of the situation. Although Becca had assumed that her kidnappers from the Order had been killed, it had never been said outright and was easy to dismiss. There was no denying what they had just done to the man they had encountered tonight.

The image of the distorted body would not leave her mind as Jeremy and Jadon took their places in the front seats and drove off into the night. She sat perfectly still—in shock—while Jadon and Jeremy discussed their next move.

Their bickering slowly brought Becca out of her stupor, but the release of her shock was not pleasant. Becca's body began to shake uncontrollably. Her breathing was fast and shallow, as if her lungs no

longer knew how to expand. Her skin began to burn with a sudden fever as hysteria built inside of her.

“You—you killed him,” she whispered to herself as she wrapped her arms around her body, clenching her fists in an attempt to control the shaking.

The first corpse she had ever seen was that of her great-grandmother; her body resting peacefully in a polished casket with wreaths of flowers, pictures of her life, and cards from loved ones scattered around her. This recent body was grotesque, decorated with shards of glass. There was nothing peaceful about this death, and Becca was sure that witnessing the demise of this man was more violent than anything else she had experienced thus far.

The edges of her vision dimmed as she began to rock in her seat. The voices of Jeremy and Jadon seemed to be echoing from the far end of a tunnel. Just then, Jadon turned around and their eyes locked.

“Jeremy,” he said, “pull over.”

Jeremy exited from the highway and pulled into the nearest gas station. Climbing in the back seat, he first tried to hold Becca, but his touch felt like fire and she flinched.

While she continued to convulse, she stared straight ahead, eyes fixed on the windshield. Back and forth she rocked, holding on to herself...back and forth...back and forth...

It was ten minutes before Becca began to calm down, and twenty before she was able to reach out and take Jeremy’s hand. He sat diligently by her side the entire time, softly repeating over and over again how much he loved her and how he would keep her safe.

Jadon had stepped away to make a phone call while Becca had her panic attack. He was still on the phone, arguing in hushed tones with whomever was on the other end of the line, even after Becca had calmed down and buried herself in Jeremy's arms.

"We still need to move," Jadon said as he came back to the car. "Victoria has a place for us to lay low in Kansas City."

"Alright," Jeremy nodded to his brother as he squeezed his arm around Becca's shoulder. "You drive. I'll stay back here."

Victoria was waiting just outside the front door of her midtown house when they arrived. She stood with her hands on her hips, showing off the snarky T-shirt she wore which proclaimed: *Clothes Before Bros*. Her platinum blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she wore no make-up, though this did not detract from her impeccable natural beauty.

When Becca stepped out of the car, Victoria rushed forward and her long thin arms wove and tangled around her. Victoria hugged her close and observed her from an arm's length before she hugged her again. All the while she chattered, explaining how glad she was that Becca was alright.

She ignored both Jeremy and Jadon as she pulled Becca up the front steps to the house. While she was turned away, Becca thought she heard Victoria mutter something about “reckless endangerment” and other things about the brothers. She was grateful for Victoria's genuine concern as a

friend, but worried a little that maybe she was a little too passionate about the situation.

“How are you, *really*,” Victoria asked Becca once they were safely inside, away from the boys.

“Fine, I guess,” Becca responded with a shrug of her shoulders. “I mean, we’re still on the run, but it’s not too bad.”

Victoria let out a heavy sigh. “Becca, sweetie, they killed a man in front of you. That has to be pretty traumatic, especially considering everything else you’ve gone through.”

“I know,” Becca said looking away from Victoria to admire the ornate rug beneath her feet as they stood in the entryway of her house. One of the brightly colored threads had been snagged and stuck up in a peculiar angle. Becca focused on this to avoid the line of questioning before her.

“I’m not going to make you talk to me,” Victoria said as she held Becca’s hands in her own, “but you need to open up to *someone*. Keeping all of these emotions bottled up like this will trigger more episodes like that panic attack you had this morning. You can’t ignore what you’ve been through.”

“Right,” Becca replied, mustering up a half-smile. Jeremy and Jadon entered the front door carrying luggage, and she retreated into the living room where she sank into a leather armchair, exhausted from the day.

She closed her eyes but couldn’t erase the image of the contorted man from her mind. She envisioned those dark dead eyes focusing on hers, blaming her for the broken bones and glass that protruded from his body, like some grotesque porcupine.

“Becca.” Jeremy’s voice startled her and her eyes snapped open, bringing her back to the present.

Her eyes were wide with fright and she stared around wildly at the foreign surroundings. She momentarily forgot she was in Victoria's house as Jeremy held her by the shoulders, trying to calm her. She began to relax again as she remembered and took in the details of the room around her. Victoria's house was decorated in a hipster chic, with purposely mismatched furniture and a mix of modern and vintage elements.

"Are you alright?" Jeremy asked as he held her.

Becca nodded, but felt like collapsing, feeling as if her self-control was spiraling cataclysmically.

"I'm just tired," she deflected. "I should go take a nap for a bit."

"Okay." Jeremy helped her to her feet and led her upstairs to a bedroom that Victoria had readied for them.

The bed had one of those old metal frames that groaned when she laid on it. Becca crawled in with her street clothes still on and pulled the white sheet over herself.

Jeremy leaned over her and kissed her forehead. “We’ll all be downstairs if you need anything.”

Becca nodded as she pulled the sheet tighter around her shoulders, and Jeremy headed downstairs, closing the door behind him.

She wasn’t actually tired in the sense that she wanted to sleep, but she wasn’t sure if she could handle being around anyone else at the moment.

Becca turned over and stared at the ceiling of the bedroom.

The worry that the others had for her was fierce and genuine, but it didn’t prevent her from feeling that her breakdown was a burden. She told herself that Jeremy and Jadon had been through the same things she had—and probably more—in their lifetime. It didn’t seem fair to her that she

should be the one who worried them so much with her daintiness. Jeremy and Jadon had literally killed someone to keep her safe. Shouldn't she be grateful?

The figure in Becca's sketchbook looked like a fallen angel, crumpled and broken, yet radiantly beautiful. Her pencil moved lightly across the page, filling in contours and shadows. Each line seemed to take an eternity to draw, but gradually, the picture was beginning to form.

She slowly realized that the broken figure she'd been drawing was resting in a bed of shattered glass. A sense of horror set in as she continued to draw. It was a disaster of her own creation and she could not stop her hands; they were possessed with a purpose: to finish the image.

The details were intricate. The drawing felt almost real to Becca, as if she could reach out and touch the broken man before her. Her hands ached from the effort, but she was finally nearing the end of the image, the face of the man.

Becca could clearly see the face of the unknown man that had died before her. His dark, beady eyes and military buzz cut hair; she remembered every detail, down to the freckles that dusted his cheeks.

The face that she drew was not his, however. It was *Jeremy's*.

She dropped the book and pencil on the bed in horror. Red splotches began to appear on the page, seeping through the paper where the body had been pierced by glass.

Becca scrambled off the bed to get away from the bloody book and stepped knee-deep into a pool of hot, sticky blood. A scream tore through her body as she slipped and fell backwards, but just before she hit the floor, she was caught by strong arms with clawed hands.

Becca looked up into the scaly face with burning blue eyes. "Jeremy?"

The scaly mouth opened up to reveal rows of shark teeth before releasing Becca to fall through absolute, infinite darkness.

The wind whipped around her and she heard Jeremy's voice in it, calling her name. She looked down below her, and saw the car fast approaching. Becca screamed and covered her face with her arms, bracing for impact.

She jerked, opening her eyes again as the harsh light of the bedroom poured around her. Jadon's face hovered above hers, his hand stroking her cheek; his touch was warm against her damp skin. Her heart visibly pounded from her chest and her veins pulsed hard against his light touch on her neck.

"You were calling out," he said.

Jadon's eyes were dark and stormy with emotion and his brow furrowed. Becca could see how much pain it was causing him to see her so broken.

"I'm sorry," she said, dropping her eyes.

Jadon held her chin and gently ordered her to look at him. Reluctantly, she did. His eyes were so impossibly blue and small tears formed at the corners. Becca resisted the urge to start crying herself.

“Don’t be sorry,” he said firmly. “This isn’t your fault, Bunny.”

She flung her arms around his neck as the tears began to spill uncontrollably. Jadon held her tightly as she sobbed, “But I’m so weak.”

“No, no, no,” he assured her as he rubbed her back. “There is nothing weak about you.”

“B—but I am,” she hiccupped.

“Never.”

Becca continued to cry for a solid five minutes. The tears seemed to be endless. Jadon held her close, doing his best to quell her shaking as she heaved with heavy, shuddering breaths.

He kissed the top of her head and she asked, “Where is Jeremy?”

“Getting a lecture from Victoria.” There was a hint of amusement in his voice and Becca looked up to see the corner of his mouth hinting upwards.

“What’s so funny,” she asked while wiping the last remaining tears from her cheeks.

“Not funny,” Jadon corrected, “just that his lecture is well deserved.”

Becca was mildly confused, but then Victoria’s shriek reverberated through the house.

“You’re impossible!”

Becca and Jadon exchanged a glance. Becca could only imagine how terrifying Victoria must be when she is angered.

She didn’t have much time to wonder why Victoria was so angry in the first place; Victoria’s angry heels began to pound up the stairs and Becca instinctively held Jadon tighter. Her steps stopped right outside the

bedroom door for a moment before they turned and pounded down the hallway.

Becca breathed a sigh of relief and Jadon chuckled. Realizing she had sighed, Becca laughed as well. The two of them were in a fit, giggling over nonsense, by the time the bedroom door opened and Jeremy came in.

His brooding scowl turned to perplexity when he encountered their laughter. He eyed them curiously, but even his special connection with his brother yielded no answer as to what they found so funny. Jeremy's furrowed brow only served to make Becca and Jadon laugh harder and he gave up trying to understand the situation, opting to leave the room instead.

When their mirth ended, Jadon stood and offered his hand to Becca, "Would you like to assist me in making dinner?"

“Not sure how much help I’ll be,” she smiled as she placed her hand in his, “but I’ll come watch.”

Jadon led her downstairs and set her up on the kitchen counter while he began to wash vegetables. One of the worst parts about being on the road was that Jadon had not been able to cook from most of their hotel rooms. They ate at decent restaurants, but nothing compared to his home-cooked meals.

Becca swung her legs back and forth as she watched him move deftly about the kitchen. She thought that even Gordon Ramsay wouldn’t be able to criticize his creations.

Jeremy wandered into the kitchen. He smiled broadly when he saw Becca perched on the counter and came over to put his arms around her. “Are you feeling better?” He gave her a soft kiss on the cheek and she nodded, nuzzling into his neck.

“I had a horrible dream, but they say laughter is the best medicine, right? I think I’ll be alright.”

“I still don’t know what was *sooo funny* to you guys, but I’m glad I could be of help. Jadon, what’s for dinner?”

“Lemon orzo salad,” he said as he dramatically dumped the pasta into the pot of boiling water and returned to cutting the onions.

“So what were you and Victoria fighting about anyway?” asked Becca.

His eyes dropped, and for once, *he* was the one who blushed. “Where we should go next since we obviously can’t stay here.”

Becca sat up straighter, her interest piqued.

Jeremy looked up into her eyes and sighed. “We’re going to Seattle.”

Victoria drove to the airport to see the three of them off the next morning. Becca hugged her tightly while Jadon and Jeremy unloaded their luggage.

“Don’t let these boys get into any trouble while you’re there.”

“You know that’s their favorite pastime,” Becca laughed, taking a deep breath to avoid shedding any tears. Saying goodbye to Victoria made her realize how few friends she had nowadays, and how sorely she missed them. “You’ll have to come up and visit us sometime.”

“Of course,” Victoria promised.

Becca admired how beautiful Victoria’s slim, muscular frame appeared in her designer athletic wear; it looked as if she was ready to both run a marathon and walk down the catwalk at the same time.

Victoria leaned forward and kissed her cheek as Jeremy and Jadon walked over to say their own goodbyes. She hugged them each and whispered what looked like a stern warning in Jeremy's ear before releasing him.

As they entered the airport, Becca turned back to see Victoria waving them off before she got into her car and left. Jeremy and Jadon each took one of her hands as they picked up the suitcases and headed in with the bustling crowd.

Every aspect of security they went through spiked Becca's adrenaline. They'd been avoiding people for so long that every time strangers bumped into her, she feared they were members of the Order of Saint George. She knew such notions were silly, but that didn't help to dispel the nervous knots that were tying themselves tightly around all of her internal organs.

Jeremy squeezed her hand in reassurance as they finally boarded their plane and took their seats. They were seated in the middle of the plane and the brothers were on either side of Becca. She was secretly glad that they did not have window seats as she had never mentioned her general fear of flying and had no inclination to see the clouds they'd be passing through. She held tightly to their hands as the plane took off, her knuckles turning white.

She thought of *Final Destination* and terrorist attacks until Jeremy's voice distracted her. He was calmly talking about the available movies that they could choose from and what drinks they should order from the stewardess. Becca's tide of nerves receded, and the rest of the four hour flight was a pleasant and peaceful rest for her.

Gentle hands shaking her shoulder woke Becca when they arrived at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. She stirred and stretched while

Jeremy and Jadon retrieved their carry-ons from the overhead compartments.

As they exited the terminal Becca looked out at the cloudy sky. It didn't seem to be the most inviting place as far as the weather was concerned, but she knew this was supposed to be a safe place for them.

When they picked up the rest of their luggage, Becca saw a man waiting with the sign that read "LADON." He looked like a chauffeur and was dressed in a nice suit. She started to approach him when Jeremy suddenly yanked her off to the side.

"What are you doing?" he hissed.

Becca gestured to the man, "His sign says *Ladon*."

"Precisely," Jeremy said. "No doubt he's someone sent by my father."

Becca stopped suddenly, pulling Jeremy back with her. She put her hands on her hips and gave him a stern look.

Jeremy threw his arms up in the air in exasperation. “Just because I agreed to come to Seattle doesn’t mean I’m ready to deal with him.”

Pursing her lips, Becca allowed Jeremy to lead her off through the crowd so they could avoid the driver. Jadon followed with their extra luggage in tow as they skirted the sign of their father’s presence.

When they got outside, Becca noticed how chilly it was. Unlike the Midwest, the fall air held not remaining hints of the summer past. The wind blew a gentle reminder that winter was fast approaching as Jeremy hailed a taxi and gave directions to a nearby hotel. Both Jeremy and Jadon sat back to relax during the ride across town, but Becca was not in such a mood.

“What was that about?” she hissed to Jeremy.

Jeremy shushed her gently, but this riled her up. Gently, he took her arm and pulled her back into the seat of the cab.

“Please, I’ll explain when we get to the hotel.”

The driver, an elderly man that looked to be of Hispanic descent, eyed the trio in the rearview mirror. Becca sat quietly and waited. She felt like they were being more cautious in this “safe haven” than they were while they were on the road. She could feel the tension between Jeremy and Jadon as they watched out the windows for any signs of being followed.

Becca sulked all the way to the hotel, but still let them register under her name rather than their own. She smiled at the front desk clerk as she took the key cards and headed over to the elevator.

Jeremy and Jadon followed her in silence as they exited the elevator on the top floor and Becca led them down the carpeted hallway to room 839. The key card clicked into the slot and the little light flashed green, allowing Becca to open the door for Jadon and Jeremy.

Safely inside their room, they all dropped their bags on the floor. Both Jeremy and Jadon collapsed on the beds and waited for Becca to join them.

When she didn't, Jeremy sat up and eyed her where she stood at the foot of the bed, hands on her hips.

“What's wrong? Not tired?”

“I'm plenty tired,” she said, “but I want to know what is going on.

Why are you avoiding your father?”

“Becca, sweetie, it's a long story,” Jeremy said as he extended a hand towards her, inviting her to come into the bed.

She remained stubbornly in place. “We have all the time in the world.”

To Be Continued...