

# Cut Off

By C. Jade Wyton

*Fresh out of hospital after her car accident, Becky finds herself haunted by nightmare-induced sleepless nights and crippling social anxiety. All she wants to do is lay in bed and let the world continue without her; but though she's been avoiding school, she can't avoid her entire life. Her family gently push to get her out of the house, just for a day, in hopes of encouraging her recovery.*

***Contains mentions of abuse / injury / horror themes.***

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It was a warm night.

Not uncomfortable, though it was still perhaps too warm to use a blanket.

It was warm like the embrace of a friend. Or a lover.

Like clothes from the dryer, thrown onto a bed instead of put away, and laid down in.

It was the sort of warmth that could lull one to sleep, if they weren't careful enough to keep themselves awake.

And who would be trying to stay awake, so late at night?

*Hm....*

A low buzz filled Becky's bedroom, and she slowly raised a hand to fumble over her bedside table for her phone.

Her phone?

Her phone was... broken, wasn't it?

Right.

Right, Becky remembered now. It had been damaged in the accident.... It had worked just long enough for her to call for help, and for her to message Adam while in the hospital— And then it had died, its battery refusing to charge, and she had been cut off from the world.

*And, yet, the buzzing continued.*

She could have sworn it was the ring tone she'd assigned to Isa.

But... why would Isa call her, when they were both home?

Becky raised her head from her pillow, her eyes bleary and vision unclear, and thought that her room seemed much darker than usual.

Her pink and white walls didn't seem quite so pink and white, tonight. They seemed more....

Red.

And yellow?

It was like she was wearing cellophane glasses.

*The buzzing continued.*

She blinked quickly, trying to loosen the sleep from her eyes, before sitting up to rub her face.

The colours disappeared and she was left in a dull, dark space where nothing seemed to focus.

She tried to remind herself that the trees she could see were just the stickers that lined her walls; she was in her home. Not out in the woods.

Was she?

For a moment she doubted it, and had to check that her bed wasn't her car— That she was, in fact, home. And not face-down on the dashboard again.

*What was that buzzing?*

She looked to her alarm clock. Its screen was dark.

Was there a blackout?

There must have been.

So... why were the lights on outside?

*Outside.... That's where the buzzing was coming from.*

Becky pushed herself to her feet and stumbled to the window.

It seemed much darker outside once she got to the window. But she could still make out the yard... sort of. Were there always that many trees?

She rubbed her eyes again, and when she opened them she could swear there were even more trees than before.

*Where was that buzzing coming from?*

She couldn't tell, not with her window closed, so she unlocked it and carefully opened it; climbing out and onto the thick tree branch that brushed the wall by her room— That was the same as always, at least. And it was as easy to climb out of as it was the last time she snuck out.

She rested a hand on the trunk of the tree and stared out into the woods.

*The buzzing was close.*

So, so close.

Where was it?

She saw movement in the dark and squinted.

What was that?

She rubbed her eyes again, trying to get the sticky, wet feeling out of them, and almost fell when she opened them to see a deer standing at the edge of the forest.

Where had the animal come from?

She looked around, glancing from one side of the yard to the other, before looking back to the deer. Which was closer, now; standing at the base of the tree and staring up at her.

She stared back.

*The buzzing was right underneath her.*

Was it coming from the deer?

It... it *was* coming from the deer.

'Hello?' she tested, slowly.

The deer twitched an ear. Then opened its mouth.

'Hello,' the deer replied, in a voice so familiar it made Becky's skin crawl. *'Isa'vanna Valstille's phone. I am not available right now. Please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as I am able.'*

The deer closed its mouth, and went back to buzzing.

Becky swallowed, and stared.

And the deer continued buzzing.

'Hello?' Becky tried again.

The deer opened its mouth.

*'Hello,' it said again. 'Isa'vanna Valstille's phone. I am not available right now. Please leave a message and I will return your call as soon as I am able.'*

Becky licked her lips, feeling her chest growing tight.

She couldn't take her eyes off the deer. And she was too scared to blink, but— But the sticky feeling was coming back to her eyes and she couldn't keep them open—

She wiped them, as quickly as she could, and then looked back to the deer.

It was on the branch with her, now.

Staring at her.

*And buzzing.*

Becky took a step back; but could only take the one before she was on the edge of the branch.

Carefully, she searched with her foot for the bedroom window. But no matter how much she tried she was met with nothing but empty air.

She didn't dare turn to look. No matter how desperate she was to get back inside and close her window and curl up in bed again and hide from this animal.

*This creature.*

Slowly, the deer cocked its head.

And it continued to twist, much further than it should have— Until there was a loud *-click-* like a phone being hung up, and the deer's head fell off.

It bounced off the branch and began to fall down the tree—

Down, to meet the hundred other deer that now stood on the ground staring at her.

Becky let out a shriek, and everything was suddenly bright as her bedroom door flew open— The light turned on and her father rushed in to wrap his arms around her.

*'It's okay,' he said, sitting on the bed with her and holding her tight. 'It was a dream. Just another dream. You're okay. You're okay....'*

Becky felt her father's hand running through her hair, and her heartbeat began to slow.

*It was just another bad dream.*

*'Ken?' a tired-but-concerned voice asked from the door, and Becky looked up to see Isa in her night-gown, rubbing the sleep out of her eye. 'Is she okay?'*

Ken gave a nod and Isa took a deep, heavy breath, as if holding back a yawn. Then she joined the pair on the bed and placed a hand on Becky's back; running her palm along the girl's skin in gentle, comforting circles.

Becky took a breath and relaxed. She leant into her father, accepting the kiss he planted on the top of her head without complaint, and closed her eyes again.

It was warm, tonight.

The sort of warmth that could... *lull someone to sleep....*

Becky peeked open her eyes, then rolled over to avoid the early morning sun that was invading her room through the blinds.

Isa and Ken were gone; presumably back to their own rooms and beds. And Becky was alone... well, except for the plush toy that one of the pair had decided to move onto the bed with her before they left.

She hugged it tighter and gave a tired groan, closing her eyes again.  
She didn't want to wake up.

*Just... just five more minutes....*

She smelt something warm and tasty wafting under her door from downstairs and realised that it was no longer early morning. It was warm late-morning, and Isa hadn't come in to wake her yet.

Then, just as she thought it, there was a timid knock that she recognised as her father's and she let out another groan— Hopefully loud enough for him to hear her displeasure.

It was met with a nervous chuckle and the door being opened despite her protests.

'Good morning, Becky,' he said gently as he sat beside her. 'How are you feeling?'

*'Good until you came in,'* Becky muttered into her pillow.

A pause, before Ken gave another nervous laugh. 'You don't mean that?'

It wasn't a confident statement.

Becky gave a heavy sigh and rolled over to look at her dad. 'No,' she said honestly. 'It's fine. You're fine.... Sorry, I'm just tired.'

It was a more heartfelt chuckle, this time, though there was still anxiety at its edges as Ken bent down to peck his daughter on the cheek.

'Get dressed, honey,' he said. 'Breakfast is almost ready.'

'I'm not hungry,' Becky lied. Then her stomach betrayed her and she growled right back at it.

Ken simply smiled and brushed the hair from her face.... Then he attempted to give her another kiss, and she quickly rolled out of the way and got to her feet.

'Alright! I'm up! Stop being *gross!*' she whined. 'I can only handle *so much* from you!'

His laugh was *far too happy* this time, and Becky blew a raspberry as she made for her wardrobe.

She froze when she saw her reflection in the door's mirror, and felt a lump building in her throat.

She was *hideous* to look at.

Deep purple bruises covered her face and body; the worst one being across her nose and under her eyes where she'd hit the dashboard face-first.

Even worse were the two humongous half-healed wounds— One along her shoulder, right at the curve of her neck and trailing down to her collarbone; and one over her hip, trailing around to her back. Both wounds were scabbed over, with bruising around their edges and dark patches of cracking skin that threatened to begin weeping if she moved wrong....

She swallowed back her sob— Then flinched when her father stepped behind her. She saw the heartbroken look on in his eyes and had to look away to the floor.

'I'm glad you're alright,' he said gently. 'I really thought I was going to lose you.'

Becky didn't reply. Instead she sniffed back her tears and wiped her eyes.

'Becky—'

*'Shirt,' she demanded. 'Long sleeves. Crew neck.'*

Her father quietly complied, helping her angle her injured arm so she could get dressed.

She batted his hands away when he began to fuss, and gave an unhappy snort as she reached for her pants. 'So I can't put a bra on myself, big deal,' she grunted. 'I'm not completely—'

She cut off with a cry of pain as she tried to bend down, and dropped the rest of her clothes as she grabbed the wound on her side.

'Becky?! Becky, let me help,' Ken muttered, catching his daughter and retrieving her clothes. *'Please.'*

'I can—' Becky winced, loudly sucking in air through her teeth. *'Okay. Fine. Fine....'*

Reluctantly, Becky lifted a foot and let her father slip her into her clothes—Grunting loudly at his first failed attempt.

'Dad— *Dad*, underwear are inside out.'

'Oh? Oh,' he gave a cough and corrected his mistake. 'I'm sorry, sweetie, I'm just trying not to look. I don't want to make you uncomfortable.'

'Too late,' Becky grumbled, almost falling and holding Ken's shoulders to keep her balance. 'I've been uncomfortable since you moved back home.'

Ken sighed loudly, and Becky grumbled when he didn't say anything else.

She wasn't sure why she wanted him to be mad at her....

She just did.

Becky sucked in another hiss of air and swore as Ken pressed a wad of tissues to her wound. 'Ow, *fuck!*'

'I'm sorry. Stay still,' he said gently. 'You're bleeding again.'

'*Mm*,' Becky grunted, though she did as she was told. She let out a long, hard breath— And flinched when she heard a loud and confident knock on the door.

'Becky?' Isa's voice called. 'Are you awake?'

'Yes, Isa,' Becky replied. 'Come in.'

Isa didn't need to be told twice. She stepped into the room confidently and looked around— Immediately marching over to the window and throwing it open.

'You shouldn't keep this closed all day,' she said, adjusting the window's protective mesh screen. 'Fresh air is good for you, you know!'

'I know, Isa,' Becky replied— Then swore again as Ken moved the tissues and her hip stung with a sharp pain. 'Fucking— *Dad!*'

'I'm sorry!' he replied meekly and pulled his hands away. 'It's... it's mostly stopped.'

'Be nice to your father,' Isa ordered, stepping to Becky's side and fixing the girl's hair. 'He's only trying to help.'

'*Ugh*,' Becky grumbled— Then looked away from Isa's glare. 'Th.... Thanks, Dad.'

Isa motioned with a hand, and Becky let out a heavy sigh.

'I...' she dropped her voice to a barely-audible mumble. *'Love you.'*

Isa gave an approving nod. 'There we go. Was that so hard?'

'Yes,' Becky mumbled, much to her father's amusement.

He pushed himself up and moved to plant another kiss on Becky's cheek—

And she dodged him, making a fake gagging noise as she hurried out of the room.

‘Rebecca Bloom!’ Isa called after her. ‘Do not take that attitude with your father, young lady!’

Becky heard her father defending her as she hurried down the stairs and into the dining room.

‘Isa, it’s fine—’

‘You know as well as I do that it’s *not!*’

Becky flinched at Isa’s tone, and found herself fiddling awkwardly with her shirt’s hem.

She wasn’t sure why her dad was standing up for her like he was. She was being a brat, and she knew it....

*Gods, she wished he’d just agree with Isa and scold her!*

Call her spoilt. Or ungrateful. Or— Or anything negative.

Anything.

Anything to show he actually *saw what she was doing*.

She huffed in annoyance and took a seat at the table; her father’s usual seat. But he barely noticed as he simply sat beside her and picked up his sketchbook.

It made her blood boil, and she found herself scratching at the hard wooden table with the handle of her fork.

‘Rebecca!’ Isa snapped as she passed. ‘Stop that!’

Becky put the fork down obediently and shrunk into her seat.

‘What has gotten *into* you today?’ Isa sighed as she vanished into the kitchen.

‘Ah, don’t listen to her,’ Ken said, placing a loving hand on Becky’s own. ‘You’re perfect.’

It took all of Becky’s self control not to break her father’s fingers.

Instead, she changed the radio to a station she knew he hated, and then looked him straight in the eye and crossed her arms.

He just went back to his sketchbook; contorting his body into a position Becky thought even *she* wouldn’t be able to manage before burying his face into it and leaning so close he got charcoal on his nose.

‘You know,’ Isa’s voice cut in. ‘You wouldn’t need to lean that close if you *wore your glasses*.’

‘They make me look old,’ Ken replied.

‘You *are* old,’ muttered Becky.

He didn’t acknowledge her comment, and instead put down his sketchbook to accept the plate of sausages Isa put down in front of him.

‘*Becky*,’ Isa paused as she reached the girl; holding her food just out of reach. ‘You are coming with me to Tief and Tire, after breakfast.’

Becky groaned, and slumped onto the table. ‘But, Isa, I—’

‘Haven’t left the house in almost a month,’ Isa interrupted firmly. ‘I’m taking you to the mechanics, and we’re going to sort out that car of yours— They can’t hold it much longer.’

‘But I—’ Becky felt goosebumps prickling along her skin. ‘I don’t want to— I don’t want to drive—’

‘I know,’ Isa said, her gentle tone surprising Becky. ‘I know you’re scared,

Becky, but I know you. And if you don't do this now, you're never going to get in another car again.'

Becky felt her chest tighten as she took a shaky breath.... And she felt her father's hand on her's again.

'You'll be fine,' he comforted.

'You've lied to me before,' she retorted, though her voice wavered as she said it and she looked away.

Isa placed Becky's breakfast in front of her, and she found herself staring at the heavily-filled plate.

Eggs, toast, bacon, a hash brown, mushrooms... beans... tomato....

Almost three times as much as her father had to eat.

'You're an avoider, Becky,' said Isa. 'You avoid things and let them fester and grow. It's best to just nip it in the bud. Sort it out before you let yourself exaggerate it into something overwhelming.'

Becky poked at her food instead of replying.

'Eat,' Isa's tone turned soft and loving, and she brushed a lock of hair from Becky's eyes. 'Then we'll get you ready to go out, alright?'

'Yes, Isa....'

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It had taken some coaxing to get Becky into the car. She'd been so nervous; the last time she'd been in a vehicle was coming home from the hospital... and she barely remembered that, she'd been on so much medication.

But Isa was right, of course.

Now that she was actually *in* the car it didn't seem so bad.

The drow was driving slowly. Taking turns gently. And easing into breaks where she could.... It was reassuring, Becky thought. Isa was a good driver.

They pulled into the mechanic's shop and Isa paused for a moment. Then, she sighed, and Becky tensed.

'*Rebecca.*'

'Yes, Isa?'

'Your behaviour this morning.... I'm disappointed in you. I thought you were better than that.'

'I...' Becky swallowed, and turned away from Isa; instead busying herself with the hem of her shirt.

'Your father just wants the best for you,' Isa continued. 'It hurts him, you know. When you act out like that.'

Becky's hands grew rougher as she kneaded her shirt and legs— And she almost sneered her reply. '*Yeah, right,*' she muttered.

'Don't take that tone with me, young lady,' Isa warned.

'I... sorry, Isa,' Becky swallowed, and felt her breath catching in her throat as she looked down to her feet. 'I— I don't know what's wrong with me.'

Isa's hand was on her, now, running gently from her shoulder and down her arm.

'It's alright,' Isa said. She paused for a moment, as if thinking of what to say, before motioning to a door as it opened. 'Ah, Angelo is in today. Perfect— Are

you coming with me, or would you rather stay here?’

‘I’d... rather stay,’ Becky answered. *She didn’t want anyone to see her like this.*

Isa gave an understanding nod. ‘I’ll just be a minute.’

Becky watched quietly as Isa climbed out of the car and made her way over to the tiefling.

They shook hands, and then began discussing something.... And when Angelo’s face fell and he shook his head, Isa let out a visible sigh and put a hand on her temple, shaking her own head.

Then they turned to Becky. And she shrunk into her seat as Angelo began towards her.

He tapped on her window, and she reluctantly wound it down.

‘Hey...’ she gave the man a nervous grin.

‘Heya.... So, ya wanna tell me exactly how fast that car was going?’ he asked. ‘Because there ain’t no way that damage was done going thirty.’

Becky clicked her tongue and shrunk down even more. She felt herself let out an involuntary chuckle as as she was stared down. ‘Would you believe forty—’

‘Nah,’ he answered. ‘Wouldn’t on my life believe forty.’

Becky felt her cheeks flush, and she looked to her feet. ‘*Sixty*,’ she answered.

‘SIXTY?!’ Angelo echoed, loudly— Causing Isa’s head to shoot up in surprise. ‘In the woods?! Yer lucky yer still alive!’

‘Yeah. I uh— I know,’ Becky responded.

Angelo just shook his head, rolled his eyes, and headed back to Isa. They spoke for another brief moment, before Isa motioned with a hand, beckoning Becky to join them at the garage door.

Becky shook her head and Isa sighed— And it made Becky feel bad enough to climb out of the car.

She trudged over to the pair and refused to meet either of their gazes.

‘Sixty?’ Isa said.

‘Yeah,’ Becky replied.

‘*Sixty*.’

‘Yes.’

‘What possessed you to—’

‘You were angry at me,’ Becky said, her voice trembling. ‘I was just trying to get home.’

Isa’s face softened and, even behind her thick sunglasses, Becky could tell that the drow looked guilty. ‘Oh, Becky.’

Becky felt a kiss press into the top of her head, and she tried to relax.

‘Hm, well,’ Angelo gave a sniff. ‘I’m looking at that hunk of metal of yers, and I’m thinking it’ll be costing y’all more to get it fixed than buying a new machine outright.... Y’all ain’t got no weird attachments to that thing, do ya? Cos I have another client who could tell ya from experience that it ain’t cheap to keep something like that around.’

‘That’s... fine,’ Becky let out a heavy sigh. ‘I don’t... think I should be driving anymore, anyway.’

‘Not if yer planning on going sixty again, nah,’ Angelo agreed. ‘Might be best for yer to have a break from it.’



‘You shouldn’t give up on it entirely, though,’ said Isa. ‘Knowing how to drive is important. You need to be able to do it.’

‘I know,’ Becky replied. ‘But... maybe just... not yet?’

Isa let out a breath and gave a gentle nod. ‘Okay. Not yet.... Angelo? Are we able to get some photos of the car for insurance?’

‘Yeah, Amelia already took ‘em when the car first got brought in,’ Angelo replied. ‘Gotta warn ya though that it ain’t pretty. I never seen that much blood before— Well, not in a car. Not from a *person*.’

Becky almost apologised, and had to bite her tongue and look away to stop herself as Isa and Angelo continued their conversation.

And —when she turned— she was horrified to meet eyes with Benny Slader as he was pulling into the garage on his bike.

‘Becky!’ he called with a mix of surprise and joy.

‘I’m going back to the car!’ Becky blurted, snatching Isa’s keys out of her hand and hurrying away.

‘Rebecca!’ Isa exclaimed. ‘*Rebecca!*’

‘Huh,’ Benny looked dumbfounded as Becky rushed out of the garage; her face half-obsured by her jacket. ‘Well... uh.... Hello, Miss Isa.’

‘Benny, it’s nice to see you again—’

Becky slammed the car door behind her and slumped as low as she could bear with her injuries. She held her jacket up to hide herself from the world outside the car, and felt herself trembling as she heard a second bike pulling up.

*Not Jareth*, she pleaded to the universe. *Anyone but Jareth*.

‘Hey Becky!’ Jareth’s voice called from outside. ‘You okay? I’ve missed you in school!’

‘She’s being weird,’ Benny called back. ‘Isa says to leave her alone!’

‘Huh, alright?’ Jareth sounded as confused as Benny as he gave a gentle tap at the window. ‘I heard you and Mattel broke up. Text me when you can, yeah? I’m here for you if you need—’

‘Jareth!’ Isa called, her voice approaching the car as she continued. ‘She’s tired. Give her some space.’

‘Oh, sorry, Isa,’ Jareth gave a cough. ‘I’m just worried. That’s all.’

‘I know,’ Isa replied. She made her way to her side of the car and opened the door— Then paused to talk to Jareth. ‘She’s alright. She just needs some time.... Why don’t you boys come over next weekend? The lawn needs another mow and she might feel more up to guests, then.’

‘Righto, ma’am,’ Jareth gave another tap on the window. ‘See you then, Becky.’

‘*See you*,’ Becky replied, her voice quieter than she intended.

Becky let out her breath as Isa got into the car, and finally pulled her jacket down to peek at the boys.

They gave her a smile and a tentative wave, and she pulled her jacket up to hide her face again.

She was grateful when Isa pulled out of the mechanics and found a quieter spot to stop and talk.

The woman’s hand found its way to Becky’s shoulder, and she offered a kind smile.

Becky gave back a sigh. 'I was worried you were going to make me talk to them....'

'One thing at a time, Becky,' Isa said gently. 'Today we got you in the car. If that's all you can handle, that's alright.'

Becky found herself smiling, at that. 'Thanks, Isa.'

'I'm proud of you, Becky,' said Isa. 'Now.... If you're up for it, I want to take you to the city.'

'The city?' Becky echoed. 'Why?'

'I want to get you a new phone,' said Isa. 'I know your old one still isn't working and....'

Becky felt herself tense as Isa paused; she could see the girl's lower lip tremble, for just a moment before she swallowed and composed herself.

'That phone saved your life, Rebecca,' Isa finished. 'And the idea of you not having a phone on you terrifies me. You understand?'

Becky nodded. 'Yes. But— Uh... do I have to go with you to get a new one? Can't you just buy it for me?'

'I could,' said Isa. 'But I don't know what you want. I'd much prefer it if you came with me to pick one, yourself. *If* you feel up for it.'

'Uh....'

'I can take you home,' said Isa. 'The city is... it's a big trip. I understand if you don't want to go.'

'Um... no, I'd like to,' said Becky. 'I think so, anyway. As long as it's with you.'

'Of course.'

'Just you.'

'Just me.'

'Not Dad.'

Isa sighed.

'I... I know,' Becky swallowed. '*He loves me*. I know.'

'Hm,' Isa didn't say anything else as she started the car again and began the long trip to the city.

It was quiet, at first. And a little awkward— One of the most awkward car rides Becky could remember having with Isa. Even more awkward than the time in elementary school when she'd gotten in that fight with Shedskin, and kicked the kobold halfway across the football field.... Isa had been furious with her (for good reason, she understood now) but it still hadn't felt *awkward*....

Becky gave a nervous cough; and Isa responded by reaching a hand over to pat the girl's hair.

'Um... Isa?' Becky tested.

'Yes?'

'Can I use your phone? To text Adam?'

'Of course.'

'*Thanks*,' it came out a little quieter than Becky had meant it to, but she didn't feel much like saying it again. So instead she busied herself with fumbling through Isa's bag for her phone.

It was weird to see actual names attached to contacts instead of emojis. Becky almost couldn't find Adam, down in the "Frankenstein" section by his fathers....

She also couldn't help but think it was a bit weird that Isa sorted her contacts by last name instead of first. And she had no idea how Isa could live without photos attached to her contacts! How Isa could tell who was who, with the way that words always seemed to dance around and change? It escaped Becky.... But she quickly pushed the thought out of her head and opened the conversation she'd been having with Adam.

The messages were rather scattered; they hadn't been able to talk much since Becky's phone had died. Only in bursts when Isa was home and willing to lend Becky her own phone.

The newest message was from Adam.

*Hope you're alright*, it read.

Becky texted him back (cursing at the auto-correct that Isa was *firmly* determined to keep turned on):

*Going to pity*

*\*pity*

*Pity*

*City*

*Isa wants a new phone*

*For me*

Becky waited for a response. Though she knew it could be hours before Adam noticed he'd gotten a new—

*Sounds fun. We can text more when you get your new phone :) badmouth JT maybe?*

That got a laugh out of Becky— Which in turn got a smile from Isa.

Becky shook her head with glee.... Badmouth JT!

She texted him back:

*Yes please*

*Feel evil today*

*Need to be mean before I burst*

He replied with a laughing emoji— And then the next ten minutes was filled with the sound of text tones, typing haptics, and Becky's giggling.

Then, bad news; Adam had to go. His fathers wanted to take him out with them, and he had to pay attention to... whatever it was they were doing.

*Don't do anything I wouldn't do*, Becky playfully warned. *Wink!*

It was the last text she sent; as Adam didn't respond further.

*Sigh.*

Now Becky was bored.

Bored.

She tapped her hands on her knees.

Blew a raspberry.

Frowned at Isa's chuckle.

Then tried to entertain herself with Isa's phone: backing out of her conversation with Adam and scrolling down.

She saw a few names she recognised. Mostly last names; what she could only assume were people from around town. And businesses.

Lots of texts organising things and sorting out services.

An order for the new fridge

Someone to paint the back fence.

An electricity bill reminder.

'You get a lot of messages.'

'Don't go through my phone, Becky,' Isa warned.

'It's fine!' Becky chuckled. Then, she saw the only contact with any sort of deviation from the standard *Name and Title* system Isa used. 'Oh— Hey. It's me! *Aw*. You put a little heart emoji next to my name and everything!'

'Rebecca, what did I just say?'

'It's fine!' Becky chuckled. 'It's just my own messages to you! I'm pretty sure I know... what... I've sent....'

She trailed off when she saw the last contact she'd had with Isa; two missed calls. One voicemail.

The accident.

She shivered.

She remembered calling Isa, but she didn't remember... leaving a message.

Becky glanced to Isa, who tensed. And Becky realised she knew more about the accident than she'd been letting on.

'You don't want to listen to that,' said Isa.

'Why not?'

'It's... traumatising,' said Isa, slowly.

'Why don't you delete it, then?' asked Becky.

Isa didn't seem sure how to respond to the question and for a long moment, the two sat in silence. Then Becky played the voicemail, and Isa heaved a sigh.

She could hear herself breathing; shaky and weak. Each breath was rattling, like the bones in her chest were clicking together each time she exhaled. And every inhale was a gasp as she desperately tried to fill her lungs.

And then.

The crunching.

The awful, horrible, familiar crunching and cracking and popping that Becky had thought was a dream— It came out from the phone, filtered through light static and clearly audible over Becky's shallow breathing.

Like walking over leaves and twigs.

*Crackle.*

*Crunch.*

*Pop.*

It made Becky's skin crawl.

Then a low groan sounded, and all she could liken it to was the moan of a zombie from a horror movie. Though it was longer and more hollow; like it was echoing through a storm water drain.

'*Weird...*' the Becky in the message breathed.

Then the message ended with a beep and the car went quiet.

And it was quiet for a while.

Becky sat still, staring at Isa's phone. She could feel her skin crawling like there were bugs burrowing through it. And she thought she might have been trembling.

The deer was....

It was real.

She'd thought she'd just been concussed.

But she'd heard it clearly through the phone.... And it sounded *worse* than she'd remembered.

*So much worse than she remembered....*

'Becky?' Isa finally spoke. 'I can turn around if you need me to.'

Becky took a breath. 'No— No I'm... I'm alright. I want to get a new phone so I can talk to Adam we— We've already started making plans and....'

'Okay,' Isa said gently. 'If you're sure.'

'Yes,' said Becky. 'I... I think I am.'

Isa gave a nod. Then, she sighed through her nose. 'Becky? You know you can talk to me, right? About anything?'

'Yes, Isa,' Becky answered, though she hadn't actually been listening. She was too busy staring at the play button on Isa's message bank....

'Becky?'

Isa's hand blocked Becky's view of the phone, and Becky blinked in surprise and looked up to the woman. She realised, now, that Isa had pulled over to talk.

'Do you need to go home?'

Becky paused for a moment to think about it.

Did she?

She wasn't sure.

She didn't think so.

'I want to go out with you,' she heard herself answer, and realised it was true— And when she did she heard herself gasp. 'Can we get lunch out?'

Isa laughed at that. 'Sure,' she said, sitting back in her seat and pulling off the handbrake. 'We can get lunch.'

'*Fuck yeah,*' Becky felt herself mutter. 'Isa? Can I watch something while you drive?'

'Quietly,' Isa replied.

Becky nodded, and began fishing in her pockets for her earbuds.

~~~~~

The city was as run-down as ever.

Dull grey streets stretched as far as the eye could see, broken by scatterings of cars and people. Garbage littered the ground while graffiti decorated the buildings.... And everything was covered in mysterious, off-coloured stains.

It wasn't as crowded as some of the cities Becky had been to, but it was still busier than she liked.

She trailed behind Isa, who seemed accustomed to the feeling of tall buildings encroaching from all sides and strolled along with a confidence Becky could only dream of feeling.

It wasn't like Becky hadn't been here before. She came to the city often with her friends.... But she always felt a little on-edge. Something about cities sent her back to that horrible year she'd spent travelling with her father, after her mother's death.... And she always felt like everybody in the city was watching her. Judging her. Leering at like her father's colleagues had.

Becky could recall the *one* time she ever saw courage from her father; the

violent fight with his boss after they'd made an inappropriate comment about her.

That was a memory she both held onto tight, and wished she could forget.

It was the first time in years she'd believed her father actually cared about her, and that he didn't regret having her....

'Keep up, Rebecca,' Isa called over her shoulder.

'Yes, Isa!' Becky called back, hurrying to catch up to the woman. She fell into pace behind her, and followed her obediently until they got to a... store that looked like it didn't deserve the chain-brand name on the sign out front.

It was dingy, dirty, and disorganised. And a little bit creepy too.

And then, when the cashier came out from the back to greet them, Becky was only half-sure they weren't going to be murdered.

Isa cast a glance to Becky as she pressed close, looking both humoured and concerned, before she greeted the tabaxi man and shook his hand.

'We're happy to just look around on our own, thank you,' she told him; and he retreated behind the counter. 'Alright, Becky. Does anything interest you?'

'Um...'

'Take your time,' said Isa. 'I'll leave you be.'

Becky wished she wouldn't. She wanted to call Isa back— But she chickened out when Isa picked up a watch and examined it, and instead turned back to the phone display.

She didn't look too hard. She barely focused on the devices; just stared at them, letting her eyes unfocus and her mind wander.

That message she'd left on Isa's phone....

That was proof, wasn't it? That she'd actually seen what she'd seen?

She hadn't been imagining things. It hadn't just been from hitting her head. That horrible, upside-down animal was real. And... and if *it* was real then....

She took a deep breath and let it out in a tremble.

*How many of her other nightmares about that night were true?*

The thought terrified her, and she felt herself clenching a fist tight around her shirt's hem.

*Let out the breath,* she reminded herself. *Out.*

She wasn't sure if it was audible or not, and glanced around to make sure nobody was watching—

*Fucking hell!*

Becky almost jumped out of her skin when she realised how close the cashier was standing behind her. And she realised she must have let out a noise, because he stepped back and suddenly Isa was between them; glaring.

'As I said,' Isa practically growled, and the man backed away further. 'We're happy to look around on our own. We will let you know when we find what we want.'

The tabaxi retreated back behind the counter, though he continued to stare at the girls.

'Thanks,' Becky muttered to Isa.

Isa gave a sniff. 'Remember, Rebecca. Sometimes what a man needs to hear is a stern voice. Don't be afraid to give him a piece of your mind.'

Becky gave a chuckle. She'd heard that from Isa an *uncountable* amount of

times before.

‘Have you found something you like?’ Isa asked. She pursed her lips when Becky shook her head, and motioned to the higher-end phones. ‘How about this one? It has a terabyte of memory. And *three* cameras! Wouldn’t that be good for your blog? You could get some nice photos of yourself.’

‘*Looking like this?*’ Becky muttered, more to herself than Isa, though she looked away with a blush when Isa raised a brow.

‘You of all people should know that bruises heal,’ said Isa. ‘After four years of martial arts, I would *hope* you know that. Or else I’d have to ask what they’ve been teaching you at that school!’

Becky just shrugged, grateful when Isa went back to the phones.

‘What about this one?’ she asked, picking up another device. ‘It’s the same brand as your old one. That should make it easy enough to copy over all your files.’

‘I guess,’ Becky waved a dismissive hand. Then, she actually read the display card and smiled. ‘Oh, wow. That’s.... That’s a good camera.’

‘And isn’t that what matters?’ Isa said, playfully.

Becky shrugged again; though this time it was accompanied by her grin.

‘It comes in pink,’ Isa pushed. ‘Oh— Sorry, *rose gold*. Tsk!’

‘Heh... doesn’t really matter what colour it is,’ Becky chuckled. ‘I need a case for it, anyway.’

‘Ah, well, go pick one now,’ Isa gave Becky a gentle shove towards the cases. ‘I saw one with a unicorn on it. You like unicorns, don’t you?’

‘*Love*,’ Becky corrected. ‘I *love* unicorns, Isa.’

Isa laughed as Becky headed to the cases. Then, Becky heard her mutter something in a vicious tone; and when she looked up Isa was staring down the store employee with a such a dark look Becky was surprised the man wasn’t taking some sort of psychic damage.

He stepped back behind his counter, and gave a cough.

‘That’s what I thought,’ Isa muttered before she spied Becky out the corner of her eye and her voice turned sweet. ‘Go pick something nice, Becky! Go on!’

Becky wasn’t sure she had the courage to disobey Isa, after seeing the look she’d given the tabaxi; so she hurried to the other side of the store and quickly picked a case for her phone.

‘That one?’ Isa asked.

‘Yes,’ Becky replied, perhaps a little hurriedly. ‘Let’s uh— Let’s just get it and get out of here, yeah?’

Isa gave a nod. ‘You wait here, I’ll deal with *him*.’

‘Thanks,’ said Becky.

‘Do you want to keep your old number, or would you like a new one?’

‘Old one,’ Becky answered. ‘Easier than uh... changing everything.’

‘Alright,’ Isa pecked a kiss on the top of Becky’s head, and then marched over to the tabaxi.

The man flinched away as Isa spoke; and it was very clear that he was in as big a rush to get Isa out of the store as Becky was to get herself out— So as soon as Isa turned away from the counter and motioned to Becky; the girl was out the door.

‘Alright,’ said Isa as she stepped onto the curb. ‘You wanted lunch? Did you have anywhere in mind?’

‘There’s this place that Katie showed me,’ Becky answered, pointing down the road. ‘Just down from here? It’s a kebab place. It’s *really* good!’

‘I don’t think I’ve been there,’ said Isa. ‘What have they got?’

‘Oh, loads!’ Becky answered, motioning for Isa to follow her as she started down the street. ‘Lamb, chicken, beef. Kebabs and snack packs. Salads.... You like falafel, right?’

‘I like falafel, yes,’ Isa confirmed. ‘As long as it’s well-made.’

‘This place is *great!*’ said Becky. ‘But, uh... it doesn’t *look* great, you know? It’s sort of... dinky.’

‘Dinky?’

‘Dinky. Dingy. Dirty. A lot of “D” words.’

‘As long as it’s not “d”-sgusting,’ Isa joked. ‘Alright. But if they have kebabs like you said, we’re going to have to bring some home for your father. You know that, right?’

‘*Yeah,*’ Becky gave a playful huff. ‘Bring some *kebabs* home for *Dad.*’

Isa poked Becky in the side, and she let out a giggle as she slapped the woman’s hand away.

‘Isa!’

Another tickle, another giggle, and Becky hurried ahead to the store.

She could see inside that there was no line, and bounced from foot to foot as she waited for Isa to catch up to her; excited to order.

Becky thought afterwards that, perhaps, she’d gotten herself too much; two different snack packs and five kebabs. But Isa had laughed it off and reassured her that if she didn’t finish it at lunch, it just meant that she wouldn’t have to make dinner.

It also helped that Isa had gotten herself and Ken four meals between them, with the intention of doing the same.

‘*Mm*, you alright with all that?’ Becky asked through her mouthful.

‘Fine,’ Isa replied. ‘How’s the kebab?’

‘*Great!*’ Becky answered. ‘Do you need me to unlock the car?’

‘That’d be good, yes,’ Isa said, turning her hip to invite Becky into her pocket.

Becky fished out Isa’s keys and then took her place in the passenger side seat; accepting the bags of food from Isa and tucking them at her feet.

‘I’m glad you seem to be feeling better,’ Isa said as she joined Becky in the car. ‘I was really worried about you this morning.’

‘Oh, uh... yeah,’ Becky felt herself blushing. ‘I just didn’t sleep well. That’s all.’

‘I don’t think any of us did,’ Isa admitted. ‘I’m not sure that Ken got back to sleep at all, after you woke him.’

‘No?’ Becky asked.

‘No,’ answered Isa. ‘He didn’t want to leave you alone.... I came in to check on you, after a while, and he was still sitting with you. It took a very firm talking to, to get him back in his room. And then I could hear him pacing. Ugh. It was just a terrible night all around.’

‘I... I’m sorry—’



‘Don’t apologise,’ Isa said, firmly. ‘You have nothing to be sorry for.’

It didn’t feel that way....

‘Oh, Becky—’ Isa let out a sigh. ‘No, don’t look like— I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.... *And you were feeling so much better, too....*’

Becky echoed Isa’s sigh before tapping on her knees. ‘No text back from Adam?’ she asked.

‘Not yet, no,’ replied Isa.

Becky sighed again; this time much more dramatically as she slumped in her seat and fiddled with her seatbelt.

They drove in silence for a long while, the passing buildings and cars becoming scarcer and scarcer until they were driving through open land scattered with occasional trees.

From there, they drove into the woods; and Becky felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up as she watched the tree line.

*The deer was in there*, she realised with a shiver. *Doing only gods know what....*

She could feel her anxiety building, again, and knew she had to say something —anything— to start a conversation and stop herself from panicking.

‘I saw a deer,’ she blurted.

‘Oh? Where?’ Isa slowed the car. ‘I don’t see it.’

‘No, uh— When I crashed. I... swerved to avoid it. I didn’t think I hit it but but...’ Becky fiddled with her seatbelt again.

Silence.

‘Isa?’

‘Yes, Becky?’

‘Have you ever seen anything weird in the woods?’

Isa tensed, at that. And her answer was very slow. ‘No.... Why?’

‘I... the deer I saw,’ Becky tried. ‘I think there was something wrong with it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It didn’t...’ she tried to think of a way to word it without making herself sound utterly insane. ‘*Move right.*’

‘It might have been sick?’ Isa offered. ‘I’ve heard a few reports in the area, lately, about deer behaving strangely. They think it might be chronic wasting disease.’

‘Chronic wasting disease?’ Becky echoed.

‘It’s also called zombie deer disease,’ said Isa.

Becky felt her skin crawl. ‘That... sounds about right for what I saw.’

‘A sick deer,’ Isa said, simply. ‘Is that what I heard in that message? The deer?’

Becky took a moment before answering, just to let the question sink in. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I.... I think so.’

Isa let out a long, relieved breath, every muscle in her body letting out a tension that Becky hadn’t even noticed she’d had been carrying.... It was like Isa had deflated into a more comfortable size, and suddenly fit better in her own skin.

‘*A deer,*’ she said quietly to herself. ‘*Thank the gods....*’

Becky silently echoed the sentiment.

*The deer was just... sick, she thought to herself. That explained everything. It was just sick....*

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Lunch was even more awkward than Becky had been expecting.

Isa had insisted that they eat as a family; though it took her a while to get Ken to come down from his study.

After almost ten minutes of “just another minute” to finish what he was doing, Becky had heard Isa scolding her father.

‘*Your daughter is waiting for you,*’ she’d told him. ‘*In a half-decent mood! Get downstairs and be a father!*’

And he had. For an agonising thirty-five minutes, they had sat together at the table and eaten, with scattered, awkward conversation that left Becky feeling like she needed a week-long nap.

She’d tried not to snap at her father. Or be rude.

A few times she’d caught herself biting back a quip; and several times Isa had given her *the look* and she’d sniffed and sighed and mumbled an apology.

Near the end Isa had attempted to steer the conversation onto shoes; something she knew everyone at the table enjoyed.... However, she was obviously not prepared for the discussion to turn heated as Becky and her father openly and heavily disagreed on the importance of function over form—Or, as Ken fervently argued; form over function.

Isa had thought it depended on the event; but the others were too into their argument to hear her.

In the end, Becky had stormed up to her room in a huff; telling her father that if he wanted broken ankles, that was *his* business.

Isa hadn’t exactly been happy about that. She’d knocked on Becky’s door shortly after and told her off.

And now, as Becky waited for her phones to sync and copy her data over, all she could do was feel guilty. Guilty, and sorry for herself.

She gave a heavy sigh and rolled over in bed... where she saw one of her pillows snoring and reached out to pet the mimic along its top.

It gave a small *mrrp*, and wiggled before sprouting long, spider-like legs and skittering over to snuggle into Becky’s chest.

‘*Good baby,*’ Becky mumbled, scratching the mimic along one of its hairy legs. ‘*Good Mimi. Cute little baby. Who’s my little poo-poo head?*’

‘*Mrow?*’ Mimi replied. Then, it snuggled deeper into Becky’s chest, and she chuckled.

‘*You good in there, stinky?*’ she asked, flicking at the frilly ribbon the mimic had formed along its hem.

Mimi began purring in response, and shifted its form until it found something more comfortable for hugging; resembling an old gryphon plush it had once ripped apart and half-eaten.

‘*Sweet baby,*’ Becky muttered, scratching between the mimic’s fake little wings. Then, she flinched as her phone gave a loud —*ding*— and lit up. ‘*Oh, it’s done....*’

She hooked a hand over Mimi, holding the mimic to her chest as she rolled back over. Mimi chirped happily as it was released and then flopped onto the bed; fully committing to its plush toy facade and pretending to be inanimate.

It was absolutely adorable, Becky thought as she reached to her bedside table to pick up her phones.

A quick check of the screen confirmed they were finished syncing, and Becky unplugged them from each other and hit the *confirm* option on her new phone.

She grinned at the familiar lock screen photo; an old picture of her and Isa, out on a trip to a zoo. It was a good memory and she—

Her home screen brought a lump to her throat, and she had to take a moment to swallow a shaky breath as she was met with Mattel's smile.

She'd forgotten that photo of Mattel was her....

Another deep breath and she shook her head.

It was fine.

She would just change it and—

Her phone connected to the network and a notification appeared at the top of her screen. It was an old one, from Adam, asking when she was getting out of hospital—

It was shoved aside by a message from Katie. Which was immediately shoved aside by one from Jezzibeth. Which was taken over by another by Katie— And another by Katie— And one from Marilyn— And Katie—

Becky stuffed the phone under her pillow and let out a whimper as it continued to loudly ding and vibrate.

It was too much....

But the messages stopped almost as quickly as they started and, after waiting a moment to make sure all of her old messages really *had* come through, Becky fished her phone back out and looked to the screen.

She had almost a hundred unread messages. Some dating back to the night she'd gotten in the accident.

She was too nervous to read them all.... Where should she begin? Who should she reply to first?

Adam, maybe?

That could work.

She'd spoken to him on Isa's phone, so she knew most of what he would have texted her, and all she'd have to do is tell him her new phone was set up.... That would be easy to do.

She opened her messages app and glanced over the icons; pausing when she saw the emojis she'd assigned to Mattel.

Mattel had been messaging her?

She... hadn't expected that. After the fight....

Becky took a breath; knowing that whatever Mattel sent was going to be hard to read, but unable to stop herself from opening the chat:

*Talk to me*

*Becky, message me as soon as you're home.*

*I'm so upset I can't EVEN*

*You can't TALK to me like that!!*

*I thought you loved me*

*You really overreacted, Becky  
I wasn't even being serious  
REPLY to me Becky  
You can't just ghost me  
You can't just BREAK UP with me!!!  
I have put SO MUCH into this relationship!  
Do you have ANY IDEA how HARD it was to convince my parents to be  
okay with you??  
You can't just leave me!!  
I CAME OUT for you!!  
Becky!!  
REPLY TO ME.  
You can't just break up with me like that.  
You LEFT me in the WOODS  
Oh my god grow up  
It's been TWO DAYS.  
REPLY TO ME.  
Fine.  
Fuck you then  
Bitch.  
(YOU CANNOT REPLY TO THIS PERSON)  
Becky felt the lump in her throat again; joined now by tears in her eyes and a  
shortness of breath that made her chest hurt.  
She swallowed, but the lump didn't go down.  
At least— She exited from Mattel's chat, and glanced over the many other  
messages she'd received. At least her friends would....  
She saw Katie's icon, and sniffed back her tears— Katie, her oldest friend.  
She'd stick with her, she was sure—  
You okay?  
Read the first message, much to Becky's relief. She let out her breath and  
continued to read.  
What's up with Mattel's tantrum on spellbook?  
Becky?  
Reply to me, Beck.  
Oh come on.  
Becky?  
Just because you're shitty at Mattel doesn't mean you should ignore me!  
Fuck's sake Becky.  
It's been three days  
Are you dead?  
Are you pregnant?  
I know you're alive cos my mom said she saw Isa buying that gross cheese  
you like.  
>:( reply to me!  
Benny said he saw you out today with Isa  
So like you're talking to him and not me?  
WOOOOOW*

*Fuuuuuuuuck offffffff biiiiitch*

*Fine*

*BE THAT WAY*

*Whatever!!!*

Oh.... Becky felt fear working its way through every bone in her body. Oh....

Katie hated her.

Katie hated her, too.

Which meant that—

That everyone else must hate her, too.

Oh, god. She couldn't—

If Katie—one of her oldest, closest friends— hated her, then *everyone* must hate her.

She couldn't breathe.

She had to—

She had to explain what had happened—

Where she was—

Why she hadn't been replying!

Trembling, she fumbled to open her Spellbook; all her friends followed her there. She could make a post about the accident and they would all see it and it would make things clear and maybe they'd understand—

She opened the post editor and— *Yes, accept camera roll permissions*— And she—

She froze.

The deer.

Her newest photo was....

A photo of the deer.

She didn't remember taking it—

And it.

It was—

It was somehow *worse* than she remembered.

So much worse than she'd thought.

Its head was upside down, just like she'd recalled. And its eyes illuminated red in the flash of her phone; which lit up all of the terrifying details she had been too concussed to see after the crash that night.

It had been closer than she'd thought— Its head was already inside the car, and it had one hoof raised to rest on the frame of the window as if about to pull the rest of itself up and in to join her.

And it was grinning, its lips curled and parted in an unnatural contortion to reveal teeth far too white and far too human. They were as unnaturally white as its single antler; which closer resembled bleached bone than velvety wood.

And there was blood.

Blood on its body.

Blood on its face.

On its lips, and dripping from its nose.

And it was looking at her.

And smiling.

And climbing into the car.

She couldn't breathe.  
*What the fuck was this thing?!*  
It wasn't a deer.  
It wasn't a deer!  
Not even a *sick* deer could—  
It couldn't be—  
It couldn't be real!  
But it was!  
And it had been—  
Right next to her—  
In the car with her—  
It was looking at her—  
Smiling at her—  
And—  
And—  
And—

'*Mrrp?*' Mimi's chirp lifted over the sounds of Becky's sobs, and she realised the mimic had wrapped around her as a scarf, and was trying to lick her cheek.

'Oh— Baby—' Becky's voice caught in her throat and she had to sniff away the panic before she was able to reach up and pet Mimi; her hands shaking as much as her voice. 'Hey girl... good baby.... I'm sorry. I'm okay. Good girl. Good baby.'

Mimi's tongue ran over her wrist before the mimic slid down her shoulder and wrapped around her other arm. Licking affectionately as it went, Mimi made its way to Becky's phone— And then let out a snarl and aimed a bite at the device.

'No— Mimi—' Becky quickly put the phone away in her bedside drawer.  
'Don't bite that. I—'

Becky broke off in a sniff and wiped her eyes. Then she sighed as Mimi tightened around her arm, and she pet the mimic.

Mimi responded with a half-chirp, half-raspberry, and slobbered all over Becky's skin.

'Aw, thank you,' she said to the creature, stroking it down its back. She finally found herself able to laugh as Mimi affectionately nibbled her. 'You're such a good girl. Thanks for protecting me from the big mean phone.'

Becky gave one final sniff as Mimi crawled back up to her neck and snuggled comfortably into place before going quiet and limp; almost completely believable as a real scarf, except for the occasional twitch or murmur.

Letting her breath out, Becky wiped her eyes and stood up.

She needed to go downstairs. Spend some time with someone— Anyone.

She stumbled half out her door and paused as she almost ran into Isa.

'Becky?' Isa lowered the hand she had been about to knock on the door with.  
'Are you alright? Have you been crying?'

Becky took in a breath as Mimi let out a chirp... and then gave a timid nod.

'I... set up my phone and...' she hesitated when she thought about the photo.

She couldn't show it to Isa, could she?

Isa would never let her outside again! And— And if her dad saw the photo

(and Isa was *sure* to show him) he would pack them up and move them all to Milan! And then she—

And then she'd lose everything.

Everyone....

'Becky?' Isa's voice was as soft as the hand she placed on the girl's cheek.

'Please. What's wrong?'

'*Nothing*,' Becky lied, her voice barely a whisper. '*I'll be okay.*'

It was clear Isa didn't believe her.

'I, uh...' Becky fiddled with her hands. 'I just.... Mattel me left some... messages....'

'Ah,' Isa's voice was soft and understanding. 'I see.... Don't you worry about whatever *Mattel* says, okay? You're a bright young girl, and in my opinion you're better off without her.'

'I know,' Becky gave another nod. 'You, uh... *always* made that clear.'

Isa returned Becky's nod, and then held out a gentle hand. 'I was just coming up to ask if you wanted to come with me to get groceries.'

Becky shook her head.

'Okay, I understand,' said Isa. 'Still, why don't you go downstairs? Your father's in the lounge and he could use some company.... I think he's worried about the argument you two had at lunch. He thinks it's his fault.'

'*It was his fault*,' Becky muttered. Then, she looked away when Isa raised a brow. 'I mean... okay. I'll go talk to him.'

'There we are,' Isa smiled, and gently began to lead Becky to the stairs. 'I'll be as quick as I can at the store, yes? Try not to terrorise the poor man too much while I'm out.'

Becky just shrugged, and let herself be guided downstairs.

'Play nice,' Isa said, releasing Becky so she could make for the front door. She grabbed her purse off the coat rack, and adjusted her sunglasses before opening the door. She paused for a moment to blow Becky a kiss, and then disappeared into the yard.

Becky let out a heavy sigh as she did. Then giggled as Mimi mimicked it.

'Silly girl,' she commented, petting Mimi and turning to the lounge. 'I love you.... Let's go face Dad together, shall we?'

Mimi gave a chirp; then uncoiled from Becky's neck. The mimic slid down her back to the floor and then slithered away like a snake, and Becky frowned after it.

'*Coward*,' she teased. Then, she took a deep breath and headed in to meet her father.

Ken was sitting on the couch, his sketchbook practically touching his nose as he frantically scribbled across the page. He seemed completely oblivious to his surroundings; not noticing his daughter as she entered and glanced to the TV. It was showing a documentary on owlbear and their... mating habits.

'What... are you watching?' she asked her dad slowly, grimacing as one of the animals on screen attempted to mount another. 'Ugh.'

'Becky?!' her father jumped at her voice, and fumbled with his artwork. 'Oh, Becky! Hello! I'm just watching a fashion show— Oh... um. Well, I *was*. I didn't realise it ended. You— You're welcome to put something else on, if you like. I

won't— Uh— I won't bother you, I promise.'

Becky watched as Ken shuffled over on the couch, pressing himself right up against the arm in order to give her as much room as possible.

'See? I'll just sit here and, uh... well. Do my usual thing.'

'*Right,*' Becky's reply was still slow and careful as she picked up the remote and sat beside her father. She took a moment to flick through the channels before eyeing her father out of the corner of her eye— And when she caught him doing the same to her, they both looked away awkwardly and coughed. '*Mm,*' she mumbled, biting her lip. 'You... uh... don't have to sit so far away from me.'

'I don't want to make you uncomfortable—'

'You're not.'

She didn't mean for it to come out so bluntly, but it did. And she felt the awkwardness in the room grow as her father un-squished himself from the arm of the chair and took a much more comfortable-looking position beside her.

They eyed each other for a moment before both coughing again— Ken going back to his drawing, and Becky continuing to click through the channels.

She couldn't seem to settle on anything, and flicked through the channels as quickly as thoughts flicked through her brain.

She still couldn't believe the messages she'd received....

And she couldn't bare to imagine what everyone else had sent her. There were so many messages; and she knew they would all be as upset as Mattel and Katie's.

It seemed like the only person who *didn't* hate her was Adam.... Which, really, she wasn't surprised about; Adam didn't have a single hateful bone in his body. It was like he'd been built with only the sweetest, kindest parts.... And it probably also helped that she hadn't lost contact with him completely. She was lucky that, unlike any of her other friends, Adam and Isa had each other's numbers.

As annoyed as she'd been at him after he'd copied it out of her phone to get her a lift home, the first time she'd shown up at his house drunk, she couldn't help but be grateful. Adam having Isa's number had saved her more than once.... And it had been what kept them in contact while she'd been in hospital.

She gave a heavy sigh, realising that she wasn't going to find anything she felt like watching, and turned off the television. She stared at the black screen for a few moments before throwing the remote on the coffee table and leaning back on the couch.

Then, after a few more moments, she let out another sigh and shifted around, unable to get comfortable.

'Are you alright?' Ken asked gently.

Instead of replying, Becky gave another heavy sigh and flopped against her father; who quietly put an arm around her and pulled her close.

He continued to attempt to draw with one hand, though his strokes were obviously much less stable as the sketchbook wobbled.... Eventually, he opted to put it down and wrap both arms around his daughter.

Becky let out yet another sigh and buried her face into Ken's side.

*It wasn't fair.*

She hadn't done anything wrong, had she?



All she'd done was try to stand up for her friend. Who... nobody else knew was her friend.... Because she was... a coward.

Becky shivered, and felt her dad run a hand down her back when she did.

She was a coward. She always had been. She'd always done the most cowardly things— And let people convince her to do cowardly things.

Like.... *Bully people.*

Her entire school life, she'd been a horrible bully. Even when she'd known it was wrong; if her friends didn't like someone, she was on top of it. Hell— Even her friends weren't free from being her victims. She took cheap shots at them, whenever the opportunity arose....

Especially when she'd been with Mattel.

She let out a slow breath as Ken kissed the back of her head.

She had always been a brat but... She was an absolute *horror* for the past year. She couldn't even count the amount of times she'd brought her classmates to tears under Mattel's instruction.

She squeezed her eyes shut, and recalled the vivid image of that poor girl, Helena Hitchcock, sobbing as she was pulled out of the science-room cupboard Becky and Mattel had locked her in.

Honestly... how was she even surprised that nobody wanted anything to do with her, now?

She was horrible.

Awful.

*A disgusting excuse for an elf.*

She felt her father's embrace tighten, and swallowed the lump in her throat.

'D.... Dad?'

'Yes, Becky?'

'You love me, right?'

'Of... course I do,' she felt her father tense. 'Why would you even ask—'

'Why?'

'What?'

'Why do you love me?' she tried not to sound upset; but she felt her eyes start to well up and had to sniff to keep herself from crying. 'You should hate me— Everyone else does.'

'You're my daughter, Becky,' Ken replied, gently. 'I love you.'

'I'm a brat.'

'No, you—'

'*I am!*' Becky snapped. 'I'm horrible! I always have been, and *I always will be!*'

'Rebecca—' Ken sat up straighter, as if to say something important, but cut off with a sigh instead. 'Becky. You're my daughter. I love you. No matter what you do, I will always, *always* love you.'

'So... you only love me because you *have* to,' Becky mumbled. Then, she pushed herself up and stumbled for the stairs.

'That's not... what I *meant*,' Ken said with a frustrated sigh. 'Becky— Rebecca, come back— Look, I— Becky, what do you want me to say?!'

Becky paused at the door, and shrugged. 'I don't know,' she admitted. 'Sorry— I.... I'm tired. I think I should go to bed.'

She glanced back at her father just in time to see him finish rubbing the bridge of his nose in frustration.

He caught her eye, then, and gave her a sympathetic look. 'I think we're both tired,' he said as he pushed himself up. 'I'll walk you up.'

'I can get up the stairs on my own,' Becky chided.

'I know,' Ken said, simply, falling into place beside her and showing no signs of backing away. 'Still. Let me take you.'

Becky just blew a frustrated raspberry and rolled her eyes.

She didn't want to admit to her dad that she *wanted* him to walk her up. She barely wanted to admit it to herself— Though, with the look on his face, she wondered if he couldn't tell how she felt....

'*Fine!*' she huffed, secretly grateful when Ken put his arm around her and walked her along. 'What, you going to tuck me in, too? Kiss me goodnight? *Read me a bedtime story?*'

'Do you want me to?' he asked with a chuckle. 'Because I will if you do.'

'*No!*' Becky felt herself blush as her voice broke. 'Don't you even *try* it—'

Before she could stop him, her father's lips met her cheek and she let out a loud mock-gag and pulled away from him; hurrying into her room and slamming the door behind her.

'I love you!' Ken called after her playfully. 'Sleep well!'

'What-EVER!' Becky shouted back.

—END—

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