

The Ward

By C. Jade Wyton

Rebecca Bloom can't forget that terrible night. It was the worst night of her life. Worse than her breakup. Worse than when she was attacked by that dog—Worse than her mother's death. It haunts her. Chills her to her bones. That she could—and would—kill someone, under the right circumstances.... And burdened with the knowledge of her actions, Becky finds herself in Warm Waters Psychiatric Hospital, struggling to speak and desperate for a distraction from the horrible memory.

Contains descriptions of violence / choking / murder / burning / horror. Takes place in a mental ward.

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Becky sat in the stiff hospital bed, working needle through cloth in a desperate fervour as she embroidered winding, flowering vines along the neck of her father's old shirt.

She had to prove her hands were good for something.

That they could be used to create, instead of destroy.

That they were more than the weapons years of martial arts training had turned them into.

So she embroidered; using what she remembered of the techniques her father had shown her when she was young.

They weren't the best stitches....

Some were loose.

Most were misshapen.

The early stitches that formed the patterns on the right sleeve were unplanned; set into the fabric without any actual thought to what she was making. But slowly, a message began to appear in the artwork.

Her life story—all of her pain—written in a language her father might finally understand....

She added the final stitch to the flower, and began on a nearby plane.

She wanted him to see her.

To actually look at her, and see who she was, besides his daughter.

She wanted him to see that she wasn't perfect. Or innocent. That she had flaws.

She wanted him to see all the harm he'd caused her throughout her life.

She wanted him to see how much she was hurting.

And she wanted him to see that she was trying to forgive him.

And she... she had to see for herself. That her hands were still good.

That she was still a good person, deep down.

So she sewed, desperate to fight off the reality of the evil, *evil* thing her hands had done.

She couldn't ever tell anyone what had happened.

Ever.

And even though it had been almost a month since that horrible night, the memory still stung her mind as fresh as if it were yesterday.

The zombies.

The blood.

*Romero's glare before he—*

Becky shivered.

The sound of Malinka's terrified shriek filled her ears and when she closed her eyes she swore she could still smell the singed fur and burning flesh in the air.

That other girl —the triton whose name Becky couldn't recall— had taken the brunt of Romero's spell.... But it had been Malinka's cry that had stuck with her.

Haunted her.

Seeing her friend burn had finally broken her.

Snapped the last thread that was holding her together.

Adam was already fighting for his life, trying to hold back the creatures that had scrambled out of the tomb, and Becky couldn't protect him. And then the—

The burst of flames from Romero, and Malinka's scream, and the smell of burning fur and flesh and all the blood and the sudden bright light and crackle of flames and—

And—

And she hadn't meant to choke him.

But he was hurting her friends.

He was threatening the lives of people she loved.

And as soon as she'd tackled him down her hands were around his throat, and he was struggling underneath her weight.

Desperately clawing at her hands. At her arms. At the ground beneath him. At anything he could reach in his desperate attempt to escape her grasp.

The sound he'd made as he tried to breathe chipped away at her brain. And the sight of the blood in his nose and on his lips as his eyes rolled back in his head and he went limp flickered into her vision every time she blinked.

*It didn't matter that he'd survived it.*

Not when she hadn't let go. Not when she had to be pulled off him by force.

Not when she had *wanted*, in the moment, for him to die.

It terrified her that the first thing she'd felt after Adam had failed to find Romero's pulse was *relief*.

That moment she'd held Malinka tight in her arms, thinking she'd ended Romero's life and saved her friends' own.... In that moment she'd felt lighter.

Relieved.

*Almost happy.*

It was that moment she was scared of. Right before the reality of her actions had hit her and she'd been crushed by the weight of the horrible thing she'd done.

*It was all Romero's fault.*

That was all she'd known in the moment.

Everything that had happened to her friends, and her town, was *his* fault.

All the undead creatures wandering the streets.

The animal attacks.

The edge in every interaction between townsfolk.

People locking themselves away; only daring to step outside if they had weapons on their belts.

Adam's thinly-hidden anxieties for his family's safety.

Jezzibeth trembling and crying and hiding in her car after escaping a walking corpse's grasp.

Her own accident and the deer that had almost killed her.

*The endless nightmares, tormenting her whenever she closed her eyes.*

Romero had been the cause of it all.

And for that very real moment, Becky had been *relieved* that he was dead.

*Happy.*

And she knew that no matter how brief a feeling it might have been— No matter how much crushing guilt had slammed her, only moments later—

She had still felt it.

*Happy.*

How was she supposed to live with herself, knowing what she'd felt?

What she was capable of?

How was she supposed to go on, knowing that she could kill someone?

That her first instinct, when threatened, was to take a life?

*That she'd do it again if she had to?*

She shivered.

*Adam had tried to talk sense into Romero, she tried to remind herself. And he hadn't listened. They'd given him a chance to walk away and he'd attacked them. Set monsters on them and— And she—*

*She was just protecting her friends, wasn't she?*

*Wasn't she?*

She felt a sudden, sharp pain in her finger and withdrew her hand from her work; examining the spot she'd pricked herself.

She wasn't bleeding.

Sighing, Becky put her work away in the container beside the bed. She'd continue it when she could focus better....

She didn't want to risk cutting herself. She was lucky that Doctor Goodhuman had given her permission to keep her things with her in the ward, with their strict rules on sharp objects. If they thought she was hurting herself they might take her work away.

*And then what would she do?*

Just as she thought it, her phone vibrated loudly and she felt her heart flutter at the familiar buzz.

That was Jareth's tone!

*Which meant—*

She rolled in bed, fumbling over the bedside table for her phone, and quickly unlocked it.

She was greeted with a photo of Mimi, poorly disguised as a motorcycle helmet, and couldn't help but smile.

The flaws in the mimic's transformation were so obvious. At least, to her they were.... She could recognise Mimi anywhere. The little speckles of pink along the rim. The misshapen visor. The almost fabric-looking texture to the helmet's body.... Mimi wasn't used to mimicking hard materials and dark colours, that was

clear.

Becky's phone buzzed again,

*Found her!*

Read Jareth's text.

*Took me 2 hours of searching. PHEW. Thought she got out! Passed over her at least 4 times before Benny tried to go for groceries and she bit him. Don't worry though! It was just his head. And we all know there is nothing in there for her to damage ;)*

Becky felt herself giggling, and bit her lip as Jareth sent another photo; this one of Mimi settled firmly over his own head, captioned:

*She's nice to me though.*

It made Becky's heart light, and she opened the keyboard to reply— And then found herself hesitating.

Words were... still so hard.

She took a deep breath.

*thank you*

She hoped it was enough. It was all she could manage.

Then she read his reply, and felt her heart catch in her throat.

*Anything for you, baby girl!*

As dumb as it was, it brought tears to her eyes, and she had to wipe them away.

And then before she knew what she was doing she was calling him. He accepted it immediately and his low-quality image appeared on her screen as he sat in bed, leaning against the wall.

'Hey!' he said cheerfully. 'Becky? Hey!'

Becky opened her mouth to greet him and—

Nothing came out.

Not even a squeak.

'Beck?' his voice fell, becoming soft and cautious as he leant closer to the screen.

Becky just sighed, feeling her shoulders slump.

'Still can't talk?'

She shrugged.

She *had* been talking today. To her doctor, and to Isa....

She wasn't sure why the lump in her throat was suddenly back, now that she was trying to talk to Jareth.....

'That's okay,' said Jareth. 'You don't have to say anything. I can do all the talking. Do you want me to talk to you?'

'Mm,' Becky managed, feeling the edges of her mouth twitch into a tired smile as she nodded. 'Mhm.'

Jareth smiled back and began telling her about his day. Though... she could see the concern in his eyes. He was trying to hide it, she could tell, but it was there. Obvious, really, in the way his smile didn't quite press the same creases it usually did....

She traced his face on the screen gently, feeling her own smile starting to fall to soft melancholy.

Then, Jareth squinted at her.

‘Wait, is that my shirt?’ he asked with a chuckle. ‘Are you wearing my shirt? You are! I was wondering where that ended up.’

His laugh encouraged Becky’s own giggle, and she flopped lazily onto her side and tried to get comfortable.

It was difficult; the mattress was too firm and she didn’t have nearly enough blankets or pillows... but... she had Jareth. And as she curled up, snuggling tight under the sheet and hugging one of the plush toys she’d brought with her, she found that his voice was enough to keep her thoughts from how different this bed was to her own.

She closed her eyes, listening as Jareth launched into a story about himself and Benny, and the trouble they’d been getting up to, and then....

She found herself blinking awake slowly and wiping her eyes, realising she’d fallen asleep.

A glance at her phone told her that only five or ten minutes had passed— And that she was still in the call with Jareth. She could see him, though the angle was awkward and his mic was muted; he was in his kitchen, talking to his mother as she prepared dinner. He had one earbud in his ear and —when Becky let out a sudden, loud yawn— it alerted him she’d woken up and he quickly excused himself, retreating back to his room and returning his attention to Becky.

‘Hey,’ he greeted.

Becky managed a squeak in response, and cleared her throat. ‘H.... H.... Hey,’ she forced out.

‘Hey!’ Jareth’s face lit up.

‘Hey,’ she repeated.

‘Hey,’ Jareth returned.

Becky giggled.

And then there was a loud —*chirp*— and Becky’s heart began to race.

‘Mimi?’ she managed, her voice wavering as she pushed herself onto an elbow and tried to spot the mimic. ‘Mimi?!’

‘Yeah, it’s Mimi!’ Jareth gave a chuckle, and began to tap his lap. ‘*Pspsp*! Here girl! You wanna see Becky? You wanna see your mama?’

A hot pink blur began to bound over Jareth’s lap; bouncing on and off the screen at top speed until it lunged for the phone with a high pitched —*scree*— and Jareth’s side of the call was obscured by a flurry of wet tongue.

‘Mimi!’ Becky exclaimed. ‘Baby! Hey baby!’

Mimi let out a thrilled chirp, before trying to swallow Jareth’s phone and letting out a shrill scream as he stopped it.

‘Hey, hey no—’

It wiggled as he pulled it back, trying desperately to escape his firm hand; but after a few minutes Mimi tired itself out and settled for trembling with excitement and gnawing on Jareth’s thumb.

‘There we go,’ he muttered, finally releasing the creature and stroking its back as it shifted into the same plush toy Becky was holding and edged slowly towards the phone again. ‘Heh. I think she’s jealous.’

‘Mhm,’ Becky giggled out.

Then, Jareth’s eyes softened. ‘*I’m* a little jealous....’

‘Yeah,’ Becky agreed, quietly.

Mimi's tongue ran over Jareth's phone again before the mimic attempted to cuddle up close; making a loud purring sound and obscuring the camera as it did.

Jareth didn't stop Mimi and the purring eventually turned into a snore, and Becky found herself giggling at her pet.

'So....' Jareth started slowly, carefully lifting the sleeping mimic into his lap and adjusting the phone so he and Becky could see each other again. 'Do I finally get to know where you are?'

'Oh, *mm*,' Becky adjusted her position and coughed, blushing when Jareth let out his breath.

'It's fine,' he said gently. 'I'm just worried. Nobody's talking to me about anything. I thought maybe Adam could tell me what happened— Jezzibeth said that you and him were together that night and— Well... he doesn't seem like he's doing too good either.... What happened to you out there?'

Becky found herself chewing on her tongue, and knew she looked guilty.

'And I don't know what Marilyn's talking about, with Malinka,' he shrugged. 'She thinks she's blaming herself for what happened, or something.... I know you don't want to talk to people right now, but you should at least let her know that you don't hate her.'

'Mm,' Becky gave a heavy sigh and fiddled with the neck of her shirt. '*Okay....*'

'Okay,' Jareth echoed, gently.

Then there was a knock on Becky's door and she, heart jolting, quickly stuffed her phone under her pillow as one of the ward nurses entered her room.

'Miss Bloom?' they questioned.

'Mhm?' Becky responded with a nod, and the nurse checked their notes.

'*Difficulty speaking...*' they muttered to themselves. '*Hm....* Alright, Miss Bloom, it's time for your evening medication.'

Becky sat up straighter as the nurse handed her two small cups; one filled with water, and one with a small white tablet at the bottom.

She stared at them for a moment before the nurse gave her a gentle tap on the shoulder, and she heaved a sigh and swallowed the contents of both cups.

'Good,' said the nurse, moving to adjust Becky's bedding and uncovering her phone. They hesitated for a moment before picking it up and passing it to her. 'You don't have to hide this. Doctor Goodhuman *wants* to see you to talking to your friends.'

'*Mm*,' Becky mumbled, hanging her head so she didn't have to look the nurse in the eye.

'Alright, well. Lights off in twenty minutes,' said the nurse as they made for the door. 'I'll be back soon.'

Becky gave a timid nod as the nurse left her room— And then glanced down to Jareth.

He was sitting patiently, watching her with curiosity.

'Doctor?' he asked. 'Are you....'

'*Mhm*,' Becky nodded.

'I thought after the accident you uh, didn't want to go back to Shadow Oaks Hospital?'

'Oh, mm. *No*,' Becky shook her head, and quickly stood up; motioning to a sign on her wall and angling her phone so Jareth could read it.

‘Warm Waters Psychiatric Hospital,’ he read aloud. ‘You’re in Warm Waters?’  
‘Yeah,’ Becky managed, climbing back into bed and setting back down.  
‘That uh... nurse? They gave you medication,’ Jareth asked. ‘Is that a thing for you, now?’  
Becky tensed, and slowly nodded.  
‘Cool,’ Jareth returned the nod, and Becky felt her anxiety starting to ebb. He was always so supportive, and kind, and he never judged her.  
She tried to remind herself of that, and offered him an awkward smile.  
‘It’s...’ she paused, trying to find the words as they caught in her throat. She rolled them in her mouth, trying to remember how to speak; and it came out slowly. ‘To help me sleep.’  
‘Yeah?’  
‘Yeah. And... I take... anti-anxiety... in the morning....’  
‘Cool. Does it help?’  
Becky just shrugged. ‘It makes me tired....’  
‘Yeah?’  
‘Yeah. The doctor said that’s normal, though and... and to give it a week or two.’  
‘That’s fair,’ Jareth said. ‘You *do* seem tired.’  
‘Yeah I... should go to bed,’ said Becky. ‘Lights off soon and.... *Hm.*’  
‘Yeah,’ Jareth agreed, his voice soft. ‘Well.... I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay?’  
‘Mhm.’  
For a moment, the pair sat in silence; neither making the move to hang up. Then Jareth chuckled, and Becky blushed, and they both looked sheepish.  
‘So— Uh,’ Jareth rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Do you want me to stay on the phone until you’re asleep?’  
‘Y.... Yeah....’  
‘Yeah....’

—END—

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