

ANOTHER REBECCA

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To Phil, for the silver horse

One

Bex

February 2010

THE BRRRINGING TONE hurts my brain.

“Yeah?”

It’s the hospital. They found Rebecca collapsed in the bathroom. She’s had some kind of convulsion; they reckon because of her high temperature. Fuck. Can’t concentrate. Can’t place myself. I just want oblivion. Take me there, someone. Or something, preferably something from a green bottle.

Got this weird weakness in my right arm. I can barely hold the phone.

“Don’t know what you want from me.”

Bloody hell, what are they saying?

“She’s in good hands in’t she?” I say. “Come in, at this time of night, what the eff for?”

I switch the phone to the other ear. The nurse is giving me a right telling-off, making out I don’t love my daughter. ‘Course I do, whatever she wants to insinuate. “It’s the middle of the night.” I feel dizzy. “You should be giving her a sleeping pill or something.”

No reply, it’s a fucking heavy-breather. *Try again.*

“How about I come over first thing in the morning?”

Shadows in the darkness. Scary. But they can’t break through the thorns around my bed. Breathe out. The voice

on the phone has gone away.

Guilt bites. Spreads a black hole in my side.

Shifting up in the bed, my elbow slips in saliva. A bigger stain wets the middle of the bed.

Damn cat. Fuck you.

It was only a bit of a drink. Just a drop, but I mustn't drive. Ain't got enough money for a taxi. Wonder if I could manage the twenty-minute walk to the hospital. Sweat slithers down my forehead. Suppose I should go, shouldn't I? But she'll be all right. She's the strong one, Rebecca. Looks after me, she does. But I will. I will go in.

A sudden, disturbing recollection hits and I look down: the damp t-shirt riding up my thigh shows a finger-mark-shaped bruise. No.

It can't have been me that happened to. I won't look.

My head swings and my feet hurt when they touch the floor. Cars go past with a flood of yellow light. It's comforting, that and the traffic sounds, they're the only company I got.

I pull on a jumper and the first pair of jeans I find. *Takes forever.* Where's my hairbrush? I push my arms through air that is thick like treacle. Time falls away; minutes last longer than they should.

I'm still sitting with the hairbrush poised above my head. Fuck it. I'll put on a bit of lippy, eyeliner; there you have it. Respectable mum.

"Not too much blusher Mum." Her voice comes to me as I zip the make-up bag shut. Another thing she always says is *have some breakfast. Line your stomach at the beginning of the day. With food.* She feels more real to me when she's not here.

My head's banging. Could really use another fag, but the packet's empty. Shit.

It's nearly 2am. When did they ring? I'm in the living room – got a feeling I might have been sitting on the arm of the settee a while. Shit, I'm shaking all over. Should I ring the hospital back? Rebecca might be asleep by now. Best not dis-

turb her, eh?

Light outside. The window rattles in its rotten frame, jolting me upright. I'm still on the settee, wearing my trainers. Two thick-bottomed glasses glare at me from the coffee table. The rings in their bases add yet another shade of brown to the room.

I rub my eyes. Rub them harder.

A siren blares by. I stand on trembling legs and walk over to the narrow window, smeared with salt and grime behind the thin curtains that I drag open one at a time. The right one sags loose in the middle and I have to tug it inch by inch. Oops. As my head lurches, my fingers tighten on the fabric and another curtain hook detaches itself from the rail.

Our flat looks out over Sea View Road, not that there's any view of the sea here at the back end of Skeg-Vegas. Living room isn't much to write home about: poky and drab. Except for Rebecca's paintings, the only colourful things in it. I haven't got the energy to redecorate but hey, a glass or two of my favourite tipple is cheaper.

Speaking of, I'll have a quick livener before the day starts properly. Clear the head a bit.

I could have lived in a nice place in Nottingham: red brick Victorian or a brand new house on an executive estate. If I'd played my princess part properly and kept him happy. But that would've been a betrayal. Rebecca and me, we're all right. More like best friends than mother and daughter. We like the same music and clothes, enjoy watching TV together. We look after each other.

We didn't need him after all, Jack.

This time I remember to lock the front door when I go, not leave the key in it like I did last time. I make sure to put it in a safe pocket.