

SCARS WITH SHARP EDGES



VANESSA EVETTS

This is a five-chapter teaser.

Note: This novel is written in NZ English, which differs slightly from UK and US English.

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First printing 2021, Wellington, New Zealand

ISBN Softcover: 978-0-473-58434-4

ISBN EPub: 978-0-473-58436-8

ISBN Kindle: 978-0-473-58437-5

ISBN iBook: 978-0-473-58438-2

ISBN Hardcover: 978-0-473-58435-1



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Cover Art and Design by Sally Walsh, www.sillierthansally.com

Copyedited by www.torncurtainpublishing.com

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Chapter One

A vibration of shame coursed through Rebecca as Ben's naked arm rested against hers. She batted down the hatches and closed herself into the shelter they'd constructed to hide away from the storm, a dark place where her own judgment couldn't find her.

"Wow!" His word echoed in the deafening silence that had made its home between them.

Regret rolled in under the doors like smoke, sucking the oxygen from the air. Rebecca crossed her arms over her exposed breasts, clasped the covers in her fingertips and sucked in a shallow breath.

"Did I hurt you?" Ben whispered.

"A little."

The bed creaked as he turned towards her, oblivious. The hair on her arms rose in protest as he brushed a strand from her face.

"Are you okay, Rebecca?"

What have you done?

Ben pressed his lips to her bare shoulder. "Didn't you enjoy it?"

Guilt wedged itself in her throat. She swallowed in an attempt to forget, to ignore the gnawing at her insides.

"It was fine."

"Fine?"

"Ben, it's different for girls. I'm told it gets better."

"Practice makes perfect then." She recoiled from his warm breath.

"I need to go." Rebecca launched out from underneath his searching hands and twisted herself in the covers. "Do you mind

turning the other way?”

“But we just—”

“I know, but—” Shame painted her cheeks red. *Is this how Eve felt when she discovered she was naked in the garden of Eden?* Rebecca imagined herself hiding in the bush, trying to stay out of sight of God, the one who sees all, knows all.

Her eyes stung with the threat of tears.

Ben edged closer. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before ... touched before.”

“Ben,” she pleaded.

“Fine, whatever.” He tugged the pillow out from under his head and dropped it on his face with a moan.

Rebecca slid off the bed, gathered her clothes from the floor, and keeping one eye on Ben’s integrity, slipped into the ensuite. She clenched her teeth as her shivering fingers fumbled with the lock, then dropped her clothes on the cold tiles. Gripping the stone basin between her hands, Rebecca studied her reflection.

What have you done? she whispered, a private message between the two. When neither offered a reply, she splashed water on her face hoping that would be enough to cleanse her, to bring her back to her senses. It wasn’t.

She reached between her legs and winced when evidence of her weakness stained her hand. *Why did you do it? Why couldn’t you have waited? How could you have been so weak?*

She spun the faucet to hot, then stepped under the steaming water and willed it to wash her guilt away. To miraculously return her, transport her back twenty-four hours ... twelve hours ... six ... even one would do. It didn’t.

She dressed in silence, then braved the scene of the crime.

Ben had dressed and was perched on the edge of the bed, his eyes full of answers to questions she’d never ask. She could already see he’d have a reason, a justification, a solution, and she didn’t have the strength to hear any of them.

“We both decided,” he said.

“I know.”

“You regret it though?”

“Yes,” Rebecca whispered. “I’m sorry Ben, but I do.”

“What can I do?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I want to be alone.”

Ben stood. “I can drive you.”

“No,” Rebecca held up her hand to halt his advance. “Thank you. I’ll walk.”

“But ...”

“Ben, please.”

“You wanted it. I don’t understand why you’re acting like this?”

Rebecca raised her eyes to his but failed to answer his pained words.

“I didn’t force you,” he stated, making sure she knew.

“No. You didn’t force me.”

“What’s wrong with you, then?”

“I wanted to wait. I’ve always wanted to wait.”

“But we ... we both decided. It was both of us. I didn’t force you. You could’ve said no, I would’ve stopped.”

Her shoulders dipped. “I got tired of saying no.”

A dark cloud drifted across his features. “You’re blaming me. I thought you liked it. I thought you wanted it.”

“I’m not blaming you. I’m blaming me. I should have been stronger.”

“What? To fight me off? It wasn’t like that. I was gentle with you.” Ben stepped forward. “I thought you wanted it.”

“You’re right, it wasn’t like that. You didn’t force me, Ben. I don’t blame you, okay. I just feel bad and I want to be alone.”

Ben looked as though his heart had been ripped from his chest.

“I’m sorry,” she offered. “I’m sorry that I ruined it for you.”

Ben shook his head. “I didn’t want it like this. I didn’t know you would—”

“It’s okay. I’ll be okay. I just need time.”

“Away from me? From us?” Ben’s voice faltered.

“Yes.”

He sighed his acquiescence. “Will you call me when you get home, so I know you’re safe? Please.”

“I will.” Rebecca hesitated, then stepped towards him and

pressed a light kiss to his cheek. He was her boyfriend of three years, the only boy she'd ever loved, the one she thought she'd marry. That had been his argument in the end. *You know we're going to get married eventually, so why wait?"*

Rebecca slid through the front door and leaned back against it. She winced when the click betrayed her presence in the silent house. She'd hoped to remain unseen, to be able to ghost herself through the rest of the day.

"Hey Bub, you're early." Rebecca's father peeked out from the kitchen, where his bible lay open on the counter.

"Plans changed, Dad. I'm going to study." Rebecca made for the stairs, unwilling to allow him a second to recognise her torment.

"Hang on." A scraping chair on the hard, wooden floor grazed her nerves.

"Dad, I've got study to do." She took the first two steps in one stride.

"What's going on, Bexi?"

Her body obeyed her father with a pause. She turned and placed her hand on the banister for balance. "Nothing, Dad. I've got an exam tomorrow. I need to study."

Mr Gowan leaned against the wall at the base of the stairs and crossed one ankle over the other. "Since when have you been stressed about an exam? You'll ace it like all the others."

"I ace them because I study."

His eyes narrowed. "Have you eaten?"

Rebecca's stomach rumbled. "I'm not hungry."

"Come on, I'll make your favourite. Let's take a few minutes before you get started."

"Dad, I really don't—"

"Come on, Bexi. Just you and I." Her father walked back into the kitchen without waiting for her response or even considering that she wouldn't follow him. Of course, she would. She was Rebecca Gowan, the straight A, obedient, happy pastor's kid.

She slid onto the stool and watched her father work. What would

he say if she told him that his only daughter had betrayed his trust, had betrayed the values she'd made her own? That she'd fallen into the trap he'd always warned her about?

Tom held up the knife. "Triangles or rectangles?"

"I'm not five." Rebecca moaned.

He smiled. "You'll always be my little girl, Bexi, no matter what."

No matter what ... The words clawed at her heart. For the first time in her life, she believed her father's words to be false. For the first time she'd done something there was no coming back from. Something she'd have to hide, something she'd have to lie about. How could she have been so stupid?

Tom placed a sandwich in front of her, then answered his phone which was vibrating on the counter.

Rebecca caught the subtle change in the tone of his voice that indicated his transition from Dad to Pastor Tom Gowan, a man who'd dedicated his whole life to his Christian faith and the betterment of Aotearoa, the tiny country they called home.

What would he think of her if he knew what a disappointment she'd become?

"What's eating you?" Tom slid onto a stool beside her.

"Nothing, Dad." She picked up her cheese and salami sandwich and took a bite.

"Everything okay with Ben?"

The bread turned stale in her throat. She shrugged and skulled her juice, buying herself time.

"He's a good kid," her father added.

Rebecca thought about the knife that'd recently been in her father's hands and what he might do with it if he knew what she'd just done with that 'good kid'. "We're fine, Dad."

Her father watched her as she pushed her plate away. "I thought you were hanging out after class today."

"We did."

"Did he do something stupid? Do you need me to read him the riot act?"

"No, Dad."

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Well, maybe some time apart will do you good.”

“What do you mean?”

Tom handed her an envelope. “This came today.”

“You opened it?”

“I couldn’t help myself.” His eyes blazed with pride. “You got in, Bexi! You’re going to America in four weeks!”

“What? I got in?” Rebecca tore the envelope from his hands and read the letter. It was true. She’d been accepted into one of the best worship mentorships in the world.

“We’re so proud of you.”

Rebecca froze at her father’s words.

“Now I know something’s wrong. This is amazing news, Bexi. This is everything we’ve been working for! You’re going to Unity!” He took hold of her shoulders and tried to shake some excitement into her.

“I am excited. I’m just a bit overwhelmed,” she lied. “Moving to the other side of the world on my own, my final exams and conference, not to mention leaving everything and everyone I know... It’s a lot.”

“I didn’t know you were feeling like that.”

“I’m fine, Dad, I just need to focus on getting through the next few weeks.” She slid off the stool and brushed the crumbs off her hands.

“Then we’ll celebrate,” Tom said, tapping on the letter.

“Deal. Thanks, Dad.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek, then made for the stairs.

“Bexi.”

Rebecca’s stomach sank, her feet refused to take another step. She turned back towards her father. “A-ha?”

“I’m here when you’re ready to talk about whatever’s bothering you.” Without waiting for a response, he sat down, slid his glasses onto his nose and picked up his bible. He didn’t need her to respond. He just needed her to know she could talk to him.

And she could. *About everything but this.*

2

Rebecca's whole body convulsed as she bent over the toilet bowl. It'd been four months since she'd received the acceptance letter, three since she packed up her whole life and moved to the other side of the world to chase her dream.

Ben hadn't even pretended to be happy for her, and when she'd told him the relationship was over, he was furious. He'd said things he'd probably regret, and she got on that plane and didn't look back.

The mentorship consisted of being thrown in the deep end and attempting to learn how to swim while drowning. The church was a fast-moving machine, and soon it became clear that those who couldn't hack the pace wouldn't survive the first year, let alone a lifetime, in ministry. Usually, first-year interns were billeted with a family from the church, but when Bex missed out on a placement, she'd opted to take up a vacancy advertised through the local community college bulletin board. As a result, she'd been living on takeout, zero downtime and minimal sleep, and right now her body was staging a coup, no holds barred.

Either that, or the three-day old curry she'd shoved down her throat at 1 a.m. on Saturday morning after practice had a dark secret.

Once her stomach stopped heaving, she cleaned herself up, then returned to her desk and hit the videocall icon on her laptop.

Her parent's faces bounced into view and the tension inside her subsided.

"Hey, sorry I'm late. I was sick."

"What do you mean, sick?" Jenny asked.

"I think I've got a bug."

"Oh no."

"You sure it's not morning sickness, sis?" her brother Dean yelled from just outside the range of the camera.

Rebecca paled.

"Ignore him, he misses having you around to harass," Jenny said.

Dean popped into view between their parents. "Or, maybe our perfect little sis has flown off the rails during her time in the land of the free and has got herself a little bun in the oven."

"You're hilarious," Rebecca said dismissively, then turned away from the camera to inhale a deep breath as Dean's words wrapped around her lungs like clingfilm.

"Get outta here, trouble-maker," Jenny shoved her son playfully.

"Well, you never know with PK's," Dean said, winking at the camera.

He wasn't wrong. Pastor's kids did have a reputation. There was something about the constant surveillance. Rebecca was all too aware that everything she did, every decision she made, reflected on her parents, and that one bad choice had the potential to destroy everything they'd spent their lives building.

The constant demand to be perfect was suffocating. Rebecca had managed to manoeuvre through her life reasonably unscathed, until recently.

"Oh, looks like I struck a nerve," Dean teased.

"Stop it!" Tom warned, then leaned in, concern etched on his

face. "How long have you been sick, Bexi?"

"A few days. I think it was rice." She couldn't deny how much the words sounded like a lie... *were a lie*. She may have only been vomiting for a few days but truthfully, she'd not been feeling herself for a while.

Our perfect little sis ... has got herself a little bun in the oven.

It was not the rice.

No. You're in the clear. It's been four months. You would have known.

"You look terrible honey, are you hydrating?"

"I can't really keep it down."

"Just sip it, as much as you can, it'll keep you out of hospital, but if it doesn't improve, you've got insurance so don't hesitate to see a doctor."

"I know, Mum. I will."

Dean's words twisted in her gut and ascended with force. Rebecca launched out of her chair without a word and ran for the toilet.

"Sorry," she breathed, collapsing back on the chair in front of her parents.

"Man sis, that was gross," Dean said, then proceeded to gag loudly.

"Don't you have somewhere to be, son?" Tom asked.

"Yeah, yeah. I got distracted by the Hollywood-worthy sound effects." He leaned down to kiss Jenny on the cheek, then swung his bag over his shoulder and blew Rebecca a kiss. "Miss you, sis."

"You too."

He craned his neck as if to study her. "Looks like you've put on a bit of weight there."

"Gee, thanks," she said, suddenly self-conscious.

"Not to worry. A few more days of spewing your guts out and you'll be sweet."

"Dean!" Jenny slapped him across the back of the head.

"Thanks, Mum," Rebecca said.

"Hey." Dean rubbed his head.

"You deserved it," Jenny, Tom and Rebecca said in unison.

Dean's face broke into a smile. "It was worth it. Love you." He

traced an hourglass figure with his hands, just out of reach of Jenny.
“All of you.”

Rebecca narrowed her eyes. “You’re a dork!”

“I’ll get him for you, Rebecca, don’t you worry,” Jenny said.

“A laxative in his coffee should do the trick.”

“I heard that,” Dean called out.

Rebecca smiled, then placed her elbow on the desk and rested her head in her palm. “He’s right though, I’ve been so busy, I haven’t been eating properly, or getting out as much as I’d like, to exercise. I’ve barely even seen the city and I’ve been here for three months.”

“You need to look after yourself, honey, or you’ll be no good to anyone.”

“Easier said than done.” A yawn betrayed her exhaustion.

“Bexi,” her father’s concerned tone wrapped her in warmth.
“Do you need me to speak to someone?”

“No, Dad. I’m okay, they warned us it would be all-consuming. I’m just tired. I’ll be fine in a few days.”

“As long as you’re sure.”

Rebecca nodded.

“Looks like you need to get to bed. I’ll call tomorrow to check in,” Jenny said.

“Thanks, Mum.” Rebecca closed the screen and lowered her head to her arms in exhaustion.

The jovial sound of her brother’s voice gave way to accusation.

He’s wrong.

Getting up, she moved in slow motion, taking note of every movement, of every extra pain, every bout of nausea, every extra tear and every extra pound she’d carried in the last few months until the truth became something she couldn’t ignore or call by any other name. *Oh God.*

She stood in front of the mirror and finally acknowledged what her brother had seen without a hint of awareness. As she whipped her shirt and pants off and studied her form, all of her shame dragged itself back into her life. She pressed her palms into her breasts and winced, she turned side on and traced her fingers over

the unfamiliar curve of her abdomen and her heart cried out.

Exhaustion. Hormonal. Nausea. Weight gain.

“No. No. No,” she chanted, as if the mere sound of her refusal to admit the truth would alter her reality. She ran into the bathroom and started rifling through the cupboards looking for the one thing that could rid her of this nightmare. The one thing that could confirm what she desperately needed to believe.

You’re overworked and you’ve got food poisoning, that’s all it is.

She pleaded with God to make it so, though she knew she’d no right to be begging him for anything. She’d made a mistake. This was the consequence.

“No! This cannot be happening.”

She pushed everything haphazardly back into the cupboard, entered her flatmates bedroom and started rifling through her drawers. This time she was rewarded for her efforts. She dragged her body back into the bathroom and sat on the toilet, blinded by fear.

The minutes passed like hours. She sat frozen, her dream, her life, her reputation unravelling before her eyes. She held the box in her shaking hands, the answer to this life-changing question at the tip of her fingertips, and yet she couldn’t bring herself to open the box. She didn’t want to confirm the one thing she already knew, because knowing meant the life she had always imagined, was over.

“Hey Bex, you home?”

Rebecca startled from her dangerous ruminations and glanced at the box in her hands. Panic launched her into action. She ran into her bedroom and glanced around before shoving the box in the top drawer of her bedside table and walking out to meet her flatmate.

“Hey, Renee.”

“Hey girl, you look terrible. You still feeling ill?”

Rebecca nodded, sliding onto a dining room chair.

“You want me to make you a smoothie or coffee or something?”

The clenching in her stomach made her wince in protest.

“I guess not,” Renee said. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks for the offer. How was college?”

“Good. I’m meeting the crew at a rally on the weekend. If you’re

feeling better, you're welcome to come."

"What kind of rally?"

"Women's rights, and the like. We've got to stick together, you know."

"What do you mean women's rights?" Bex asked, dreading Renee's answer.

Renee added creamer to her coffee, then took a seat opposite Rebecca.

"They've been trying to strip funding from our local clinic. We're not going to stand idly by."

Bex tried to still the nerves in her gut, before her face gave her away. This was not the first time she'd been present for these kinds of discussions, but it was the first time she'd been actively involved in one.

"You're talking about planned parenthood?"

"Yeah," Renee said, sipping her drink. "They offer all sorts of essential services to women, which our community desperately needs."

"Like abortion." The word tasted foul on her tongue, as if even being a part of this conversation was betraying her ideals.

"Of course, and other things."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. I don't agree with abortion."

Renee's shoulders dipped before she smiled. "There are plenty of women who would never have an abortion themselves but actively support other women's rights to choose what's best for them. Free choice is a pillar of our society. We have to fight for it."

"But there are other clinics that provide those services, aren't there? Clinics that aren't such strong advocates for unrestricted abortion, that aren't so political?"

"There are other clinics, but planned parenthood does a lot of good for the community and I personally have no problem with unrestricted abortion. All women should have the right to access whatever healthcare they need."

Rebecca sighed, unwilling to get into a heated argument when she knew she didn't have the capacity to both respect her own views and respect her friend's right to have opinions that contradicted

hers.

She was too exhausted and too terrified. “I appreciate you feel strongly about that, and you have a right to your own beliefs, but it’s just not something I could be a part of. I can’t... I’m sorry.” Tears touched her cheeks before she realised.

“I’m sorry, Bex, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t, I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, I’m just really tired.”

“You sure?”

Rebecca rose from the chair. “Yeah, I’m going to try to get some sleep.”

“Okay, call out if you need anything. I’ll be here all night.”

“Thanks.”

For the next three hours, Rebecca lay in silence unable to think of anything but the box hidden in the top drawer. She desperately needed to sleep but couldn’t escape the plague of her thoughts. Fear, shame, guilt, anger, heartbreak and doubt were on a constant loop in her head.

Homesickness clutched at her. She desperately needed her mother’s soothing words, her warm embrace, her hope for a future Rebecca now feared she’d never get to have, but even that was tainted by the knowledge that this shame was something she was destined to carry alone. As much as her mother loved her, this was not something Rebecca could ever discuss with her. There was no way she’d survive her mother’s disappointment.

She picked up the framed picture from her bedside table and traced her fingers over each face. They’d taken this picture on the night of her final exam. She’d finally finished her Fine Arts degree, she’d been selected from thousands of applicants into this prestigious mentorship and she’d survived her youth unscathed, or so they’d all thought.

Her heart ached. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I let you down.”

The pride written in their expressions, the memory of their touch and sound of their encouragement wasn’t enough to douse

the flame of panic gaining a foothold inside her. She'd had a four-month reprieve where she'd thought she could move on. She'd had a taste of the fantasy that she could be forgiven for her sins and experience no real consequence for going against her own beliefs and giving in to temptation, but she knew that was no longer true. Even if the test came back negative, something had changed. She couldn't pretend any more. She was lathered in hypocrisy.

Seventeen weeks. It has been seventeen weeks since she'd run away from her shame and buried it where no one would ever find it. For seventeen weeks, this secret had been lying dormant inside her waiting for the perfect moment to erupt. Seventeen weeks...

The realisation of what that meant for the possible life inside her launched her off the bed and into her ensuite. She couldn't wait another second. She had to know before it was too late—. She doubled over as the mere thought of the impossible option tore apart her insides. She sobbed as the truth took hold.

It's already too late.

3

The lines blinked at her, like an alarm blaring in her head. Lines. Two lines. One was her hope, the other her nightmare.

Her hands shook as her numbing body sat paralysed on the edge of her bed. This was it. This was her sin as it wrapped its barbed tendrils around her life and pulled tight.

“Hey hun,” the door creaked open as Renee stepped inside. “Are you hungry? I’ve made—”

Rebecca gasped as Renee’s eyes moved to the evidence in her hands. She didn’t have time to hide it and she didn’t have the strength to breathe, let alone respond with words.

“Oh ... Oh, Bex ... I didn’t know.”

She caught the pity in her friend’s eyes as a heartbreaking wail escaped her clutches, and she doubled over, dropping the test on the floor. Renee rushed to her side. “Oh honey, I’m here.”

How was this happening? How had one bad decision ruined her whole life?

“This isn’t the end of the world, Bex. It’s going to be okay.”

Rebecca sat upright and turned towards her friend, tears streaming. “No. It’s not okay. Nothing about this is okay.”

Renee brushed the hair from Rebecca’s face.

How did she find herself here, in this situation? How could she have been so stupid? Her whole life had been about excellence and diligence and obedience and yet... when it counted, she’d failed.

She'd not been any better, she'd not resisted temptation or stuck to her values, or made her parents proud. She'd become their greatest shame. She'd ruined everything.

Her face shook with a desperation only she could understand. There was no solution to this problem, only a choice between two options, both of which would ruin the rest of her life.

"What about the father?" Renee asked. "Is he in the picture?"

"No."

"Is it someone I know? Or someone in the program?"

Rebecca's eyes darted to Renee's. "No! And you can't say anything."

"Of course I won't. You don't have to worry about that, I'm on your side." She wrapped her arm around Rebecca's shoulder and tucked her into her embrace.

"What am I going to do?"

"I can't answer that. But you do have options."

Rebecca shook her head. "Options are the one thing I don't have."

"Of course you do, Bex. It's still early. You could have the baby, you could adopt it out, you could terminate the pregnancy and try again when you're ready."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean, no, I can't."

"You can't what?"

Rebecca launched off the bed and made for the door. "I can't do this. I can't be pregnant."

Seventeen weeks.

Her name rang out behind her as she grabbed her keys off the bench and ran out the front door. She couldn't stop moving, she had to disappear, to run away from this nightmare and pray to God it didn't find her.

Night descended like a dark mist and stayed long after the sun had risen. It was a malevolent haze robbing her of even a breath of hope.

However hard she looked, she could see nothing but the bleak reality of her shame wrapped in a life torn to shreds by her own fear and judgment.

Was it really a choice, when both options would bring her to her knees before a god that would abandon her to her guilt?

Did she truly believe that God would abandon her?

How many times had she told young people that God loves them no matter what? *No matter what?*

Now, she wasn't sure. She'd always believed that anything could be forgiven. That's certainly what she'd told others. But she was a pastor's kid ... she was in ministry ... she was held to a higher standard. It wasn't that simple, not for her.

Everything she knew to be true looked so different from the other side. The standards she'd always clung to now felt like a noose around her neck. The sanctity of life had been woven into every thought, every belief since she was in her infancy—her entire belief system around abortion was based on it—and yet she didn't feel as though she'd been granted a miracle. Instead, she was overwhelmed by the burden of her shame wrapped in skin. There was nowhere to turn.

She made her way back home and crawled into her bed, but her sleep was tormented as one scenario after another played out in her dreams, until she woke in a panic, unaware of what was fact and what was fiction.

She opened the top drawer and drew out the pregnancy test, praying it was all a bad dream. Two lines taunted her from the thin plastic pinched between her fingers.

Despondent, she scooted back under the covers and squeezed her eyes tight in an attempt to hide away from the truth.

“Hey, Mum,” she imagined her mother’s face popping into view on her laptop. “Surprise, I’m pregnant.”

“Don’t even joke about it, Rebecca. You’ve no idea how many times I’ve heard those words. It’s the last thing I want to hear from you.”

“I’m not joking.”

“How could you of all people, be pregnant?” her mother jibed.

“I’m pretty sure pastor’s daughters get pregnant the same way as all the others.”

Jenny paused, then shook her head and gathered up her papers from the table. “Did your brothers put you up to this? It’s not funny.”

“I’m not laughing.”

Rebecca’s dad stepped into the dreamy haze behind his wife. “Hey Bexi, what’s up? You feeling better?”

“She’s called to let me know she’s pregnant,” Jenny said with a disbelieving tilt to her head.

“Good one. Is it April fools?”

“It’s September, Dad.”

“Nice try, honey.” He blew them both a kiss and walked out of view.

“But, Dad...” she called out.

“Love you,” her father’s voice echoed back in response.

Rebecca shook her head and turned back to her mother. “Mum, listen to me. I need you to listen.”

“I don’t have time for this.” Jenny stuffed her sermon notes and lunch into her bag.

“Mum, this is important. Will you stop for a second?”

“Rebecca, this is ridiculous. We both know you’re not stupid enough to get yourself pregnant.”

“I didn’t get myself pregnant. It takes—”

“Good. Look I’ve got an appointment in ten minutes. I’ll call you later, have fun today.”

“Mum!” Rebecca grabbed the laptop with both hands. “Please ...”

“I love you!” Jenny blew a kiss before ending the video call.

“Mum. It’s true ... it’s true!”

The words echoed on her lips as she woke from her dream, the pregnancy test still clasped in her hand.

“You okay?” Renee asked, perched beside her on the bed.

Rebecca shook the sleep from her head and dragged herself into a seated position. *“I’m sorry. Did I wake you?”*

“You were crying out.”

Rebecca turned towards the window. *“I was dreaming about*

telling my parents.”

“It didn’t sound like it went well.”

“They didn’t believe me.”

“Sounds like they’d have a reason—”

“Yeah ... it’s what comes after that which scares me most.”

Renee brushed her hand down Rebecca’s arm and motioned towards the bedside table. “I brought you breakfast and a cup of tea.”

Rebecca tucked her legs underneath her to allow Renee more room. “Thanks, but I don’t think I—”

Renee placed the warm cup in her hands. “It’s meant to help with nausea, and calm your nerves—two birds, one stone.”

“Thanks,” Rebecca squeezed her lips together as a fresh wave of hopelessness crashed over her.

“Oh, honey. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, then took a sip of the hot tea to give her a minute to compose herself.

“Have you thought about what you want to do?”

Rebecca shook her head. “I haven’t been able to think about anything else, but—”

“If this pregnancy isn’t what you want, I can help you.”

Rebecca’s grip on the mug tightened. “That isn’t one of my options.”

“Are you sure, Bex? There’s nothing wrong with making that decision. Millions of women have—”

“No!” Rebecca’s head shook from side to side with rapid jerks. “No.”

“Okay. It’s okay. I won’t mention it again.” Renee touched her palm to Rebecca’s knee. “Yesterday I said you have options, and you said you didn’t have any. What did you mean by that?”

Rebecca’s eyes glazed with fear. “I can’t have this baby.”

Renee tilted her head to the side as her brow creased. “Why not?”

“Because it was a mistake, it was—”

“Tell me.”

“I only had sex one time.” Rebecca’s face crumbled under the

weight of her revelation. “I didn’t even want to. I—”

“You what?”

Rebecca shook her head. “I loved him, but I wasn’t ready, and now ... this will ...”

“Will what, Bex? What are you saying?”

“It’ll ruin me, my future, my reputation, my family, their legacy. It’ll ruin everything.”

“Honey, you’re not the only woman who has experienced this, and you’re certainly not the only Christian. Whether you believe it or not, you do have options. If you don’t want to have this baby, you don’t have to.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Of course, it is. Nobody knows and nobody has to. This doesn’t have to ruin your life.”

Rebecca’s stomach revolted. “You don’t understand.”

“So, help me understand.”

“Abortion isn’t an option for me.”

“Why not?”

Tears tracked down Rebecca’s cheeks. “Because it’s murder.”

Renee’s shoulders dropped as she exhaled a heavy sigh and leaned in to comfort her friend. “Honey, at the moment, this is just a clump of cells. It’s not murder. That’s just what pro-lifers say to scare women.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I don’t agree with you, Renee. I believe it’s murder. I do.”

“But it’s still early. You can just take a few pills and forget this ever happened, it’s that simple.”

Renee’s words reached in and clawed at Rebecca’s insides. If only that were true.

“I’m four months pregnant. It’s not that simple.”

“Four months? You mean the father is in—”

“New Zealand ... Yes.”

“Well, that could make it easier. If you decide to adopt the baby out, they’d never have to know—you’re on the other side of the world.”

Grief overwhelmed Rebecca. How could she think of leaving her

child behind? And yet, the mere thought of having a child felt like she was sacrificing her own life.

“I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t have a baby and leave it.”

“So, does that mean you want to keep the baby?”

Rebecca’s face contorted with emotion as heavy tears fell again. “I don’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice. It’s just not always between things that we like.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Honey, I’ll support you. If you want to keep the baby, I can help you talk to your parents, or the church—whatever you need. If you need me to help you find an adoption agency or if you change your mind and want to book an appointment at the clinic, I’ll be right beside you, okay.”

Rebecca tucked herself back under the covers.

“I’ll give you some space to think, but it’s not too late, Bex. In this day and age, you don’t need to suffer through a pregnancy you don’t want.”

When she didn’t answer, Renee stood and rearranged the covers, then pressed a kiss to her friend’s head. “You’re going to be okay.”

Fear stole the words from Rebecca’s tongue. As much as she wanted this nightmare to be over, to believe that she could solve her problem with a few little pills and then move on with her life pretending it never happened, she knew it was impossible. She simply couldn’t go ahead with taking the life of something she’d always believed was a miracle. She’d been raised to believe that a baby was a baby from the moment of conception, and who was she to play God?

But how could she have this baby? How could she give birth to a child who would bring only shame to her family? A baby which would forever be evidence of her failure, of her sin? How could she bring a new life into the world when their very existence was shrouded in guilt, regret and disappointment? What kind of mother would that make her?

How could she ever have the courage to face her family, her

community, those who had invested everything to position her for ministry? What else would she do with her life, when it was the only future she'd ever imagined? Scenario after scenario tormented her every thought as she lay desperate to lose herself in the oblivion of sleep.

The peace she craved didn't come with sleep. Instead, she saw the image of her mother standing in the doorway of Rebecca's childhood home.

Rebecca glanced down at the sleeping newborn in her arms.

"Welcome home, darling," her mother paused. "Who's this?"

"This is your grandchild."

The adoration on her mother's face turned cold. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You heard me," Rebecca said.

"Is this why you didn't want us to pick you up, because you..." Her mother's words halted as Rebecca's father stepped up beside her, his eyes drawn to the bundle in her arms.

"Rebecca ..."

"Dad. Meet your grandson."

His eyes darted between them, as lines of awareness wove across his face. "What have you done?"

"I had a baby."

"How? ... When?"

"When? He's four weeks old. And how? Well, I'm pretty sure I don't need to answer that question."

"Don't be crass," her mother answered.

"You can't have a baby." Her father's disappointment clamped its fist around her heart and squeezed.

She lowered her eyes to her son. The profound love she felt for him dispelled all fear. "The fact that my son is asleep in my arms, proves your statement false."

"What will people think?" Jenny asked, raising her hand to the doorframe as if she needed support to stand.

"I guess they'll think the truth."

"What truth? That the church paid for you to go to the most prestigious

worship program in the world and you thank them by—”

Tom’s eyes widened as shock robbed him of his ability to think clearly, let alone speak.

“What are we going to do?” Jenny’s eyes darted to her husband. His blank stare offered no solutions.

Rebecca placed her palm flat on her son’s back. “Maybe you could be like Jesus and choose love.”

“How dare you preach to us? Look at what you’ve done!”

“How dare you?” Rebecca seethed. “You haven’t even looked at your own grandchild.”

“Right now, I’m struggling to look at my own child. I don’t even recognise you.”

“I’m your daughter.”

“Not the one I raised.”

Pain sparked in Rebecca’s chest; its overwhelming takeover was only thwarted by the weight of her son in her arms. “You’ve always taught me that children are miracles.”

“Not like this.”

Rebecca’s gut tightened with motherly defence. “Would you have rather I got an abortion?”

Her mother’s face drained of all colour. If she’d not been holding a newborn, Rebecca imagined her cheek would be stinging with her mother’s disapproval.

“I would have preferred you didn’t get pregnant in the first place. We trusted you!”

Her father’s eyes glistened with tears, but his lips remained firmly sealed.

Tears touched Rebecca’s cheeks and she carefully took a step backwards, wrapping both arms around her son. “You know the saddest part?”

“That you’ve ruined your life? That you’ve thrown away everything we’ve worked for? That we’re the ones who have to face the congregation?”

“No.” Rebecca’s chin quivered with heartbreak. “The saddest part is that you’re so bound by fear of what other people will think, you’re rejecting your own grandchild.”

"It's not like that," Tom finally found his voice.

"It's exactly like that."

Tom stepped towards her, his arm out. "Come inside. We need to sort this out, as a family."

"Sort what out?"

Tom's eyes darted to her arms. "We need to talk about our options."

Bex laughed and brushed the tears from her cheeks. "I've made my choice, and you've obviously made yours. I believed you when you preached about unconditional love. I clearly shouldn't have."

"Come inside, Rebecca. People are starting to stare."

"I don't give a damn if people are staring, Dad." She stopped trying to hide the emotion in her voice. "I came here to give you a chance, but you've proven you'd rather cling to the illusion of perfection, than love me."

"I do love you."

"Do you? Do you love the flawed imperfect me that is standing in front of you, or just the perfect picture you've created in your head, the one I've spent my whole life trying to live up to?"

"Rebecca!" His voice was firm and immovable. "Come inside."

"No." She shook her head and drew her son closer to her body. "I know what that kind of love feels like now. My child is alive because of it, and I won't apologise for that."

The vehemence of her conviction shocked Rebecca awake. She launched upright, ripped the covers off her legs, then burst into tears at the realisation the scene hadn't been real, unlike the love she'd felt for her child, and her grief over the potential loss of a family and life she loved.

When her tears had run dry, she skulled a glass of water, called in sick to the church office, and tucked herself back under the covers, craving the nothingness of sleep. Even if the film kept reeling, it couldn't be worse than being awake and facing the reality of her situation.

For two days, Rebecca languished in a pit of denial and misery, until Renee forced her way back into the room, pulled back the curtains and yanked off her covers. "Get up!"

“I don’t want to.”

“Well, I’m your friend, and your time of denial is over. This is happening, cupcake, and you’re either going to embrace it and start celebrating the life in your womb or you’re going to do something about it. Both of those things will become more complicated the longer you wait, so ... come on.”

“I’m not ready.”

“I’m sorry Bex, but you’re four months in. You don’t have the luxury of time.”

Rebecca exhaled an exhausted breath and got up, walked into the bathroom closing the heavy door behind her, and turned the shower to hot.

By the time she re-emerged wrapped in her dressing gown twenty minutes later, Renee had cleaned up her apathetic mess, opened the windows, and was sitting on the freshly made bed holding out a steaming cup of tea. She tapped the bed next to her.

Rebecca accepted the tea and sat down.

“What have you decided?”

She raised her eyes to Renee’s. Her beliefs had made the decision for her.

“Bex?”

“I’ve decided to face the consequences of my actions.”

“What does that mean?”

Rebecca shook her head “I don’t know. But I do know I can’t have an abortion, Renee. A big part of me wishes I thought the way you do, but I don’t.”

“That’s okay. How about we book an appointment at the clinic and you can see a nurse? They’ll confirm the pregnancy and talk about the options. I can go with you, if you’d like.”

“I don’t want to go to Planned Parenthood.”

“Bex, it’s not that—”

“I don’t want to go there.”

“Okay, that’s okay. I’ll find another clinic.”

“Thank you, Renee.”

“You’re welcome.”

True to her word, Renee found another local clinic, booked an appointment for the following week, and stayed by Rebecca's side for the tests, the scan and the conversation. The second Rebecca saw her baby on the ultrasound her decision was made final. No matter what it cost her, she was going to have this baby.

4

It had taken another two weeks for Rebecca to garner enough courage to call Ben. She'd rung and hung up more times than she could count and she'd got away with it—until today, when Ben decided to take measures into his own hands and call the number that kept pranking him.

“What the hell do you want? Why do you keep calling me?”

Rebecca could taste the fear in her breath.

“Who are you?”

“It's me, Ben” she whispered.

“Me who?”

Her own name wedged in her throat. “Be- Rebecca. Rebecca Gowan.”

“Rebecca? Seriously, what is this? Why have you been pranking me?”

“I haven't been, I mean... it was me, but—”

“But what? Are you okay?”

Rebecca's silence screamed down the line.

“Rebecca?”

“I'm okay, it's just—”

“Just what?” Ben's words were laced with frustration and impatience.

“Ben—”

“What? Rebecca, for goodness’ sake, speak woman, you’re weirding me out.”

“Okay.” She pursed her lips and exhaled before closing her eyes and inhaling a deep breath of courage. “I’m pregnant.”

Ben’s shock lashed down the line and struck her with force. He didn’t need to speak for her to understand. She’d felt it herself. The horror, the panic, the fear.

“Ben, say something. Please.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“That’s what I’m calling to talk about.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” The sound of her words took on a new edge. “Ben, it’s yours.”

Ben’s response sounded like a laugh, and Rebecca felt its fearsome vibration in her bones.

“You’re not doing that.”

“Doing what? I thought you’d want to know.”

“Well, you were wrong.”

“Ben,” Rebecca pleaded. “Can’t we just talk about this?”

“No, I’m not interested in whatever you’re trying to do here.”

“I’m not trying to do anything, I just—”

“Stop talking.”

Ben’s demand stole the words from her tongue.

“Look, we made a mistake, I repented,” he added, as if that was the only answer she needed.

“You’ve repented? So, where does that leave me?”

“I suggest you take that to God.”

“Take it to God? Are you serious? What, you think he’s gonna forgive me and this baby is going to cease to exist?”

“Maybe you’ll lose it.”

“Maybe I’ll lose it! What kind of person says that?”

“Look, I don’t see why this is my problem. You got yourself into this mess, so sort it out.”

“So, I got myself into this mess all by myself? I had sex with *myself*?”

“Well, I don’t know what you’ve been up to. Who knows how

many people you've slept with?" Ben accused. "I haven't seen you for three months."

"How dare you? You know damn well you're the only—"

"I don't know that. How could I possibly know that? You live on the other side of the world, and we were barely speaking before you left. It could be anyone's. How do you know you're even pregnant?"

"—cause I'm not stupid. I've done tests and a scan, you bastard. It's a boy, by the way."

"I don't want to hear any more. I was with you one time, for goodness' sake, and now you're trying to pin this on me."

"It only takes once, Ben."

"No, there's no way. We used protection."

"And? I'm sorry, did you not do sex ed? They fail."

"Nah, that's just what girls say to trick people into marrying them."

"You're the last person I'd want to marry."

"Great. We finally agree on something."

"Why are you being such a bastard? Is it just that you don't want anyone to know you made a mistake, that you're not the perfect preacher's son you pretend to be? Is that it?"

"Look, I screwed up. I gave into temptation one time and I regretted it. I've repented. I've made it right."

"How is denying your child making it right? How is treating me, your girlfriend of three years, like the neighbourhood slut, making it right?"

"I never said that."

"You did, Ben. That's exactly what you said."

"Look, I'm sorry, Rebecca, but I'm not letting you take me down with you. If you want to destroy your life, I can't stop you."

"Who the hell are you? What happened to you? Why are you treating me like this?"

"You're blaming me! You just called me out of the blue, four months after breaking my heart. We were supposed to get married and you got what you wanted, then dumped me."

A burst of sardonic laughter rippled down the line before she could filter it. "Wow, so you're going with that now, are you? Is

there no end to your bullshit?”

“Oh, okay. I didn’t realise you were that far gone.”

“Yes, I’m so far gone that I’m calling you on it. I can’t believe I trusted you. I can’t believe I thought you were a good guy, that I wasted three years of my life on you.”

“I am a good guy. I was willing to marry you.”

“Willing? That’s hilarious. I don’t believe you were ever going to marry me. That was just a ploy to get me into bed.”

Rebecca glanced up to see Renee standing in the doorway of her room, her expression moving between empathy and fury.

“—says the girl who calls after four months claiming to be pregnant with my child. How do I know you’re not just doing this to get back at me?”

“For what?” Rebecca turned her focus back to Ben.

“Who the hell knows? You’re the one who called time on our relationship. I’m sure you can think of something.”

“I’ve no interest in getting back at you.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be trying to trap me with a pregnancy.”

“Trap you? You seriously think I want anything to do with you? You’re the last person I’d want a life with.”

“Great, so we don’t have a problem then. You’ll sort it.”

“Are you telling me to get an abortion, Ben?”

Renee’s eyes darkened as she moved towards Rebecca. If Ben had been in the room, he wouldn’t be on his feet that’s for sure.

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“You mean you wouldn’t say those exact words, but you’re happy for me to lose it, medically or otherwise?”

“I never said that.”

Rebecca laughed. “I’d love to see your father’s face. Should I call him next?”

“You wouldn’t!” Ben warned.

“What do you think he’d say about his only son, his newly appointed youth pastor forcing his ex-girlfriend to get an abortion just to save face?”

“I’m not forcing you to do anything, and there’s no proof it’s

mine. I don't know if you're even pregnant. This could be some elaborate plan to—”

“Trap you?”

“Exactly. Look, I'm seeing someone else. You need to get over this.”

“I don't give a damn if you're seeing someone else. Good luck to her. That doesn't change anything.”

“Of course, it does. It means your problem has nothing to do with me.”

“In other words, you got me pregnant, but now you've got another girlfriend, it can't possibly be your baby. Would you like me to send you both the scan?” Rebecca threatened.

“No, what would that prove?”

“The only proof you need is my word. I've only ever been with one man, and that's you, and you know it!”

“I don't believe you.”

“Okay. We'll do a DNA test after he's born.”

“Like hell, Rebecca. We broke up. Get it through your head. I don't want anything to do with you. You've changed, and not in a good way. You need help.”

She roared with frustration. “You're right. I'm stuck on the other side of the world dealing with this on my own. I do need help.”

“Well, you should have thought of that.”

“Yeah, before sleeping with a guy I thought loved me.”

“We made a mistake.”

“No, I made the mistake of ever trusting you. You're the last person who should be a youth pastor.”

“Are you done? I have a meeting,” Ben said dismissively.

“I never want to see you again,” Rebecca screamed.

“Excellent. Done deal. One more thing. If you turn up with a baby, making claims, I'll make sure no one believes you.”

“A DNA test will sort that out.”

“Not before I've ruined your reputation.”

She squeezed her fist tight and imagined smashing it into his perfect face. “There's one thing you seem to be forgetting, Ben.”

“What's that?”

“That God sees everything.” Rebecca slammed the phone down before he could make some pathetic comment about forgiveness. She knew the call wasn’t going to be easy, but she never imagined it would be this bad.

“Damn, girl, are you okay?” Renee asked.

Rebecca was shaking with fury. “He accused me of being the town bike.”

“Damn. I wish he was here so I could give him a piece of my mind.”

“Based on that look in your eyes, it wouldn’t be your mind you’d be giving him a piece of.”

“You’re right about that! He’d be bloody.”

“I don’t have bail money, so best we keep the beatdown in our fantasies.”

“You sure? I could make a quick round-the-world trip, do the damage and be back before Sunday dinner. No one would ever suspect a thing.” Renee’s brows jiggled with excitement.

The offer lathered a protective film over Bex’s heart. “As much as I love that idea,” she thought about it for a second longer than she should have, “how about we settle for never seeing the bastard again, find a dark corner somewhere, and try to forget?”

“Should I gather some girls for a night on the town?”

Bex exhaled a heavy breath as the gravity of Ben’s reaction settled in her stomach. She lowered her hand to her abdomen and let her anger take its true form.

Renee took Bex’s hand and brushed the tears from her cheeks. “You’re not alone in this. I’ve got you, okay. No matter what you decide.”

Bex lowered her head to her friend’s shoulder and let her heart grieve the support she wished Ben had offered.

5

Two hours later she found herself in a darkened booth at a local club surrounded by women. Renee had called in the troops for one mission and one mission only—to turn Rebecca’s mourning into dancing, literally. It was a masterstroke. Her heart felt light for the first time since her brother had thrown down the gauntlet with his flippant comment about her being a rebellious pastor’s kid and sullyng the family name by getting knocked up.

She raised the mocktail to her lips and sculled it, imagining the kick of alcohol that could soften the sharp edges of the last few weeks. Renee ordered another round for the table, then dragged her out of the booth and onto the dance floor. Rebecca let herself loose for a solid hour before she felt the night descend into her bones. She slid into the vacant booth, took a sip of her drink and leaned herself back. She watched as the women danced until they were surrounded by men on the hunt for signs that someone would be warming their beds tonight. By the look of it, many of them wouldn’t be disappointed.

Even though she’d never had any desire for this world to infiltrate hers, a part of her longed for the simplicity of living however she wanted, without the threat of religious shame dogging her every decision, or the fear of disappointment in her

father's eyes when he realised who and what she'd become. She wished she could own her decisions, flaws and mistakes, put them down to life experience and move on. But the values instilled in her had too strong a hold. They weren't just her parents' beliefs, they didn't just belong to her faith, they'd been woven through every cell of her being since birth—maybe even since conception. She believed what they preached, and yet she still found herself here, wishing she could forget the fragile life inside her for one night. If only she could drown her pain with alcohol, or the touch of a man who didn't know she was meant to be something else, someone else.

She wanted to forget. She wished that being set free was as simple as letting go, but her beliefs bound her with unbreakable chains and it was getting harder and harder to move without feeling the pain of them tightening around every limb and every thought.

She admired Renee's freedom as she danced with one of the guys circling their group, and wondered if she'd ever feel that free. *You can just take a few pills and forget this ever happened, it's that simple.*

She raised her glass to her lips and closed her eyes, praying courage would conquer the all-consuming fear that had made a home in her.

If you wanted to adopt the baby out, they'd never have to know—you're on the other side of the world.

Rebecca had dismissed this option as impossible, but was it more impossible than the options it left her with? At least the child would be alive; at least she'd know a loving couple was benefiting from the miracle her mistake had allowed. They wouldn't judge her, they'd simply love.

Would she be able to give birth and then say goodbye? Could she really continue her life on the other side of the world and pretend her child had never existed? Rebecca pressed the back of her hand to her forehead in an attempt to dampen the tone of her excruciating thoughts. *Nobody knows and nobody has to know.*

I'd know.

Those two words were an exclamation, a plea, a realisation. At the end of the day, the issue wasn't what anyone else thought of her. She wasn't the first Christian to get pregnant out of wedlock; she wasn't the first pastor's kid to fall short of the church's expectations. Thousands of other women had walked this very road and survived, many of them respected mothers and leaders. Why couldn't she?

If you turn up with a baby, making claims, I'll make sure no one believes you ... I'll ruin your reputation.

Her father's voice entered the loud club, challenging her thoughts. *You'll always be my little girl, no matter what.* As much as she wanted to believe him, his words couldn't silence the truth of Ben's threats—or the truth of her own experience.

She'd seen young girls who found themselves walking on the wrong side of the tracks outed from church circles, ignored and abandoned. She'd seen the judgment with her own eyes; she'd even played a part in it. She knew Ben was right. If she went home with a baby, she'd not be easily forgiven, and the last place she'd be safe from condemnation would be in her childhood home.

But could she live with that kind of secret?

Renee slid in beside her. "You okay, girl? Those thoughts looked dangerous."

Rebecca faked a smile. "You looked like you were having fun."

"Oh, I was, but my job isn't done here until *you're* having fun."

"I have been having fun."

"It's the 'have been' part I'm having a problem with."

"I'm okay, seriously."

"Ah, no, you little liar." Renee motioned over to the crowd. "I could point out a few individuals who could provide a healthy distraction."

"I wouldn't call that healthy."

"Oh, come on. Wild sex with a hot, willing stranger could be exactly what the doctor ordered."

Rebecca laughed. "Sex is exactly what got me into this mess. It sure as hell isn't going to get me out of it."

Renee shoulder-bumped her and smiled. “You can’t fault me for trying. You want a real drink? Drown your sorrows?”

Rebecca shook her head. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I’ve no idea what that means, but I’m taking it as a compliment.” Renee took a long swig of her cocktail and reached under the table to squeeze Rebecca’s knee.

“Come back to the dance floor. I’ll even let you bump and grind me without any expectation of a happy ending.”

Rebecca laughed. “I appreciate that, but I’m exhausted, so I’m just going to sit here and watch you have fun.”

“You sure?”

“Of course. Renee—”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“Probably in bed.” Renee motioned towards a cute guy sitting at the bar eyeing them. “On that note—”

“You’ve got half an hour, then I’m calling a ride.” Rebecca raised her hand to cover a yawn.

Renee slipped out of the booth. “I’ll use every second of it.”

As Renee sauntered over to the guy at the bar and dragged him to the dance floor, Rebecca couldn’t shake the four words that had come home to roost in her head. *Maybe you’ll lose it.*

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