

CHAPTER

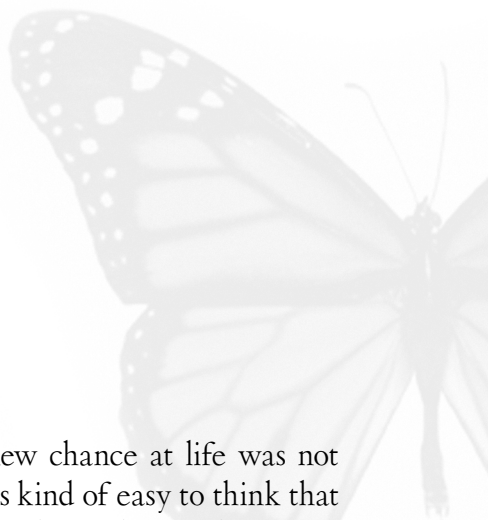
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Becoming Beka BECOMING BEKA

My whole

new chance at life was not turning out as I had hoped. It's kind of easy to think that you'll be able to reinvent yourself, to change the course of your life with a single decision. But then you turn around and you are facing the same people, who look at you in the same way they always have.

I knew I wanted things to be different. Even sort of believed they could be different. But something happened as I walked down the hall that first morning after the New Year. The first time I walked down the hallway of the school I had attended for the past two and a half years. My first time as a new believer. What happened was . . . nothing. Absolutely nothing. I still felt very much



like the same Rebekah Madison of two weeks ago. And I began to wonder if anything was really going to change at all.

* * *

“Hey, Madison!” I turned to the sound of Gretchen Stanley’s voice commanding my attention. She always commanded attention from anyone nearby. I was glad we were on amiable terms, but when Gretchen called, you had to jump. I wasn’t sure I wanted to jump for anybody.

But today, I jumped.

“Yeah, what’s up?” I smiled.

Liz, Mai, and Theresa hovered nearby. They looked so much like Charlie’s Angels standing there waiting for their orders that I almost laughed. Theresa was a tall red-head, Mai was a younger, meaner version of Lucy Liu, only with shorter hair, and Liz was totally Cameron Diaz, complete with long smooth blonde hair and a certain “airhead” quality. I noticed immediately that Chrissy wasn’t nearby, and I realized I hadn’t seen her with the group recently. They seemed to mostly travel as a unit. Chrissy must have been blacklisted for some reason and Liz, who usually hovered near the outskirts, and who was trying hard to shed her Lizzy nickname, had moved into the “inner circle.” It was all kind of ridiculous, but I knew my life at school was much better since I was no longer in “social Siberia.” For a moment I felt sorry for Chrissy, and I didn’t even know her.

Gretchen turned to them and shooed them away, rolling her eyes as she did so. Once they moved away she

gave her blonde curls an extra toss—surely meant for someone other than me—as she pulled me close.

“Have I got a secret for you! You won’t believe what I found out over winter break.”

“What?” I asked, genuinely curious, not only about the secret but her desire to pull me back into “the know.”

“Not heeere,” she said dramatically. “We’ll talk before rehearsal. You just stick close to me, Madison, and I’ll watch your back.” She turned and shimmied down the hallway, waving and giggling at her public. I watched her go, wondering for the millionth time why she was so popular. She was cute and built well, but there was nothing extraordinary about her. And even though her skin seemed tan and flawless, she also had this narrow nose that turned up a bit at the end, which made her look even more stuck up. I turned back to my locker. Even though it was pointless to worry about what Gretchen’s big secret was, I did. All day.

* * *

“Well, you’ll just have to wait and see what she tells you. Don’t stress about it.” Lori was overly calm about my news at the lunch table.

“But what if it’s . . . you know. About what happened over break.”

Lori’s eyes grew large, apparently just cluing in to the depth of my anxiety. “But how would she know about that? Who knows about it?”

“Just my family. And you.”

“Then she can’t know. They have confidentiality

things at those places. Don't worry. I'm sure it's some dumb rumor about some guy she likes."

"I hope you're right."

"I am. Now on to more interesting topics. Have you seen Mark today?"

I grinned in spite of myself. "A couple of times. You know, we've only been back a couple of hours, and he's all I can think about. Well, him and Gretchen's big secret. That can't be good."

"But at least it's normal."

"Yeah, but we talked about this. I prayed with you that night to put Mark into God's hands and let Him lead me. But my heart seems to have a mind of its own."

Lori thought for a moment before she answered. "Look, all I know is that we're brand-new at this whole Jesus thing. He must understand. We'll just keep trying." She took a deep breath. "Yep, we'll just keep trying."

"We? I thought I was the one with all the heart problems. 'Fess up. What aren't you telling me?"

Lori dropped her head, letting her long dark waves fall across her face. "I've been spending an inordinate amount of time thinking about Mark's friend Brian."

"What? You didn't tell me that! I thought we were friends." I pouted.

"Oh, we are!" She looked up quickly. "Forever friends. I guess I have been trying denial. It isn't working."

"Well, aren't we a pair?" I said, gathering up my lunch things.

"Yeah. You've got that right."

* * *

I was so glad that Lori had moved to town. Even though we had been friends only a few short weeks, I felt closer to her than I had ever felt to anybody. I don't suppose many friends can say that they both made a life-changing decision on the same day. We had been over at Lori's house, and her foster mother, Megan, had shared with us about Jesus in a way I had never really understood before. That day, both Lori and I had made commitments to follow Christ. We were in it together, and it helped to know I had someone rooting for me.

That's why I felt a pang of guilt as I walked to my next class. The one thing Lori didn't know was how much Gretchen hated her. Lori wasn't stupid. She knew full well that Gretchen wasn't interested in being friends with her, and it didn't bother her. But I couldn't bring myself to tell Lori about Gretchen's true feelings. Gretchen was just jealous, but she was also lethal. She had single-handedly made my life at school a nightmare after my mother's death. She had an ability to sway public opinion any way she wanted, and right now she wanted Lori alienated.

In truth, I still hadn't figured out why Gretchen had changed her mind about me in the first place. She had all of a sudden gone from publicly persecuting me to inviting me back to the "in crowd." I liked being popular again, but how long I could stay there I wasn't sure.

* * *

Gretchen had convinced me to try out for the school's musical, *Annie*, before Christmas last year. I had

earned the part of Molly—one of the orphans who is friends with Annie—and Gretchen had gotten the title role. I was surprised she could fit her head through the auditorium door.

“Beka! There you are.” She grabbed my arm and pulled me through the side door of the stage into a hallway.

“Gretchen. Rehearsal is going to start in like three minutes. We’d better go back in.”

“Oh, please. They can’t start without me. I’m Annie. Remember?”

As if I could forget, I thought.

“I have to tell you what I found out this weekend!” I took a deep breath, bracing myself. If she had found out about my hospitalization, my life as I knew it would be over.

“Well, I just happened to overhear my mother talking to my dad about this ‘sweet little case’ she had been assigned. You know she’s a court-appointed advocate, right?”

I nodded, still not sure where the conversation was headed.

“Well, I could only hear bits and pieces of the conversation, but I figured out that the case involved a sixteen-year-old girl being adopted. Apparently it’s a pretty unusual case. Well, of course, I just had to find out the rest of the story. I mean, people depend on me for accurate information.”

She paused, looking at me to agree with her. I nodded but felt sick to my stomach. Now I knew exactly where the conversation was headed.

“After my mom went to bed I took a look through her briefcase. I figured whoever it was must go to our school since it’s a Bragg County case. Of course, I didn’t find any actual papers, but I found a note in her planner about a meeting with . . . are you ready? Trent! Rollins and Trent. It’s Lori! That obnoxious new girl is an orphan!” She waited for a moment and then pushed my shoulder. “What’s wrong with you? Isn’t that the most interesting bit of gossip we’ve ever had in this dull school?”

“Gretchen, you can’t tell anybody that.”

“Who, me? Beka, I have a responsibility to protect the people of this school.”

“Protect them from what? So she’s an orphan. For the moment anyway. What’s the big deal?”

“How did she become an orphan? Huh? What if she murdered her parents or . . .”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I warned you that there was something wrong with that girl—I just know there’s some sordid story in this somewhere. I’m your friend, Beka. I know that you’re trying to be nice to her and all, but you’re being terribly naive. I’m trying to help you.”

“There’s no story, and you can’t just go around telling people about it. It should be her decision.” I said the words firmly, but I was shaking inside.

“You knew about it, didn’t you? Didn’t you? How did her parents die?”

“That’s none of our business.” I decided to switch to a different tactic. “Look, Gretchen, I’m asking you, as your friend, not to say anything about this. Please.”

She looked at me carefully as she pulled at a blonde curl.

“Sure, Beka. I won’t say anything.” She paused and leaned in closer. “But you owe me,” she added.

“Owe you?”

“Yeah, I’ll keep your little friend’s secret—for now. But you owe me.”

Suddenly the door flew open next to us and slammed against the cement wall, causing us both to jump. It was Mai, her silky black hair flying as she stopped short.

“You two better get in here. T is ticked.”

We followed Mai back into the auditorium and slipped into some seats, but our entrance did not go unnoticed.

“That is the one and only time you will be late for one of my rehearsals,” Mr. Thompson, the director, called from the stage. “Do it again and I will replace you, got it?”

We both nodded, but Gretchen didn’t seem to care.

* * *

By the time I reached home I could feel my shoulders knotting up from the tension. T, which is what most kids called Mr. Thompson, was not a very laid-back type of guy—just the opposite in fact. The rehearsal schedule he had handed out looked like it came from a man who was oblivious to the fact that we all had to go to school while we prepared for the play. He scared me. Gretchen seemed to think he was harmless, but I had never been around anybody who was so completely . . . intense.

“So how was the first rehearsal?” Paul asked as soon as I came into the kitchen.

“Not bad.” I shrugged. “Has Thompson always been so . . .”

Paul grinned. “You get used to it.”

“You quit the band, remember?”

“Yeah, but not because of Thompson. He just takes everything dead seriously. It’s not just a school musical to him. In his mind you all are opening on Broadway.”

I leaned on the counter where Paul was slicing cucumbers for dinner. “Do you think it’s . . . I don’t know . . . weird? That I’m in the play?”

He stopped slicing and looked over at me. “No. Not at all. It’s not something I had ever imagined you being interested in, but I think it’ll be good for you. See how it turns out when it’s all over.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Do you need any help with dinner?”

“Nah, I’ve got it. Hopefully Mary will be back soon. I’m getting kind of bored with spaghetti.” He grinned.

“Me too,” I admitted. “Well, I guess I’ll try to get some homework done before dinner.”

He nodded his head and gave me a sympathetic smile before I left. Paul had offered to cover dinners while our housekeeper, Mary, was training somebody to care for her elderly mother. Mary had been helping out with the housework and dinner ever since my mother died, but while she cooked all sorts of wonderful things, Paul had been alternating between spaghetti, hot dogs, and frozen lasagna.

I smiled as I went up the stairs. I was so glad that Paul

and I weren't fighting anymore. It felt nice to be able to finally take a deep breath and relax while I was at home.

* * *

I really did try to get started on my English paper, but my mind kept wandering back to Paul. We were finally getting along after so much trouble and tension, and it was all going to end. He only had six more months at home before college gobbled him up. It hurt to even think about it. Growing up only sixteen months apart, the times we had been close way outnumbered the difficult times.

And it wasn't just the fact that I was going to miss him, either. I wondered how the house would change when it was just me and my two little sisters. I didn't think Anna would be a problem—she was only eight and was more interested in having fun than just about anything else. Even after Mom's death, she bounced back pretty quickly. But Lucy. She was another issue altogether. She rubbed me wrong sometimes . . . and if I was really honest, I'd have to say I probably bugged her too. She still didn't trust me completely. I didn't blame her for being skeptical, not after all my lies, but still . . . everyone else had given me a chance to get back into their lives and hearts. Lucy was still waiting . . . and watching me. I didn't know how to convince her that I was really serious about God this time, and part of me thought that I shouldn't have to convince her at all. Paul was kind of a nice buffer between us—he seemed to deflect the sparks that sometimes flew. I wondered if those sparks would set off a major bonfire when he left.

CHAPTER

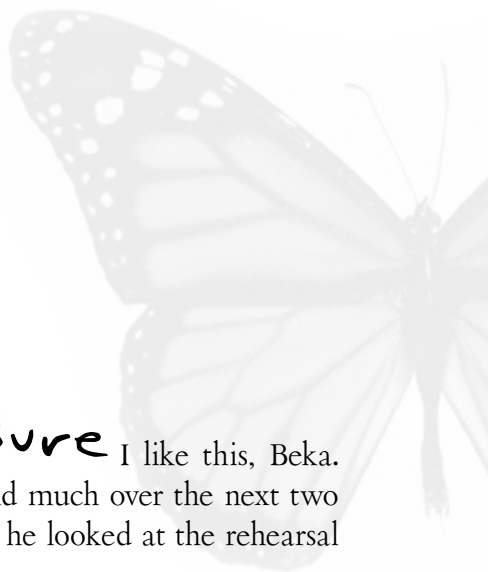
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Becoming Beka BECOMING BEKA

"I'm not sure I like this, Beka.

You're not going to be around much over the next two months." My dad frowned as he looked at the rehearsal schedule.

"I know, but . . ." I wasn't sure what to say, since I was a little concerned about it too. Not so much the not being at home part. That part was actually good—it would give me time to get my footing with God without so much attention. But I was worried about my classes. I had always been a good student, but it's not like I could just slide my way through. I needed to study and work. Trig and chemistry were hard enough—I enjoyed math and science—but my history and English classes were



tough this year too. That's the trouble with getting really good teachers. Good teachers are always twice as hard. And since I had no clue what I wanted to do, I needed to have those grades—Bs weren't an option for some colleges out there. I had kind of blown a lot of my grades last semester when I was depressed and angry and didn't care. I cared now. A lot.

"So," my dad prompted, snapping me out of my thoughts. "What do you want to do about it?"

"I don't know what I can do," I said, sinking into the big blue recliner in the family room. "I mean, I have an actual part and . . . oh, I don't know."

"Do you really want to do this play?"

I covered my face with my hands. "I don't know. Yes, I guess. Maybe." I looked up when Dad laughed. "This isn't funny."

"I know. I don't mean to laugh, but how did you get into this? If you weren't even sure you wanted to do it."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. And it seemed exciting. But I guess I didn't realize it was going to be such a huge commitment."

"I can understand that." He nodded.

"But I said I'd do it. I ought to follow through with it. Don't you think?"

My dad smiled that warm, soft smile of his and nodded. "Yeah, that sounds about right. But you'll speak up if you feel like you're drowning, right? I know you want to get your grades back up and work on your relationship with God. You will let me know if it all gets to be too much?"

"Sure." I smiled. He seemed satisfied, but I wondered

if I would even recognize I was drowning in time to yell out for help. It probably would have helped if I trusted myself to know when I needed help. Just the fact that I had stayed in a psychiatric hospital—the very thought caused my stomach to flip over—made me feel incompetent somehow. Like there was something wrong with me and it was just hidden better now. In fact, even though I had confessed my big secret, I had almost traded it for a new one. Somehow, Gretchen finding out about Lori’s pending adoption made me vulnerable. Could she possibly find out about me—Beka Madison, former psychiatric inpatient?

It didn’t help at all that my doctors and family said that I “shouldn’t be ashamed of needing help.” The shame had wrapped itself around me like a boa constrictor that threatened to choke me if someone found out. And it really wasn’t only the hospital. I was going to have to start seeing a counselor. My dad had insisted on it, and at the time, I didn’t think much of it. Compared to the hospital, it didn’t seem like a big deal. My first appointment was still two weeks away. Dad had said that we needed to get through the holidays and the start of school first. I was pretty sure that he wasn’t going to let me back out of it now, though.

Out of pure necessity, I hauled out the rest of my homework, putting off the English paper once again. Mrs. Hollingsworth had asked us to write an essay comparing a book we enjoyed to our own lives—explaining why it impacted us. Normally, I liked assignments like that, but I couldn’t even come up with a book to use. I did enjoy reading when I got a spare moment, but I

couldn't think of anything that could compare to my crazy life.

* * *

At rehearsal the next day, Gretchen was acting particularly smug. I assumed it had to do with her discovery of Lori's secret. She had already let me know that she hadn't found out anything else, but that she wasn't going to give up until she knew the whole story. Knowing Gretchen, part of me wondered if I should warn Lori about what was going to eventually happen.

"There just has to be some story in it . . ." Gretchen stopped talking as I fell into a seat in front of her and Mai.

"I thought you weren't going to say anything, Gretchen." I kept my voice steady despite my nerves.

"Oh, please. Mai isn't just anyone." Gretchen waved her hand at me as if I was being ridiculous.

"Gretchen, front and center." T's voice boomed from the stage, and Gretchen leaped out of her seat, leaving Mai staring at me.

"What?" I finally asked.

"Oh, nothing." Mai smiled in a way that sent the hairs up on my neck. She reached up and twirled a piece of her silky black hair around her finger. We sat there like that for about an eternity, and just as I was about to try to make an exit, she leaned forward. "I would just be careful if I were you."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I almost didn't want to know.

"Well, Gretchen is giving you a chance to prove

yourself. I wouldn't blow it if I were you." She paused and narrowed her eyes. "You're only going to get one shot."

"I still don't know what . . ."

"All orphans onstage." T's voice interrupted my question, and Mai and I both stood and headed for the stage. I let her get as far ahead of me as possible. I really had no idea what she was getting at, but our conversation rattled in my head. Did Gretchen know Mai was going to say those things, or was she acting alone? I felt like throwing up. I didn't need any more complications in my life. Wasn't it complicated enough?

* * *

"Hey, Molly, wait up." I smiled before I even turned around. I had only seen Mark from a distance at rehearsals so far, but that was definitely his voice.

"So, how's the orphanage?" Mark asked as he reached my side. I had this sudden urge to reach up and run my fingers through his thick, wavy hair. *Where did that come from?* I wondered.

"Not bad, but it's a lot more work than I expected—I had no idea so much went into a play," I blurted out in one breath. *Slow down*, I thought. *I have to relax.*

"Yeah, it's amazing, isn't it? Too bad we don't have any scenes together. I haven't really gotten to see you."

My thoughts exactly. Out loud I said, "Yeah, they have everybody pretty broken up."

"It won't be like that the whole time."

We reached the parking lot entirely too quickly, but when we got to my car, Mark leaned against the driver's

side door. “We haven’t really gotten a chance to talk since New Year’s.”

“I know,” I said quietly, unsure of what he might be thinking. I had replayed New Year’s Eve a hundred times in my mind, always trying to remind myself that we had agreed to be friends. Friends. For the first time in my life I actually wanted more than that, and it wasn’t an option.

“Well, we agreed to be friends, right? Would it be okay if I called you sometime? Friends talk on the phone all the time.” He smiled that gentle smile that curled up just a little bit more on the right. It made my heart melt. At that moment, every other thought evaporated. He wanted to call me.

“Sure, I’d like that,” I said. I spoke calmly, but on the inside I was leaping.

“Okay then. I just wanted to make sure it was all right with you.” He moved away from my door and touched my shoulder before he waved good-bye. “Talk to you later.”

I watched him leave before pulling my keys out. I hadn’t even noticed it was cold before that moment. I slid into the car. My emotions were so jumbled all of a sudden. Should I have prayed about it before answering? Should I have checked with my dad? It all seemed so simple a second ago, and now I wasn’t so sure.

Lord, I really don’t know how all this works yet. I want to do what’s right. But I really think I like Mark. Please help me. I didn’t know what else to pray. So I started my car and headed home. But I found it impossible not to hope that I would get a phone call very soon.

* * *

I ate dinner as fast as I could so that I could get back to my room and near my phone. But before I could make my escape, Lucy ruined everything.

“So when are we leaving for youth group?” she asked as we were clearing the dishes.

“What?” I was still distracted, straining to hear the upstairs phone ring.

“Youth group? It starts up again tonight. You are going, right?”

Her tone was rather accusatory, in my opinion, and I squared my shoulders ready to defend myself. “No, I’m not,” I answered.

“But you have to take me. Dad said that you were going to drive me.”

“Well, I can’t. I haven’t even finished half of my homework. So you’ll just have to get someone else to take you.”

“But . . .” she started to say, but then turned and left the kitchen. Two minutes later she returned, my dad in tow.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Why are you asking me? I’m sure she filled you in.” I was only mad at Lucy, but I couldn’t keep the anger out of my voice when I answered him.

“I’d like to hear your version.”

“My version? I can’t take her to youth group. I have homework to do. End of story.” I finished wiping the table and tried to leave.

“Wait, Beka. Sit down for a second.”

I dropped into one of the chairs with a growl. “I have homework to do. Really.”

“I guess I made an assumption,” he began. “I thought you would be returning to the youth group now that you are working on your relationship with God.”

“Well, we never talked about it. I’m not against going, but I didn’t get home till five. I have to finish an English paper, and I still have trig and chemistry homework. There’s just no way I can go.” I tried to sound reasonable, but it came out all whiny.

“So you’re not planning on going at all?” He had that “parental concern” look on his face.

“I don’t see how. Unless I don’t happen to have homework on a Tuesday night. Which I doubt will ever happen.”

“I’m not too happy about this. It’s important for you to develop friendships with other Christians and to grow spiritually. Youth group can help you do both of those things.”

“Lori’s a Christian. I see her.” I argued.

“But you both are brand-new. It would be good for you to see young people who are further along.”

“So you want me to drop out of the play? I can’t do that.” My thoughts scrambled around even as I tried to defend staying in the play. My dad was giving me an out, and I was scared to take it. Even though the play itself scared me, I was more scared to try and get out of it.

“I’m not asking you to.” He leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers through his hair. “I guess we’ll just have to play this one out, and you can go on those nights when you can finish your schoolwork.”

“So who’s going to take me?” Lucy asked. I didn’t realize she had been standing in the doorway the whole time.

“I’ll take you.” He stood up and headed out of the kitchen. “Why don’t you go get ready?”

I took the opportunity to make my escape. As soon as I got to my room, I picked up the phone to hear the stuttering dial tone, letting me know there was a message. My dad had finally caved in and gotten a package from the phone company that gave both lines not only voice mail but also call waiting and caller ID. I loved it, even though I had also been told that I was going to have to share my phone line with Lucy the following year. For now, though, it was still all mine. I held my breath as I dialed to retrieve the message, but it was just Gretchen in a total panic for me to call her back.

I picked up the phone, then put it right back down. I simply didn’t have the energy to deal with her.