

CHAPTER

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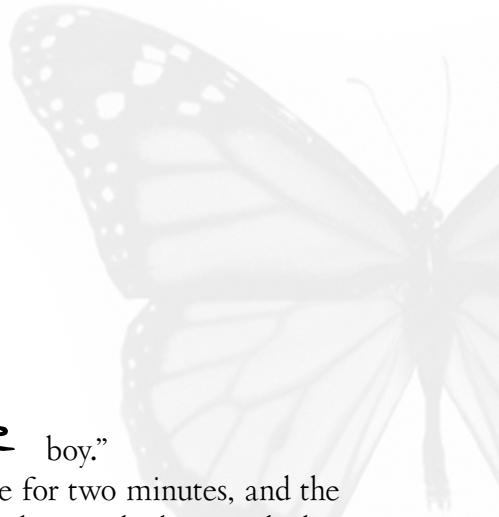
Becoming Beka

BECOMING BEKA

Whoa there boy.”

I hadn't been in the saddle for two minutes, and the enormous palomino had already squashed my right leg against the wood fence around the paddock. "Ow. C'mon now, move over." I lifted the reins in the direction I wanted him to go, but instead of moving forward, he shifted his weight as if he were actually trying to break my leg.

I looked over where Gabby had finished helping my sister Anna mount Wind Dancer, the little paint horse she had just gotten for her ninth birthday. I didn't want to act like I couldn't handle myself, but my leg was



throbbing. I fought with myself for only a moment. Pain was more important than pride.

“Gabby?” I called. She looked at me, and I swear she suppressed a grin, but she ran right over and grabbed the bridle. Asking her, the woman who had been hanging around my father for months, made my throat tighten. I didn’t even want her near me.

“What are you doing, you big oaf?” She pulled the bridle, moving the horse forward, instantly allowing the blood flow to return to my leg and making it tingle and itch. “Thunder can be a little headstrong sometimes.” She smiled at me.

I didn’t smile back. “Then what am I doing on him? Don’t you have some nice old horse that can barely walk or something?”

“Thunder’ll be fine once we get him out on the trail. We’re just too close to his supper.” She paused and looked up at me. I felt like I was looming over her, the black helmet on my head adding at least two inches to my height, not to mention being up on the horse.

“You going to be okay? Your dad said you’ve done this before.” She actually sounded a little concerned, which made me want to conquer the big beast before giving her the satisfaction of helping any more.

“I’ll be fine.” I smiled this time. Well, I tried to smile. She turned and headed back toward Lucy, who was trying to throw a saddle onto the back of a midnight black gelding.

* * *

Anna walked Wind Dancer over to where Thunder had found a nice patch of grass to munch on. He seemed to not care in the least that I was on his back.

“Isn’t Dancer amazing?” she asked me for about the tenth time that afternoon.

“Yes, amazing,” I told her again. “I still can’t believe Dad bought you that thing.”

“Me neither. I mean, he just had to buy the horse though since Gabby lets him stay here for free. Isn’t she awesome?”

Awesome wasn’t the word that came to mind, so I ignored the question. “You’re not going to mind her using him for lessons? Other people riding him?”

“Nope. Because he’s my horse. It doesn’t matter who rides him ’cause he’s still mine. I’m going to warm him up.”

She barely moved, but the horse turned easily for her as she clucked her tongue and then walked toward the riding ring. She looked like she was born on the horse, even though she had been riding for only a few months. She had told us that she chose the name Wind Dancer because riding him made her feel like she was dancing with the wind. I envied her.

I shifted my attention back to Gabby as she adjusted Lucy’s stirrups. Lucy stretched her leg forward while Gabby buckled the strap and then placed her foot in the stirrup. Gabby pulled on it, slid her hand under the horse’s belly, and then gave the black gelding a slap on the rump.

“You’re all done. You can go walk him around the ring until we’re ready to go,” I heard her say.

Lucy pulled back on the left rein and turned her horse toward the ring where Anna was already trotting. I watched her, still getting used to the auburn hair that curled itself up and around the edges of her helmet. She had gone into town with Gabby the night before and come back with a full ten inches chopped off her hair. Apparently, they had found a salon in the mall that was doing a Locks of Love program, where people donate hair to make wigs for sick kids. She decided then and there to get her hair cut. With the heaviness gone, her hair curled softly around the edges. It now fell just below her chin, instead of all the way down her back. She looked so different. And so much more grown up. She would be fourteen in August, but people would probably think she was my age or older.

Maybe I should do something with my hair too. Something drastic. I reached back to touch my own auburn hair that was bundled into a ponytail at the nape of my neck. It was so plain, just long and straight. And boring. Maybe my hair would curl too.

* * *

“Hey Beka, you can walk Thunder around the ring for a few minutes. We’re almost ready to go,” Gabby called as she headed into the barn to get her own horse. My dad had said a family trail ride would be fun, only I didn’t think he should have called it a “family” anything. My brother, Paul, *wasn’t* there since he was at baseball practice and Gabby was there, and she wasn’t part of our family.

I had gotten up that morning determined to try and be nice to Gabby, but I just couldn't do it. I had even tried praying, but it didn't seem to help. My father had promised me that they were just friends and that he still missed my mother too much to even think about anyone else, but I wasn't sure I believed him. He seemed to really enjoy being around her. Anna and Lucy adored her, and then there was me, the only holdout. Mom had only died just over a year ago, and the memories were still raw in my heart. I couldn't even think about a stepmother. The thought made me nauseous. But Gabby spent way too much time with my family for me to be completely naive about what might be going on. My dad and she weren't dating, but I was sure she wanted to.

She had never been married, and it was obvious when she looked at my dad that she cared about him. Too much, in my opinion. I would think that she was after his money, which as a banker he had quite a bit of, but she had plenty of money of her own. She had inherited the horse farm from her grandparents when they died, and now she ran it, giving lessons, boarding horses, and hosting riding shows. But that was part of the problem. When I looked at her, she just always seemed "horse-y," as if she'd just walked off the farm. She was usually in jeans, and her long hair was usually kind of messy. One time she had even tied it back with some twine she pulled off the hay bales. I mean, really. Was that the kind of stepmother I wanted?

I didn't want any stepmother, but she struck me as particularly distasteful. My mother had been a pediatrician, and she always looked stylish even in her white lab

coat. She wore dresses and skirts that made her look like a knockout, and now my dad was hanging out with the horsewoman of Bragg County.

* * *

“Hey Beka, are you coming with us?” Dad called from the ring, where they had all lined up behind Gabby. Lucy and Anna had been on trail rides before with Gabby and my dad. Up until today, I had always had a reason to get out of it. Until today. It was the first day of spring break, and I couldn’t come up with one excuse when they talked about it the night before.

“I’m coming,” I called. The line of horses began to move across the clearing toward the woods. “C’mon Thunder,” I said as I pulled on the reins. He lifted his head in protest and then returned to the grass he was still eating, pulling me forward in the saddle as he did so. I pulled again and gave him a kick, like Gabby had showed me. He still didn’t move. Maybe I didn’t kick hard enough. I tried again and this time he lurched forward and headed straight toward Lucy’s horse at the back of the line.

I was practically lying on his mane so I tried to return myself to an upright position before I reached everybody. Thunder wasn’t trotting, but he was walking fast, and I felt like I was going to slide off one side or the other. I tried to remember the twenty million things Gabby had told me to remember when she had helped me saddle the horse. I really had ridden before, but it had been at a Girl Scout camp where they put all the begin-

ners on these decrepit old horses that couldn't lurch anywhere if they tried.

My heart was pounding in my chest, but as soon as Thunder reached the back of the line, he slowed down and simply followed Lucy's horse. By the time we walked onto the trail, I started to relax. Thunder had probably done this a hundred times before, and everything would be fine.

Since we were single file, no one could really talk to each other. Lucy and I could have talked, but she didn't turn around, and I didn't want to start the conversation. I figured she was probably mad at me, because when she came home all excited about her new haircut I hadn't said anything, not because of her but because I felt like Gabby had entirely too much influence over her. Lucy wouldn't have even been at the mall if Gabby hadn't taken her. Lucy had seemed irritated with me ever since then, and I didn't feel like having the argument that was brewing.

So I concentrated on the scenery. At least I did until I got whacked in the face with a branch that swung back at me when Lucy let it go. She called "Branch!" just as it stung my cheek. I knew my cheek was red, because when I touched the skin it felt like it was on fire. After that I concentrated on ducking and twisting to avoid any more renegade branches.

We walked for a long time. I didn't wear a watch, so I wasn't sure how long we had been riding, but I was getting bored and my bottom was sore from the saddle. And I was tired of the branches. I was positive I was going to find my face full of red scratches when I got home.

I tried thinking about what kind of dresses I would buy for the two dances I had been invited to. Two dances. Two guys. I shook my head in disbelief. I was pretty sure my dad would be okay with Josh and his homeschool formal, but I wasn't sure about Mark and the junior prom. My brother, Paul, had heard that Mark had a questionable reputation, and even though Mark had confessed his secret to me, I had a feeling it wouldn't ease my brother or father's mind. And then there was Mark and Josh themselves. I had already fallen for Mark. Even with his past, I couldn't help but get all flushed and tongue-tied when he was around and when he looked at me with that adoring look. Besides, I knew how Mark felt about me, or at least what he said he felt, but Josh was still a mystery. A rather intriguing, handsome mystery. One that I kind of wanted to solve.

Finally I saw a break in the trees coming up, and sure enough, we emerged onto another pasture facing the barn, but on the opposite side. I was so relieved that we were done that it caught me off guard when Thunder lurched again. Since he was doing his own thing on the trail, I had let go of the reins, holding onto his mane instead. I gathered the reins back up and pulled up and back on them. He didn't like that and gave a loud whinny, which made everyone turn around to see what I was doing to the horse.

"Make sure he doesn't take off on you," Gabby said as Thunder pulled at the reins by throwing his head side to side, still whinnying.

I was getting scared, and I was actually happy to see Gabby turn around and start riding toward me. I wanted

to get off that horse as quickly as possible. I could feel his muscles tense underneath my calves, and he was jumping a little bit as he protested.

Then Anna said something about a bunny, and Thunder reared back on his hind legs, leaving me clutching the saddle to stay on top. Then as soon as his front legs hit the ground, he took off at a full gallop. I felt like a rag doll trying to hold on as I got tossed around on top. I abandoned the reins, grabbing two big chunks of his mane and pulling myself down over the top of the saddle. My teeth felt like they were going to bounce right out of my head, which made me think about what I would look like with dentures. Then Thunder suddenly stopped dead in his tracks.

Only I didn't.

It was impossible to hold on as I felt my body sail into the air. It seemed so slow. I saw his ears, his long pale nose, the ground, and then blue sky. I heard a nicker that sounded as if he was laughing at me. And all I could see was sky. A bright blue sky with perfect cotton clouds. Birds flying overhead and ringing bells . . .

CHAPTER



Becoming Beka BECOMING BEKA

"Beka! Beka!"

I kept hearing voices, but I couldn't tell where they were coming from.

"Beka! Wake up!"

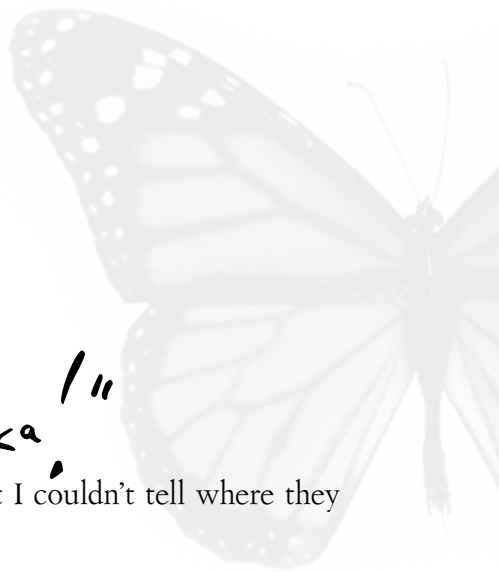
What? Why are you yelling? I lifted my hand to my head. It was throbbing. I tried opening my eyes, but they didn't seem to want to open. It made me tired to try. I just wanted to go back to sleep. Why wouldn't they leave me alone?

"Beka!"

Maybe if I ignored them they'd leave me alone.

"Go call 911, Lucy. Now."

That woke me up. "What? What's wrong?"



“Wait, Lucy. She’s waking up.”

I moved to sit up but couldn’t, so I forced my eyes open. My dad’s face was inches away.

“Don’t try to sit up yet. Are you okay?”

“Huh? What happened?” When he sat back a bit, I saw the sky again and groaned. That stupid horse threw me. Gabby’s face appeared, and I could see Anna clutching at Lucy above my feet.

“Should I go call for help?” Lucy asked.

“No,” Gabby said. “I think she just got the wind knocked out of her.”

“Are you sure?” Dad said. “She should get checked out, shouldn’t she?”

“Let’s see how she does. Beka? Does anything hurt?”

I focused on my body, which kind of ached all over, and my throbbing head.

“Yes.”

“What hurts?”

“Everything,” I said.

“Let’s try to get you up,” Gabby said. She reached down and took my arm.

“Wait. Should we move her? What if she broke her neck?” Dad sounded frantic.

“She’s fine, Greg. I’ve seen dozens of kids get thrown from a horse, and she didn’t land on her neck. She didn’t hit any rocks. She just needs to get her legs back under her. Get her other arm and let’s get her up. One, two, three.”

I felt myself being pulled from the ground. My dad had a firm hold of me around my waist; otherwise I think I would have sunk down onto the ground again.

My legs felt a little wobbly, but they worked. And it didn't hurt quite as bad as I had thought.

"Walk her around, Greg. Make sure she's okay."

My dad obeyed, but all I could think was that she shouldn't be barking orders at everyone, especially my father. What if I had broken my neck? She would be responsible for me being wheelchair bound for the rest of my life. I had a fleeting thought that it would serve her right, but Dad was pulling at me to walk with him.

* * *

"I think you'll be fine, Beka. Do you feel better?" Gabby asked after my dad had checked every joint and made me take a roadside drunk test to prove that I was okay. I was still achy and my head hurt, but I could tell there wasn't any serious damage.

"I guess I'll be fine." I didn't want her getting off the hook too easily. After all, she had chosen the horse.

"Well, let's get these horses back in then. Let me help you back up." Gabby crouched by Thunder's side and laced her fingers into a little step for me.

"I'm not getting back on that thing."

She stood up. "You need to get back on. Just ride him back to the barn."

Are you crazy? Insane? How could you even suggest that? I tried to think of something I could say out loud, but I couldn't come up with anything.

"Gabby. Let's just let her walk back on her own. I'll lead her horse." *Thank you, Dad!*

“That’s not the point. She needs to get back on so she doesn’t develop anxiety about horses,” she argued.

“I’m not getting back on,” I repeated.

“Beka.” She took that parental tone with me, which wouldn’t have been a problem if she were actually my parent.

“Look. I got hurt. I’m not riding him.”

“But it may make you afraid to ride again. You have to get back on. Give it a try.”

“No. Who says I ever want to ride again anyway?”

“Greg?” she pleaded.

“She’ll be fine, Gabby. Let’s just let it alone.” *Strike two!*

She gave us a huffy sigh but went over to help Lucy and Anna mount again. When she got them settled, she came back and took the reins to Dad’s horse, after giving him a look that made it clear she wasn’t happy with him. Dad came over and took Thunder’s bridle.

“You okay, Butterfly?” he asked.

“I think I’ll be fine. Thanks.”

“No problem,” he said. “Let’s head on back, pardner.” He tipped an imaginary hat at me and then slung his arm around my shoulder. It felt really good.

I popped two Tylenol and showered as soon as I got home. I wanted to get the horse scent off of me. I had messages from Nancy and Lori to return, so I cuddled up on my bed with my phone, and extra pillows to cushion my sore body.

* * *

I decided to call Lori first. I knew Nancy wanted to talk about the retreat, and since I didn't want to, stalling seemed a reasonable tactic.

"So, how'd the trail ride go?" Lori asked.

"Miserable. The horse *she* put me on threw me," I told her.

"I thought you were going to try and be nice to her."

"I tried. I just don't understand why she has to be around at all. It was supposed to be a family ride. She's not family."

Lori was quiet for a few moments. I knew what she was thinking, especially since she had told me several times over the last few weeks to give Gabby a chance, to pray for her, and to trust God for what was going to happen. But I just couldn't stop hating her. I kept imagining her dirty, muddy, twine-tied self smiling and making eyes at my father. It made me seethe inside. She wasn't good enough for my dad, and I didn't want anything to do with her.

"Well," Lori sighed. "You're going to have to make the best of it. It looks like she's going to be around for a while. I know it stinks for you though."

"Some help that is," I pouted.

"Okay, subject swap. Are you going to be gone the entire spring break? I thought maybe we could drive down to the beach or something. I haven't been there yet."

"We?"

"Okay, maybe you could drive and I could sit pitifully in the passenger seat since I don't have my license. You don't have to keep reminding me, ya know."

“I know. I just like teasing. No, we could do that. I leave tomorrow after church and come back Wednesday evening. So I have all day Thursday and Friday until six. We could go on Thursday.”

“That would be great. Maybe you should invite Gabby.”

“I’m hanging up now . . .”

“Okay, I’ll stop. Seriously though, have you even tried to get to know her?”

I took a deep breath, annoyed that she would ask. “Why should I? Dad said they’re just friends.”

“Well, she’s a believer, right?”

“Supposedly.”

“Just think about it. Maybe if you got to know her better it wouldn’t be so horrible for you when she’s around. Besides, it puts you in a bad mood.”

“What if I hate her even more?”

“I seriously doubt that would happen. You might even start to like her.”

“Okay, keep talking like that and I’ll have to find another friend.”

“I’m saying it because I am your friend. And besides, with Gretchen on the loose, we may only have each other when we get back to school anyway.”

We made plans to meet on Thursday, but the thought of Gretchen returning to school kept spinning webs inside of me. She had been on her very best behavior since her suspension, but she knew I was the one who turned her in for accidentally burning down The Snack Shack. And I knew she wasn’t going to let that just slip by. I had the feeling she was purposely trying to torture

me by not doing anything, all the while letting me know she was right there, watching, and waiting to pounce.

My real fear was that she had actual ammunition since she had discovered that I stayed at the psychiatric hospital over winter break. Sure, she was popular, and she could sway public opinion about me at school, but now she could make everyone believe that I was certifiably crazy too. And I couldn't get around my shame over it. I really had wanted to kill myself. I thought disappearing would be easier than dealing with all the secrets. Coming clean with my family had helped a lot, starting counseling had helped too, but what was scarier was that life for me was changing again. And once again, I wasn't dealing with it very well.

After my stay at the hospital, I went back to school and had the play going on. It kept me so busy that I barely had time to breathe, much less think. And now there was nothing. It was like a dark vortex returned, taunting me and reminding me that something was still missing. Part of me knew that God was supposed to be filling that hole, but I was so new at the God thing, I didn't always know how to do that. I kind of thought it would be nice to go away for a couple of months and get my footing with God and then return to my life. But instead, it was like trying to climb on a rock that was being battered with wind and waves from every direction. I just couldn't seem to get my footing. And it wasn't just Gabby that bothered me. Or even Gretchen.

It was so much more.