

CHAPTER

1

Becoming Beka

BECOMING BEKA

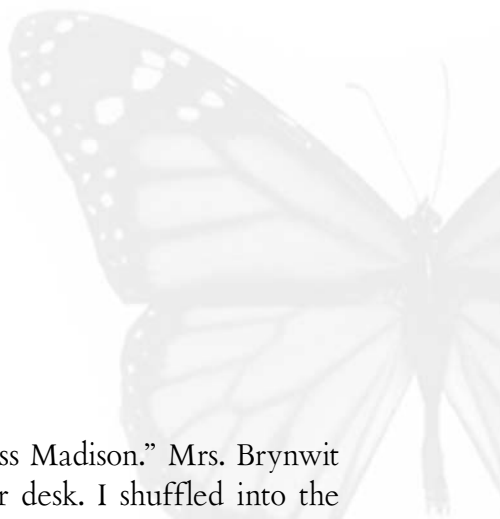
Sit down,

Miss Madison.” Mrs. Brynwit didn’t even look up from her desk. I shuffled into the room and sank into the high-back wood chair in front of her desk. She moved one paper aside and picked up another, holding it in a pinch in front of her face.

I looked around at the dark, windowless office. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. What could I possibly have done? It was the first day back from winter break, and I hadn’t even made it to my seat in homeroom before Mrs. Lauden sent me to see Mrs. Brynwit, the principal.

She and I did not have a very good history.

She dropped the paper and stared at me for what



seemed like forever before she spoke. “This is becoming quite the habit with you.”

“Excuse me?” I choked the words out. Somehow my mouth had dried up since entering the room.

“Well, after last year’s events, the slanderous posts, the Snack Shack fire, well, frankly I thought you’d try to finish out your senior year without causing problems.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Excuse me? I, uh . . . I don’t know what you mean. I’ve only been here for twenty minutes.”

Mrs. Brynwit stood up and caught her hands behind her back—well, as best as she could since she had these short pudgy arms and a wide body. She paced in the narrow space between her desk and the bookcases.

“I’ve had a very serious complaint lodged against you. It seems one of the students felt their civil rights were violated by your proselytizing.”

“Complaint? Prosta-what?”

Mrs. Brynwit stopped. “Proselytizing. Preaching.” She picked up a paper and read, “‘I was close to the edge, When You came to my rescue. . . . You came to me, Salvation in Your hand.’ Is this not from the song you sang at the holiday concert?”

“Yes. It is, but . . .”

“And I assume you’re speaking of God in this song?” Mrs. Brynwit sat back down and leaned forward.

“Yes.” I pulled at my necklace and tried to take long slow breaths. Now if only the room would stop shrinking.

“This is a public school, Rebekah. This is not an appropriate venue for you to preach at the student body

about your faith. Now there is one student I know of that was offended by your blatant disregard for other faiths, and there could be many more. Perhaps they were too upset to come forward.”

I shook my head. “It was just a song.”

“And even a song can make others feel like you are belittling their beliefs.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No. That’s word for word what was in the complaint.”

I felt sick to my stomach. How could this be happening? I thought everything was going pretty well. I made it through the holidays and my dad’s engagement, and I mailed every last one of my college applications. It was like I had been punched in the stomach.

Then a thought occurred to me.

“Can I ask . . . who made the complaint?”

“That is none of your concern.” Mrs. Brynwit looked horrified that I would even dare to ask.

“It’s just. There’s a girl who, well, she’d have personal reasons for making a false complaint. She doesn’t like me. She hates me. Maybe she’s doing it to get back at me.”

Mrs. Brynwit straightened her back and pinched her lips together. “Miss Madison. It is none of your concern who made the complaint, because I found it to be valid enough to bring you in here. That is all you need be concerned about.”

I sat stone-still hoping that she wouldn’t try to suspend me again.

Mrs. Brynwit huffed and folded her arms on her desk. “So what do you have to say for yourself? Besides making more accusations?”

I chewed on my bottom lip for a second and tried to get my thoughts to calm down enough to answer. "It was an assignment. I just completed an assignment." I waited for another couple of seconds. "I got an A on it, too."

"Your grade is hardly the point." She spit the words out. What made her hate me so much?

I took a deep breath and said, "Well, the concert, well, it had songs from lots of different cultures and faiths. Mine was just one song. I guess I don't see why I'm in here when I'm not the only one who sang about God."

"I realize you are not the only one, but those other songs had been approved by the administration. Yours was not."

"Mr. Thompson knew about all of our projects. I turned in the lyrics weeks before the concert."

"And I will speak with Mr. Thompson about that. I just want to make it abundantly clear to you that you are not to engage in this kind of religious activity in my school. It's one thing to complete an assignment privately between a teacher and a student. It's quite another to publicly perform a song with such religious intonations."

I wasn't sure what she was saying.

"Are we clear?" she asked.

"I think so."

"Then get to class. I don't want to have you back in my office again, Miss Madison."

I grabbed my backpack and left before she could change her mind. The bell rang, and after checking the clock I walked to first period in a complete daze.

* * *

“I don’t understand. So you can’t sing your song again?” Lori took a bite of her sandwich and cocked her head at me.

Lori and I became friends back in the beginning of our junior year when she moved to Bragg County. And I was so glad for her right then.

“Well, yeah, but she made it sound like she didn’t want me saying anything about God.”

“Can she do that?” Lori reached back and secured her long dark hair into a ponytail and then rested her head on her hand.

I shrugged. “Well she did. It just stinks. I seriously thought I could get through a few more months of school without having some big crisis. I still have to wait to hear from colleges, then there’s Dad’s wedding.” I shook my head. “It’s still weird to say it out loud, you know?”

She nodded. “I can imagine. How are things with Gabby?”

I pushed the corn kernels around on my tray while I thought about it. I had hated Gabby at first. To be fair though, I probably would have hated any woman who showed my dad attention. It just hurt too much to think of him with anyone but my mother. It was coming up on two years since she had died in a car accident, and what started out as a friendship with a coworker had resulted in my dad’s engagement and a wedding set for June 21. I had learned to tolerate Gabby and almost like her over the last six months or so, but it still felt odd . . . and wrong . . . to think about having a stepmother. It would be different for me though since I would leave for college in the fall. It was my two younger sisters, Lucy and Anna,

who would actually be living full-time with a new stepmom. I was just glad I wasn't them.

"Beka? Hel-lo."

"Sorry. They're okay I guess. Not terrible, but not wonderful either. I like her as a person—just not sure about the stepmom thing."

"It's weird. Your family is planning a wedding and mine is planning a divorce." Lori shook her head and sighed.

"Are they seriously going through with it?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Dad is just so mad and he won't admit that it's serious. He thinks Mom and everybody else have blown it way out of proportion." Lori leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. "And you'll get mad if I say the other thing."

"It's not your fault, Lori."

"I know but it feels that way. I can't help but think that if I hadn't caught him looking at that junk on the computer none of this would have happened."

"Lori."

"I know, I know. It's just hard."

The bell rang and we gathered up our trash. I followed Lori to the door. Her shoulders were slumped, and I wished there was something I could do so that she wouldn't be so sad. She had only come to live with David and Megan Rollins a year and a half ago, and they adopted her within six months. Megan and David had seemed like a perfect couple, but then Lori had caught David using pornography. When she told, the marriage seemed to blow up. I understood why Lori felt responsible, but more than anything I wanted to knock some sense into David. By him not admitting what he did was wrong, it

was making Lori miserable and destroying his marriage to Megan. How stupid could one man be?

I waved good-bye to Lori when we reached her class and felt a tug on the back of my shirt at the same time. I turned to see Mark try to duck away, but when I turned again, there he was, standing in front of me with a wry smile on his face.

“You got your hair cut,” I said.

Mark ran his hand through his sandy blond hair and shrugged. “Mom made me.”

Mark. It would help me a lot if he weren’t so cute.

I started to walk and Mark moved to my side to walk with me.

“So,” he said. “Loved all those phone calls you made to me over break. Yup. All those nice long talks . . .”

“I’m sorry. I just . . . well . . . I thought . . .” I had planned during the break exactly how I would respond to Mark when I saw him, and instead of my prepared speech flowing from my mouth, I felt tongue-tied and flustered. Why did he always do that to me?

“What gives?”

He didn’t sound upset, but I felt bad for not being able to give him a straight answer. I liked Mark, probably too much, in fact, and even though we had been kind of on-again, off-again, when he was near me, there was no other place I wanted to be.

But it was just so complicated.

“We’ve been through this, haven’t we? I wouldn’t have known what to say if I had called you back.” I crossed the hallway and opened my locker. Mark leaned up against the wall and watched me.

“We can sort it out. Let’s try at least.”

I sighed and shook my head. I closed my locker door and faced him. “We blew it, remember? My dad isn’t going to let me go out with you because he says I’m irresponsible when I’m with you.”

Mark stepped forward and wrapped his arm around my waist. “It never stopped us before.”

“Mark.”

“It’s that guy, Josh. Is that it?”

“No. We’re friends. Like I tried to tell you before.”

I turned and walked away, but Mark appeared at my side a moment later.

“I saw you.”

“Saw me what?” I swallowed hard.

“With him. At The Fire Escape.”

“Yeah, so. We saw a movie.”

“I’m just saying, I just didn’t like the way you were looking at him.”

I laughed out loud. “You’ve got nerve, Mark.”

“What? I can’t help it. I told you before break that I think we’re meant to be together.”

We reached the music room, where I was taking the second semester of music theory and Mark was a teacher’s aide for Mr. Thompson. I found a seat among the random couches and chairs strewn across the large room, and Mark plopped into the seat next to me.

I rubbed my hands over my face and then dropped them into my lap. “You’re going to make me have this conversation again, aren’t you?”

Mark batted his eyelashes at me and a smile escaped

from my mouth. I tried to hide it, but Mark pointed at me and stood up.

“Ha! See, Beka. You can’t deny it.” Mark planted his hands on the arms of my chair and leaned in close enough for me to smell spearmint on his breath. “We can work this out.” He moved all the way forward until he had kissed me and then walked toward Thompson’s office.

My cheeks flushed as a couple of kids around me let out low whistles. I sank back into the chair. All I had wanted to do was have a normal end to my senior year. So much for normal.

* * *

We had a substitute for the class, which I thought was weird since it was the first day back from break. And I couldn’t help but wonder if it had something to do with my song. Mr. Thompson had to just be sick—but I wasn’t going to be able to rest until I found out. After class, I poked my head into Thompson’s office and cleared my throat. Mark looked up and grinned.

“Where’s Thompson today?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“No reason. Just wondering. See you later.”

“Count on it.” He waved and then turned back to his desk.

I fidgeted my way through my next class and spent most of the time in journalism trying to convince myself I had nothing to worry about. Mrs. Brynwit probably yelled at Thompson to make herself feel better, and that would be it. Since I was the senior editor for our student

newspaper, *The Bragg About*, I was the one to make sure everything got finished in time to publish every Friday. It was a good thing that we didn't have a deadline this week though—it gave me more time to worry.

And Mai being in the class didn't help things either. She had tried to blackmail me into giving up my job at the paper, spread rumors about me, and told everyone that I had stayed in a psychiatric hospital during my junior year. I still didn't know why she was so popular. Gretchen Stanley used to be the popular one, and Mai was always following her around. But Gretchen had transferred to a different school and Mai had taken over as the queen bee. And boy did she have it in for me. I wasn't too happy with her either, because she had been trying to draw my sister Lucy into her crowd—which had nothing to do with wanting to be Lucy's friend and everything to do with Mai getting back at me.

Mai didn't speak to me at all during journalism, but she kept shooting me these looks that made the hair on my arms straighten. I thought maybe my overactive imagination was getting the better of me until I ran into her at the end of class. She sneered at me and then laughed as she walked away.

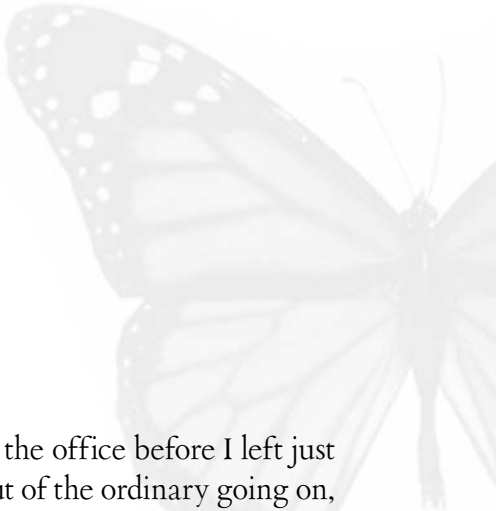
There wasn't a shred of doubt in my mind that Mai was the one who went to Mrs. Brynwit with that stupid complaint.

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I walked by the office before I left just to see if there was anything out of the ordinary going on, but everything seemed quiet. I saw Mr. Stickel sitting at the duty desk in the lobby, reading a book. The teachers had to rotate desk duty all day just to make sure people didn't come in the building who weren't supposed to be there. Mr. Stickel helped Thompson out with the play every year, so I got to know him during *Annie* last year. I was debating about going and asking him if Thompson was okay when he looked up and caught my eye, waving me over.

“Hey, Mr. Stickel.”

“Beka.” He slipped his feet off the desk and sat up in

his chair. “So how come you didn’t audition? You would have made a wonderful Peter Pan.”

I felt myself blush. “Oh, well, I . . . I guess it’s just not really my thing.”

“Too bad. You really have talent.”

“I got a song recorded.” The words came flying out of my mouth. It would be so much better if I clammed up when I was nervous instead of spouting out too much information.

“Really? How did that happen?” Mr. Stickel stood up and shoved his hands into his pockets. His head came forward and tilted. He seemed to really want to know.

I cleared my throat. “Well, it’s nothing really. I mean, a record producer heard my song at the holiday concert and had me record it so he could take it back to L.A. with him. It has to go before boards and committees and all sorts of stuff. It may be all for nothing.”

Mr. Stickel wrinkled his eyebrows. “Why do you say that, Beka? You never know what could happen.”

“True.” I rocked onto my toes then back on my heels. “Oh, I wanted to ask you. Have you seen Mr. Thompson today? He was out. Is everything okay?”

“I’m not sure. He was in here earlier talking to Mrs. Brynwit. I’m not sure what’s going on. He didn’t teach his classes today?”

I shook my head.

Mr. Stickel shrugged. “I don’t know. Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” I saw Lucy come around the corner with a scowl on her face. “I better go. See you tomorrow.”

“Good luck with your music, Beka.”

I waved at him and waited by the door for Lucy to

catch up, but when she did she walked past me and right out the door. I sighed and followed her out, watching her auburn hair swing around her shoulders. This was getting old.

* * *

“What happened?” I asked after Lucy had slammed the car door closed and hunched down in her seat.

“What do you mean what happened?”

“Something must have. You were fine this morning, and now you’re mad.”

She huffed and turned away as I pulled out of the parking lot. I stayed quiet, trying to decide if I should push her or just leave her alone. I never knew what to do with Lucy anymore. My older brother Paul, who had moved to college for his freshman year, was always able to say the right thing to her. I always seemed to say the wrong thing. Even though she drove me nuts, I was worried about her.

When I pulled into the parking lot of the gym for her gymnastics practice she finally turned toward me.

“Beka. Can’t *you* talk to Dad?”

“About what?”

“Me being grounded?” She rolled her eyes. “It’s been weeks and he hasn’t said anything.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“I just have a . . . somewhere I want to go this weekend, that’s all.”

“Is that why you’re in a bad mood? Cause you can’t go to a party?”

“I didn’t say it was a party.”

“Lucy. Please. I’m not an idiot. Does this party have anything to do with Mai?”

Lucy crossed her arms and turned her face away. That answered my question.

“Lucy. I just . . .”

Lucy threw her hand up. “I don’t want to hear this anymore. Mai thinks I’m cool, and just because you’re not you can’t totally mess up my social life. Besides, you’re a senior. You’ll be leaving anyway. I’m the one that has to stay here for three more years.”

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. I knew Mai was just using Lucy to irritate me, but Lucy really thought she had been chosen for the cool crowd on her own. Mai and I went way back, and none of it was good. I knew she couldn’t be trusted, but how was I supposed to convince Lucy of that? Especially when Mai was so good at lying.

“Dad’s worried about you, Lucy. He doesn’t want you to . . . things happen at those parties.” I lowered my voice as if someone could actually hear us talking inside the car. “I caught you in a bedroom with Ethan, remember?”

“Are you deaf? I keep telling you I wasn’t going to do anything with him.” She threw up her hands and reached for the door handle.

I reached over and stopped her. “Can we talk about this more later? I want to . . .”

“What’s the point? You never listen to me.” She pushed me away and climbed out of the car, slamming the door shut behind her. I leaned back in my seat.

* * *

Lucy returned from practice and refused to talk to me, and then glared at me during dinner. Dad didn't even seem to notice. He rushed through dinner and then disappeared into the den to make some phone calls. I decided to just get it over with.

I knocked on her door. She had always shared a room with Anna until Paul went away to college. She convinced Dad to let her have Paul's room, and we moved his stuff to the basement rec room. Nobody was ever down there, and Paul would still have a place to stay during the holidays. Lucy was very protective of her new room, so I wasn't surprised to find it locked when I tried the handle.

I banged harder. "C'mon Lucy. Open up."

The door swung open and Lucy stopped short, her hair flying forward. "What?"

"Did you want to go over to youth group tonight?"

"I'm grounded, remember?"

"You're allowed to go to youth group. Come with me." I leaned on the door frame.

She growled and walked back to her bed where her books were spread out in a fan. I took a few steps into the room and took a seat on her trunk.

"Can we talk some more about this?"

"No. Not unless you're going to help me with Dad."

I dropped my head back and looked at the ceiling. "He's not going to let you go to a party anyway."

"He's not going to know about the party. I just wanted to spend the night at Amy's house." She smiled innocently.

"Yeah, right."

“Beka, I’m not doing anything that you haven’t done.”

Right between the eyes. She was right. “Not at your age. I never even left the house when I was your age.”

She shrugged. “Well, I’m older than you were at my age.”

“I just don’t think you can handle it.”

She scowled. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“These parties. The expectations. They revolve around drinking and sex. You’re fourteen, Lucy.”

“And you’re not my mother.” She looked down at her book pretending to read.

“I know that. But since Mom’s gone someone’s got to be straight with you. You’ve just been acting so different since you started at Bragg County. I don’t know . . . I just want to help.”

“Well, you’re not. I need to finish.”

“What about youth group?”

Lucy never even looked up.

“Whatever. If you need . . .” She wasn’t listening anyway. I closed the door behind me and leaned against it. It was hard being the oldest sister. How did Paul manage, especially with Lucy? And why couldn’t I seem to get it right?

Walking back to my room my thoughts flickered back to my encounter with Mrs. Brynwit. I still couldn’t believe she had accused me of violating others’ rights by performing my song. That night had been so special and so wonderful, and now it felt dirty and ruined. Even though I wasn’t sure Mrs. Brynwit should have done it, I still didn’t want to get in any more trouble with her or

anybody else. I just wanted to finish my senior year. But the fact that Thompson was MIA on the first day back after winter break worried me. It just felt wrong.

I flicked on the light in my room and, as if on cue, my phone rang. I picked it up.

“Can we finish that conversation now?”

“Mark.”

“Can I come in? It’s too cold out here to talk.”

“Where are you?”

“Looking at your window.”

I walked to the window and looked down. Sure enough Mark was bobbing up and down in our yard, one hand to his ear and the other shoved into his pocket.

“I’m freezing, Beka. Give a guy a break.”

My mind had a plan in an instant. Amazing how it worked so fast when it probably shouldn’t.

“Go around to the basement door. I’ll meet you there.”

“Whatever you say, Beautiful.”

I hung up and couldn’t help but grin. It was nice to be chased.

I went downstairs and stopped by the den. Dad was bent over some papers at his big rolltop desk that sat in the corner of the den.

“You okay, Dad?” I stood in the doorway.

He looked up, his eyes tired and his hair messed up. “Sure, Butterfly. Everything okay?”

“I guess.”

“What is it?”

“Oh, just some school stuff. But it can wait.”

“Are you sure?” He motioned to his desk. “I’ve just got a lot on my plate tonight.”

I flicked my hand. “No big deal. Well, I’ve got homework to finish.”

“Okay. Night, sweetie.”

“Night.”

He was hunched over his laptop before I had even turned away. He’d never even know I was gone. I closed the basement door quietly behind me, leaving the lights off until I reached the back of the house. I unlocked the sliding glass door and then realized there was a broom handle in the way. Mark was pretending to freeze to death, so by the time I yanked the door open I was laughing. He fell into my arms.

“I thought you’d never come for me.” He put his hands on my cheeks. “See, I told you I was freezing.”

I pulled the door shut and Mark shrugged off his jacket. I led him into Paul’s makeshift room. There was a small love seat, the bed, and a couple of chairs in the room, but before I could even decide where the best place to sit would be, Mark flopped onto the couch and pulled me down next to him, his arms around me.

“Much better.”

“What are you doing here, you goof?” I adjusted myself so I could see him better.

“I wanted to finish our conversation.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Oh, really.”

“Definitely.” He leaned over and kissed me on the lips, then pulled back just a little bit. “I’ve been wanting to do that all day.” He grinned and leaned back. I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding until that moment.

“You and I.” He looked at me. “It’s been a little crazy.”

“You could say that,” I said. “I just felt like you were . . .”

“Wait. I get to go first. Remember I’m the one that froze to death to get over here.”

“Have at it.” I leaned back, feeling even more pressure lift off me.

He opened and then closed his mouth, and then laughed.

“What?” I asked.

“I forgot everything I was going to say.” He laughed and I joined in.

His laugh melted into a smile and he said softly, “See. We’re good together. Don’t you think?”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not what the problem is. You want to be more serious, and then you want to keep things light. You follow me around and then ignore me. I don’t know what you want anymore. I don’t even think you know what you want.”

“Oh, I think I do. It’s always been you, Beka.”

I looked at him, the curve of his mouth, his deep brown eyes. What is it that I wanted? Did I want to be with him or not?

“You say you want me now, but for all I know you’ll be dating Angela again saying, ‘Let’s keep it light.’”

“What about you? You can’t make up your mind either,” he said.

“Well, I haven’t had to. You got mad about Josh and that dumb rumor and pushed me away. What was I supposed to do?”

Mark took my hand in his and rubbed the back of it.

He stared at it for a long second and then looked up at me. “Can we just start fresh? Last year. I don’t know. It was all so crazy.”

“True.” A nagging image of Josh kept floating into my thoughts.

“So what about your dad? He won’t let us see each other again?”

“He’ll let me. He just doesn’t like it. He doesn’t want me breaking the rules.”

“Then if we’re more careful about that. . . . What do you say—can we try again?”

How could I say no? It all felt so good and right. I had lots of concerns, not the least of which was Josh, but Mark came after me. He was willing to take a risk with me, and that meant something.

“And you won’t push . . . you know.”

“I won’t push.” He rubbed his thumb down my cheek and brought my face toward his. “I promise.” Then he kissed me again.

* * *

As I watched him trudge through my backyard, everything I felt so sure about a few minutes earlier began to seep out of me. Could I trust Mark? And what about Josh? Josh was three thousand miles away at college in Seattle and we had no commitments, even though he had hinted around that he cared about me.

I leaned my head on the cold glass and closed my eyes.

Lord, what am I supposed to do? I need You to be clear, to help

me know which way to go. With Mark, it just seems so good when we're together and he really likes me. And when Josh was home that felt right, too. But now that Josh is away . . . I just don't know. And what if I make the wrong choice?