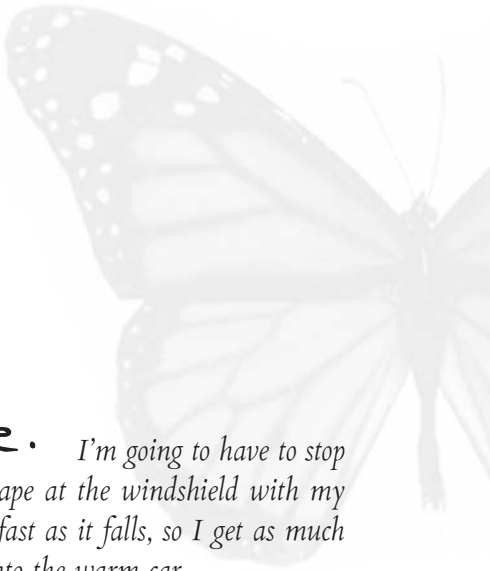


# CHAPTER

Becoming Beka      BECOMING BEKA

1



"I can't see. I'm going to have to stop again," I say. I pull over and scrape at the windshield with my glove. The drizzle is freezing as fast as it falls, so I get as much off as I can and then dive back into the warm car.

"Crazy night, isn't it?" my mother asks as she rubs my back quickly to warm me up. It doesn't really help, but it feels nice.

"Well, we don't have too much farther to go," I say, flashing a grin at her. Even bundled up in the parka she seems delicate. But it's her confident face that I admire most. No wonder half the town brings their kids to her office.

"Beka, honey, slow down up here. The road has probably gotten really icy." I carefully slow down, but the headlights coming towards me seem too close, maybe even on my side. I squint to see

*better. The lights must be over the line. I swerve the car right to avoid a collision but can't get back on the road. My mother stiffens her legs against the floorboard as if she could stop the car from her side. We start spinning around and around. It feels slow. Then, the car slips off the embankment and starts tumbling down the hill, end over end. It feels like a carnival ride, except for the sound of metal being crushed and glass shattering.*

*Then it stops. I listen but can't hear anything. I look at my mom. There is blood. Her eyes are closed. "Mom? Mom!"*

\* \* \*

Breathing heavily, and drenched in sweat, I sat up and clenched my blanket. When I saw where I was I lay back down, turned on my side, and waited for my heart to slow down. The dark windows told me it was still night even before I glanced at my alarm clock. Four A.M. I knew I wouldn't be going back to sleep.

The dream had been coming regularly, but now it was more like twice a week instead of once a month. It was always the same. Except sometimes I don't slow down the car. I closed my eyes and thought about my mother. In her white coat at the hospital. In her apron in the kitchen. I thought about her smile.

Shivering, I pulled the covers up closer. My heart ached, but I didn't cry. The tears wouldn't come. *I don't deserve to cry*, I thought. *If I had been a better daughter, she probably would still be here. She'd be downstairs right now sleeping next to my father. She'd get up in a few hours and make breakfast for all of us.*

But she wasn't here. She was dead. And I had to figure out life without her.

It's funny how, in your head, your memory tells you things were much better than they really were. In my memories we were close. We smiled at each other and understood each other's hearts. But if I'm honest with myself, that's more imagination than memory.

I wanted to know her better than I did. We hardly understood each other at all. Yes, my imagination was much kinder than my memory. Memories stuck in my heart like barbed wire—anytime I moved or thought too long, there they were, stabbing at me. I'll never know the feeling of her arms wrapped around my shoulders or her hand smoothing my hair. As if those things could ease the ache in my heart. Even if she were still here I would still be me. I couldn't seem to escape that.

She had been gone nine long months, but in some ways, it felt like it was yesterday. I tried not to think about it too much. I had plenty of other things I was supposed to be thinking about anyway. I glanced at the stack of college brochures on my floor. Now there was something I didn't want to think about. *How can I make a huge decision like that when I can't even face myself in the morning?*

I walked over and tried to pick up the stack, but they slipped, and one by one they thumped to the floor. With only a few left in my hand, I threw them towards the trash can. I couldn't seem to get anything right lately. I knew I was being foolish, and part of me thought that getting out of here, away from my family, school, and my memories, might be just what I needed. But I couldn't muster the energy to even start the process. The

brochures only came because I signed some paper at school.

I picked up one from Mary Washington College and looked at the students on the cover. They looked happy and confident, comfortable even. I couldn't look like that on my best days, and there weren't many of those. See, what was the point of college? People go to college to get somewhere, make something of themselves. I just wanted to disappear.

Reluctantly, I went to my closet. I grabbed a dark red sweater, chose some jeans and a turtleneck. I had less than an hour to put on my face—my face that said, “Yeah, everything's just fine.”

I walked over and sat on the floor by the long, narrow netting that hung from my ceiling. The first rays of sunlight splayed across the green carpeting my mother always told me I would regret choosing. And I did. But I couldn't bear to change it, and so it stayed along with the butterfly border that wound its way along the top of the wall.

“How are you guys doing?” I reached my hand in where the netting overlapped and held out my index finger. The smallest caterpillar obliged and crawled slowly into my hand. I pulled him out and up to my face. The striking yellow, black, and white stripes of his body rippled as he moved round and round my hand. His little legs barely touched my skin before they began moving again.

“What should I name you, little guy? Roscoe? Nah, you don't want to be a Roscoe. Maybe, well, I guess you could be a girl. Riley? Let's call you Riley. That'll work if you're a boy or a girl. I know you're hungry. I'm going

to get you some fresh leaves before I go, okay?” I slipped Riley back into the netting and let him crawl onto the maze of twigs at the bottom of the tower. He joined his four brothers or sisters and headed for the last remaining leaf lying at the bottom.

When I reached the kitchen it was exactly as I had left it the night before. The house was so still. It was about the only time of day that it *was* still, what with five people in the house. I never used to be the first one downstairs. Mom was constantly calling up the stairs to get me out of bed. Now with the nightmares and insomnia, I had discovered that waking up at the crack of dawn wasn't all bad. It was actually kind of peaceful.

I loved our kitchen because it was so cozy, all decked out with soft greens and yellows nestled in the smell of warm bread and cinnamon. A large oak island with a cooktop dominated the left half of the room, while the table took up the right half. My mom had made the flowered curtains just the year before. “Aren't they cheery?” she had asked us. I agreed with her, even though I hadn't felt “cheery” in quite some time.

I started a pot of coffee for Dad, knowing that he would emerge soon, wanting his first cup. I made extra since Paul has taken to drinking coffee too. Dad keeps telling him it's a bad habit, but he doesn't fight him much on it. My brother Paul will be graduating in the spring and is going to college on scholarship in the fall. He's a fantastic baseball player, but he wants to be a doctor. He figures if they are willing to pay his way he will certainly let them, but his schoolwork would be his real priority.

“Will you make me breakfast, Beka?” I turned to see my eight-year-old sister catapult herself into the kitchen and fling her arms around my waist. Looking down at her reddish blonde hair, I couldn’t help but smile. It was hard to stay sad when Anna was around. She looked at me with that toothless grin that made her even more impossible to resist.

“Sure, sweetie, what would you like?”

She paused, looking around the kitchen. “Can I have pancakes?”

Now it was my turn to pause. In my mind, I quickly ran down the ramifications of having pancakes. Everyone would want some, I was sure. However, even with making them and the massive mess that would have to be cleaned, it was probably early enough to pull it off. Besides, it would keep me busy.

“Okay, on one condition, though,” I told her. “Run up to your room and put on your black tights. These are blue.”

She looked down at her legs and gasped. “I didn’t even notice,” she said seriously. Then she turned and barreled up the stairs. Anna never did anything slowly. I giggled as I thought of her tearing through her drawers trying to find tights. Suddenly that black cloud swept over me. Mom used to help Anna lay out her clothes every evening with this private little game they played. I shook my head, pushing the thought away. It was not going to do me any good to think. I reached into the pantry and pulled out the Bisquick and began gathering the other ingredients.

Anna came down shortly and was very helpful as I

gave her directions. I heard the back door slam, and Paul appeared around the corner wiping his face with a towel.

“Early morning run?” I smiled tentatively, our argument the night before still ringing in my ears.

“As always,” he said. “Are you going to save me some of those pancakes? I have to run up and shower.”

“I will,” Anna called from her perch on the stool, “but you’d better hurry or I’ll eat them all up!”

“You wouldn’t!” he said.

“Yessss,” Anna giggled as he grabbed her in a big, sweaty hug and then dashed up the stairs.

“Anna, honey?” I said to her. “Could you go pull about three leaves off the plant in the foyer and take them up to the caterpillars?”

“Ohhh, I love feeding the little caterpillars. They’re so cute!” Anna jumped off the stool. I could hear her running back up the stairs.

As she went up, I heard Lucy’s voice. “Goodness, Anna, you better slow down or you’re gonna get hurt.” I gave the batter a few extra hard stirs and forced a smile onto my face.

“Good morning, Lucy! Why don’t you sit down? You can have the first batch of pancakes. How does that sound?”

“No, thanks,” she said as she slipped into one of the chairs. “I’m really not hungry.” I studied her as she slumped in the chair, her head down and her straight auburn hair covering her face. Something was definitely wrong. But I wasn’t sure if I should try to say anything. She had been a bit moodier than usual lately and seemed to pull away anytime I got close. As Paul entered the

room, I silently motioned for him to work on the pancakes. He nodded, glancing at Lucy, and took over the skillet. I walked over and stood by her chair. She didn't move for a minute, but when she looked up at me I wished I had just kept making pancakes.

"Is there anything I can do?" I sat down in the chair next to her.

She shook her head.

"I know it's hard sometimes, but it's no use being sad. It's not going to make things any different, will it?"

She wrinkled her brow. "Please don't act like you know what I'm feeling. How could you when you hide in your room all the time and never talk to me? Look, I'm fine. Just leave me alone."

I sat back a bit stunned. "Well, I'm your sister. I was just trying to—"

"Sister?"

"Hey, Lucy, can you give me a hand?" Paul's voice interrupted before she could say anything else.

"Sure." She stood and went over to the stove where Paul was cooking. I could have heard their conversation if I had wanted to, but I didn't want to know.

I stood up and swallowed the lump in my throat. I was ticked. I should have said something different, but she had caught me off guard. Lucy and I started having problems even before Mom died, but it no longer just felt like a separation; it felt as if we were on different planets. And we were, I guess. Not because I was three years older, but because of Mom. Lucy had spent all sorts of time with Mom, while I tried to avoid her. They went places together and spent time together. It used to make



my insides hurt when they would come home laughing and smiling with their arms around each other. I wanted that with Mom too. But every time Mom asked me to go somewhere, I said no. I couldn't be with her like Lucy. She might have discovered my secret if I spent too much time with her.

It bothered me that Lucy and I couldn't even have a conversation, but part of me just didn't want to care. I didn't want to constantly worry about what everyone else was thinking. It consumed my thoughts. *Can they see what I'm really thinking? What I'm really feeling?* It almost felt like if I let it out, all that anger and sadness, I might never get it back in. I took a deep breath, trying to push those feelings back inside. I had to get through the day. That's all I had been doing lately—trying to get through the day.

Paul looked up and caught my eyes. I tried to smile but ended up looking away, not wanting him to see what was going on inside of me. He had an uncanny ability to look right through me. I never could fool Paul. Luckily, Anna chose that moment to come downstairs, and we were all soon occupied with setting the table, pouring drinks, and finishing up the cooking.

"Well, well, well, the whole gang is up and ready to go. I am impressed," Dad said as he came through the door.

"Hey, Butterfly," Dad said as he kissed my cheek and squeezed my shoulders, the pet name making me feel close and distant all at the same time.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Anna called as she reached up her arms for him. "What's my name?"

“You know your name, silly girl,” he teased.

“You know, my special name. You call Beka Butterfly and Lucy Princess and me . . .” She stopped, waiting for him to finish.

“Miracle. You’re our little miracle.” He squeezed her tight and she giggled. Even though I had seen them have that same conversation a million times, I had to get out of the room.

“I’m going to check on the caterpillars,” I said to no one in particular and escaped to my sanctuary. I made sure the netting was secure and wasted a few moments straightening out the pale yellow quilt embroidered with the delicate butterflies I had always loved. I waited as long as I could, then trudged back down the stairs, wanting much more to return to my room and stay there all day. I wouldn’t have to worry about what to say. Before I reached the last step, I was determined not to let anyone know how I was feeling. No matter what.

\* \* \*

Only Paul was left in the kitchen. He stood at the back door waiting for me to gather my backpack and jacket. He was eerily silent. Even though I had my own car, I usually rode with Paul to school. Parking was a bear and it made it easier to take one car. Only today, I would have given anything to drive myself. We walked out to the car, our shoes crunching the light blanket of snow on the grass. It was the only break in the silence. I dreaded him asking me anything, and I tried to keep a thoughtful, but not sad, look on my face. It worked all

the way to school, but then, as we were walking to the building, Paul stopped and faced me.

“Rebekah, you really need to find someone to talk to. I don’t care who it is, but you can’t just keep going on like this. It’s like you haven’t even faced the fact that Mom is gone. You keep hovering over Anna, you argue with Lucy, but nobody can talk to you about anything serious. You never talk about missing Mom or feeling sad. You blow us off if we ask how you’re doing. If you keep everything inside and don’t talk about it, Beka . . . you could, well . . . I don’t know, I’m just afraid for you. You act like everything is fine, but you know it’s not. It’s like you’re not even you anymore. I love you, Beka, and if you want to talk, I’m here.” He gripped my shoulders with his hands and looked at me so fiercely that I nearly burst into tears. But I didn’t. And after a few moments, he gave me a hug and turned and went into the building.


I felt absolutely frozen, like I just couldn’t move. My mind was racing, replaying his words in my head. I dealt with Mom’s death. I wasn’t avoiding it, was I? I knew she was gone. I could feel that anger getting bigger inside me. He didn’t know everything. I was doing fine. I didn’t need to advertise what was going on to be okay.

I swallowed the rest of my tears and pushed everything he said aside. I still had seven hours of school to get through. I adjusted my backpack, stuffed everything down inside, and walked into Bragg County High School determined to be okay. Whatever that meant.

# CHAPTER

# 2

Becoming Beka      BECOMING BEKA



Already the halls were filled, and I plunged into the stream headed towards the lockers. Glancing at my watch I realized that I had nearly fifteen minutes before homeroom. I sighed. I really didn't want to see anyone or talk to anyone. I opened my locker and gathered my books for the first two periods, then headed for the auditorium. Not many people were at that end of the building early in the day, and I would get some privacy. Or so I thought.

As I turned the corner I walked straight into Gretchen Stanley. She is one of those beautiful, popular girls who walk around with their swarm all day. We have known each other since third grade, and up until my

mother died, we got along fairly well. She was duly sympathetic at first, but after a few months she said she was getting “bored of my long face” and couldn’t understand why I didn’t “snap out of it.” She began telling the other girls that I was milking my mother’s death for sympathy and that she just wasn’t going to play along anymore. She stopped speaking to me, and so did a bunch of the other girls. Except when they were being snotty and sarcastic. They would patronize me and treat me like I was ten, then laugh and walk away. I thought it would wear off, and I didn’t really care so much at first. But lately, Gretchen had been simply ruthless in her sickeningly sweet comments, and they were making me downright angry. I was in no mood to talk with her today. I was too afraid that I might burst into tears.

“Excuse me. Sorry, Gretchen,” I said quickly and tried to move past her and the swarm, but she actually grabbed my arm. For a brief moment I considered shoving her but figured that would just make things worse.

“Rebekah, how are you doing?” She spoke just as if she were talking to a puppy.

“I’m doing just fine.” I mimicked her tone of voice back. She puffed up her chest, and I braced myself for a nasty remark. But none came. She seemed to change her mind and then actually smiled at me.

“You don’t have to act like that. You stepped on my foot. The least you could do is give me a moment of your time.”

“And why would you want a moment of my time?” I pulled my jacket up against my chest and waited. I couldn’t figure out what she was up to.

“I was looking for you to find out if you want to do something with us.”

I paused and studied her face. Was this a joke, or was she serious? I looked at the other girls. Chrissy and Mai looked bored and uninterested. Theresa looked nervous. But no one seemed like they were laughing about it.

“Do something? With you? I thought I was pathetic. Or something like that.”

“Oh, please! That’s ancient history.”

“If you call last month ancient history, then I’m not sure we’re speaking the same language, Gretchen.”

She stomped her foot. “Why are you doing this? I just wanted to know if you’d audition with us. I’m being completely genuine. Really.” She smiled. When I didn’t respond she continued. “They are having auditions for the spring musical this Thursday and Friday, and since we are all trying out I thought you might want to also. They’re going to do *Annie*, and Mr. Thompson is directing it.” She sounded excited about it. I still couldn’t figure out if she was for real. I wondered if she was planning some terrible joke to play on me or something.

“Why are you asking me? I mean, we haven’t exactly been friends lately. I’m just curious,” I said quietly.

“My gosh, Beka, why are you so paranoid?” she snapped. “I was just trying to help you get back in the swing of things—you know, rejoin the land of the living. I mean, it’s about time, isn’t it?” She brushed past me. The other girls leaped towards her, and they moved down the hall as a unit. I turned and ran for the auditorium.

As I sank down in one of the chairs I heard the home-room bell ring. I didn’t move. *Who cares about homeroom?*

*Who cares about being on time?* I was so tired of always doing exactly what I was supposed to do. I tried to swallow the tears, but they started falling down my cheeks anyhow. I didn't understand why I felt so awful. Nobody seemed to understand me. I replayed the conversation with Gretchen over and over. She probably was plotting something against me. Why else would she suddenly be nice after six months of put-downs? *Wow, I really am paranoid.*

It didn't make any sense, though. Nothing made any sense. And Paul. My mind wandered back to his words in the parking lot. He didn't understand me either. My stomach turned over as I thought about my brother. It hurt somewhere inside to know that he was thinking those kinds of things about me. I laid my jacket on the seat in front of me and put my head down. I just wanted to disappear.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew a bell was ringing. And, according to my watch, it was the second period bell. I was really late. I gathered everything and ran to class, desperately trying to think of an excuse. I looked through the little glass window and saw Miss Hansen passing out papers. I did not want to walk in that room late. Miss Hansen had appointed herself the guardian of the clock, and I would have to endure a lecture in front of the whole room. I knew because I had witnessed that lecture countless times. I ducked under the window and headed for the bathroom. I didn't really think about how stupid that was until I actually walked in and looked at the rows of stalls and sinks. What was I supposed to do in there for forty-five minutes? There wasn't even anywhere to sit, except for the obvious, of course, which I was not going to do. I

should have just stayed in the auditorium or left school entirely, but there was really nowhere to go. I dropped my backpack in the corner and slid down the wall holding my jacket. I was not having a good day.

Then a toilet flushed and I suddenly became aware of the sneakers in the last stall. *How am I going to explain this one?* I dropped my head and pretended to be extremely engrossed in the zipper on my jacket. I heard the water running, but after a few minutes of listening for the door to the hallway, I figured I had just missed it. I looked up and realized that the girl had not left the bathroom but was standing right in front of me.

“Can I help you or something? I mean . . . are you like sick or something?” She looked down at me with a strange expression. I couldn’t think of a single thing to say, so I just looked up at her and bit my lip to keep my mouth from quivering. *Don’t start crying!* For some reason, I always chose the most inopportune times to start crying.

I folded my arms around my knees and dropped my head as I felt the first tears fall across my cheeks. My mind was whirling with Paul and Gretchen and Mom. At some point I was aware that this girl was sitting next to me with her hand on my back. I fought the tears. They weren’t going to do me any good. They couldn’t change the way things were. So I kind of just sat there and breathed. In and out. In and out. I concentrated on that until the feelings were stuffed back inside and I could look up with no fear of the tears showing up again.

I studied the girl sitting next to me. She was small framed with masses of thick dark wavy hair pulled back gently from her face. Pretty too, in a tough sort of way.



“Why did you stay?” I asked her.

She shrugged softly. “I don’t know. I guess I thought maybe you might want someone here.”

“I’m Rebekah Madison. I don’t remember seeing you before. Are you new here?” I was feeling pretty awkward and thought small talk might be easier than explaining what was wrong with me.

“My name is Lori, Lori Trent. Thursday was my first day but I spent last week taking all of these tests and stuff. Today is my first day of classes.” She spoke softly and carefully, like she was studying me, wondering if I could be trusted. There was something different about her. Gretchen would have never put up with me sitting in the bathroom, and she certainly wouldn’t have even pretended to be concerned. I decided, for no particular reason, to take a chance.

“Thanks for staying. I guess I just needed to clear my head, and I didn’t much feel like going to class. It’s been a hard morning.” I paused and sighed. “Actually,” I said carefully, “it’s been a hard year.”

“Well, I hope you are feeling a little better.” She glanced down at her watch and then looked up at me. “Are you going to class?” I shrugged and dropped my head. “I have—” she paused and looked at a crumpled piece of paper that she pulled from her pocket, “English literature with Hansen. I think I’m pretty late.”

I felt bad because I was the one who had made her so late. And it’s not like she knew the teachers yet. I smiled at her and said, “That’s my class too. Miss Hansen is really strict about being on time, but maybe we’ll only be in half the amount of trouble if we walk in together.”

She laughed and I noticed for the first time how beautiful she really was, like a china doll with small, perfect features and even white teeth. I had a feeling Gretchen was either going to draw her into the swarm or try to alienate her completely. Gretchen didn't do real great with other beautiful people. "That sounds like a good plan," she said. We gathered up our backpacks and headed towards class.

Miss Hansen gave us a brief lecture on respect and tardiness but allowed us to sit down without too much trouble. I sat in my usual seat, third row to the right of the room (if you're facing the blackboard). The only other empty seat was in the back of the room, and Lori quietly made her way to the back. I was sort of sorry that I couldn't sit near her. Even though I didn't know much about her, she interested me, and I thought it would be cool to get to know her.

As Miss Hansen turned to write the five steps to evaluating poetry on the board, I heard my name being whispered softly. I looked up and found Gretchen pointing to a note on the floor by my foot. I picked it up, thinking it couldn't possibly be for me, but there was my name neatly printed on the front of the folded paper.

Beka—

Meet me by the gym before lunch.

I want to talk to you about Annie.

—Gretch

I shook my head as I read it. What was it with this girl? I couldn't figure out why she was all of a sudden being nice. I heard my name again. Miss Hansen was so busy talking to the board she didn't even notice half the

class was absorbed in whatever daily drama had gotten their interest. Gretchen looked at me expectantly. I nodded my head to tell her that I would meet her before lunch. After she had turned around to pretend to be a studious student, I turned around to see where Lori was. She caught my glance and smiled.

I raced out of the room after class to avoid Gretchen but didn't realize that I had ditched Lori in the process.

"Wait up, Rebekah." I heard a breathless voice behind me. "I wanted to ask you a question." I turned to see Lori running to catch up with me. I moved to the side of the hall so we could talk without being trampled.

"Everyone just calls me Beka. Rebekah sounds so formal," I said as I adjusted my backpack. I was still feeling pretty stupid about how I had acted in the bathroom, and I didn't really know what to say to her.

"Oh, okay. Well, I was sort of wondering about lunch. I mean, I've got B lunch and I thought if you had the same lunch maybe I could go with you." She dropped her eyes and said, "I really don't know anybody yet."

"Sure, I guess that's okay . . . I have to talk with someone right before lunch, but I could meet you by the cafeteria. Okay?" How could I say no? I felt like I should tell her that I wasn't exactly someone who could help her get to know the "popular" people, and I felt guilty for not wanting her to run with the "popular" group. But I supposed she would find that out soon enough anyway.

"That sounds great. I've got to get to my next class, so I'll see you later. Bye." She turned and was soon meshed with the crowd. *Maybe today isn't going to be as bad as I thought.*