

CHAPTER

Becoming Beka BECOMING BEKA

1

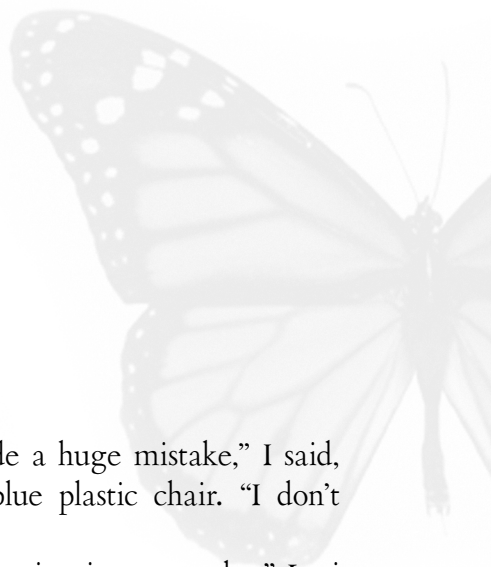
I think

I made a huge mistake,” I said, slumping into the molded blue plastic chair. “I don’t think I can do it.”

“You were excited about going just yesterday,” Lori said. She parked my small suitcase and sat down next to me.

“I know.” I watched the rest of the team counting bags and talking in little clusters. There were twenty-three of us, but I didn’t know most of them very well at all. And here I was about to fly with all of them to a third-world country. What was I thinking?

I spotted Josh crouching by a group of bags. *That’s* what I had been thinking. Spending just ten more days



with Josh before he disappeared across the country to go to college was most of the reason I was now sitting in an airport about to say good-bye to my dad and my best friend. A wave of fear hit me as the bustle around me seemed to move in slow motion. *What if the plane crashes? What if I get one of those freaky diseases they told us about? What if . . .*

“Beka!” Lori snapped her fingers near my nose.

“What?”

Lori shook her head. “Once again. You really think it’s a mistake?”

“Maybe.” I waved my hand toward the group. “They all seem to have some big, noble purpose for going. What am I doing here?”

Lori smiled. “Josh talked you into going. I’m sure he’ll take care of you.”

I turned and scowled at her. She laughed.

“All I’m saying is, go, enjoy yourself. Don’t worry about what got you here; just go do it. Let’s go. Your dad’s waving at you.”

I looked where Lori was pointing and saw my dad looking a little frantic. He was standing behind a mountain of suitcases and other baggage. Lori stood up, and I forced myself to get up, still considering how I could change my mind. I just wasn’t ready. The trip had been postponed and then reinstated. I had already decided I couldn’t have gone in September. I would have missed school, and Josh would have already left for Seattle Pacific. But when they suddenly rescheduled the summer trip, it had caught me off guard, and before I could even think about it, we had to go.

Lori walked in front of me, her thick dark hair swinging across her back. I was glad she had come with my dad to see me off, but I couldn't even tell her how scared I was. I had only been on a few family trips. Nowhere like Haiti, and never by myself. Even the idea of spending time with Josh couldn't quiet the butterflies in my stomach.

Josh spotted me and gave me a smile. His dark hair and eyes and that chiseled jaw made my heart flutter, forcing me to do battle with my thoughts each time I saw him.

"You okay? You look a little pale."

"Thanks."

"You know what I mean," he said. He put one hand on my shoulder and used the other hand to lift my chin. "Are you okay?"

I took a deep breath. I didn't want to seem like some little girl who needed rescuing. "I'm okay. Just a little nervous about planes. That's all."

He dropped his hand away from my face, and I forced a smile onto it.

"Then I'll pray for God to comfort your heart." Josh bowed his head and prayed. He was always doing that. He wasn't one of those people who said, "I'll pray for you" and then probably went away and forgot about it. He always prayed right then and there. As he finished, though, I really did feel a little calmer.

"Haiti team. Listen up." David Bay, the pastor who was leading the group, jumped up on one of the chairs. He was only a couple inches taller than I, so I understood

why he needed the help. “Say your good-byes, grab all of your bags, and let’s get in line. We need to get moving.”

David jumped off the chair, and everybody began to dismantle the pile of luggage and filter into the roped line at the Delta desk in front of us. Dad walked over to me and squeezed me into a big hug. “So, you ready to go, Butterfly?”

“I guess I don’t have a choice.” I pulled back. “I’ll be okay. Right?”

“It will be great,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“I just do. Here, I got something for you.” Dad took a small wrapped box from his pocket and handed it to me. I pulled off the pale blue ribbon and paper. I knew he must have gotten it wrapped somewhere, because wrapping was never one of his strong points. I slipped the cover off the box and found a delicate blue butterfly hanging by its wings from a gold chain.

“Dad. It’s beautiful.” I pulled it from the wrapping, and Dad took it from me and fastened it around my neck. “Thanks.”

He squeezed me in another hug. “I’ll be praying for you every day.”

“I know you will.”

“Beka! Come on,” Josh called from the end of the line.

“I better go.”

“Go. Take care.”

Lori came over with my last bag. “Wow!” she said, fingering the butterfly around my neck. “Have fun. I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too. You can always go hang out with Gretchen while I’m gone.”

“Ha-ha. Very funny. I’ll wait for you to get back, thank you very much.”

“Beka!” Josh’s eyes were now wide as he disappeared deeper into the line.

“I gotta go.” I gave Lori and my dad each one last hug and hauled my luggage into the line. There was no turning back now.

* * *

By the time we all climbed onto the plane at 6 a.m. I was too tired to care where I was going anymore. All I wanted to do was go back to sleep. We were scattered all over the plane, and I couldn’t even see Josh from where I was sitting. Then a guy who looked a little bit like a Cro-Magnon man with a business suit stared down at me from the aisle.

“So where are you going, little missy?” he asked before he had even stowed his carry-on bag. I tried to remember where my headphones were. Rats. They were in my checked bags.

“Haiti.” I turned my attention to my seat belt.

“Haiti? Now that’s odd.”

I smiled. Maybe if I didn’t answer he’d leave me alone. I turned and looked out the window just to make the point.

He wedged himself next to me. “I’m going to Miami myself. Mind if I take off my jacket?”

I waved my hand at him and then instantly wished I

had said I did mind. The smell of cigarettes, liquor, and other odors I didn't want to identify wafted over me. I tried not to crinkle my nose, but I couldn't help it. He stunk.

"Yeah, just flew into town for business. So why Haiti?"

I couldn't believe I was actually going to have to talk to this guy. I looked around to see if anybody on my team was near me. Dana was in the center section one row back, but she seemed engrossed in a conversation with the elderly woman sitting next to her.

I turned to the man while trying to press myself as close to the window as I could get. "I'm going with my church."

"Church. Hummph. Don't have any use for the place myself."

What was I supposed to say? I yanked my backpack out from under the seat and pulled out a book. Maybe that would do the trick.

"You young people. Guess believing won't do much harm." He adjusted himself in his seat and yanked the strap of his seat belt to tighten it. "Me and God aren't exactly on speakin' terms, if you know what I mean."

Who did this guy think he was? I pressed my forehead on the window and watched the airport guys fold up the ramp that had just finished carrying our bags into the belly of the plane.

Fortunately for me, Mr. Cro-Magnon fell asleep as soon as the plane lifted in the air. His mouth drooped open and he snored, but it was better than having to answer all his questions.

I did wonder what might have happened that made him so bitter. Did he lose someone and never get over it? Or maybe he just always did things his own way and was never told anything different. I didn't know anything about how to explain my faith to someone else—I always seemed to just clam up like that. It was another one of those things that I thought I should learn but didn't know where to start. And the thought crossed my mind that I should have been at least nice to the guy.

I watched the clouds in the sky and read a little as we made the trip.

When we descended into the Miami airport, I saw the roads and houses and cars come into view. So many people. I felt so small.

I did say good-bye to Mr. Cro-Magnon as we left the plane, but he seemed groggy from sleeping, and I wasn't sure he really even noticed.

We had to change planes in Miami, so we piled into the waiting area at the gate. Pastor David sent us all off to get some food, and then we had to meet at a new gate for a team meeting. I checked my watch. We had only forty-five minutes before we had to be back. Josh came up next to me.

“Should we go find some food?” he asked.

“Sure.” I loved it when he focused on me like that. A few other young people joined us. One skinny guy with glasses seemed about my age. He had introduced himself as Darrin York at one of the team meetings. He seemed shy but nice. Two other girls came over too. One who was a bit younger than I, Caitie Karraker, was bubbly and anything but shy. She kept touching Josh, which

bothered me, but it was the tall, pretty brunette named Andi—"it's Andi with an i"—who worried me more. She had to be college age, and before we had even gotten in line to get our lunch, she told us about wanting to go to medical school. Since Josh had been planning on medical school most of his life, they had an instant connection.

We took our trays, and after pulling two tables together, I made a maneuver to sit next to Josh. I managed to do it, but because of the table legs we were still at separate tables. And Andi plopped herself down right across from him, which left me talking with Darrin and Caitie. They were nice, but I couldn't get my mind off of Andi and Josh, leaning close together and sharing their passion for medicine as they ate their lunch.

"So how long have you been going to Harvest Fellowship?" Caitie asked me.

"Oh. Five years, I guess. Something like that," I said. I stirred my straw in my soda and watched Andi pat Josh's forearm.

"We came last year. What about you, Darrin?" she asked.

"Two years and three months," he said, pushing his glasses back up on his nose. "Aren't you the girl, well, you're the one who . . . that was your mom who died last year, wasn't it?"

I tore my eyes away from Andi and Josh and looked back at Darrin and Caitie. Caitie had gone quiet, and both of them were looking at me.

"Yep. That would be me." I nibbled on a cold French fry.

“What happened?” Caitie tucked her brown hair behind her ear.

“It was a car accident, right?” Darrin said.

“She was coming home from seeing a patient at the hospital and had an accident on the ice. It happened a year ago last March.” I said it like a robot. I didn’t feel like baring my soul to two almost-strangers in an airport. Caitie and Darrin just stared at me. Andi and Josh had stopped talking and were staring at me too. I shifted in my seat. Now I needed rescuing.

“We better get back for that meeting,” Josh said. He stood up and began to gather the trash at the table. Everyone else followed his lead, and we walked back to the new gate. I walked behind everybody else feeling uncomfortable. It was always like that when my mom came up. People either didn’t know what to say or they gushed all over me about how sorry they were. But I always left feeling odd and out of place.

Josh dropped back to walk with me.

“Thanks,” I said.


“No problem,” he said. “I’m glad you’re here, Beka. Really.”

I let his words sink into me. It was just something new. An adventure. Right? So what that I had no idea what I was getting into. I was with Josh. And that was all that mattered at the moment.

CHAPTER

2

Becoming Beka BECOMING BEKA



The descent into Port-au-Prince, Haiti, was very different from the descent into Miami. I had snagged another window seat, and I watched as we landed at an airport that looked like nothing more than a dilapidated strip mall. They rolled a stairway out to the plane, and stepping outside was like stepping into hot soup. We went straight from the plane to our pile of luggage and through customs. We were carrying over-the-counter medicines to distribute, and Pastor Dave got hung up trying to explain it to the customs officers in Creole.

When they finally let us through, we went out onto the street and were piled into three pickup trucks that had been converted into taxis. A multicolored cabin with

benches had been mounted onto the back of each truck, and we crammed ourselves into two of them, and our luggage went into the third. I got a seat on the end of the bench so I wasn't stuck underneath the little cabin. I watched the city bounce by as we made our way down the streets. It wasn't at all what I expected.

Even though I knew it wouldn't be like an American city, it was a shock to see regular, although mostly old, cars driving down the street, along with donkeys, pigs, and chickens everywhere. I lost count of how many animals I saw walking along the shoulder and darting in and out of traffic. The landscape was lush and green with palm trees and thick vegetation, but most of the buildings were nothing more than cinder block and tin. Many Haitians walked alongside the roads, the women wearing long skirts, just like the one I was wearing. We were told that all the women in our group had to wear long skirts in public, so before the trip I bought several at a thrift store. They were a pretty bad fashion statement, but I was almost glad for the thin fabric because it was so hot.

The truck taxis drove us to a plain two-story house with a flat roof and geometric grates covering the doorway and windows. Standing at the gate to greet us was Se Tata, our host for the ten-day trip, who was wearing a bright blue suit. She hugged each of us as we crawled out of the taxis. She took us up to the second floor, where we were split into four different bedrooms. Se Tata spoke English, sort of, and she showed us around the house. She had two teenage girls who seemed to help with the housework, but they just nodded shyly at us as we passed by the small kitchen.

I stared at the little bathroom we all had to share. Not only was it small, but the water for the shower apparently just dripped over you from a container on the roof. Oh, and the toilet didn't flush. One of the Haitian girls showed us all how to pour the water into the toilet and use a plunger to force it down the pipes. We were going to have to haul water up to the roof every other day to keep everything working.

I flopped onto one of the cots in my room that I was sharing with Caitie, Andi with an i, and Dana. I wouldn't get any kind of privacy on this trip.

"You guys want to go up on the roof?" Dana asked. She had been to Haiti twice before, so before we even left I made a plan to stick near her. She hung out with the youth pretty often, so I at least knew her a little bit. Dana always seemed to know what she was doing.

"Sure," Caitie said, closing her suitcase. Caitie and Andi followed her out onto a second-story patio, and Dana climbed up a white ladder. We followed her up onto the flat roof, and I walked over to the edge. Right across the street from us was a walled lot that was a small dump on one half with a small cinder block and stone house on the other. The roof was held on with cinder blocks and stones scattered across the top, and I could see a family of pigs curled up near the edge of the pile of garbage.

Down the hill and up the side of the mountain near us were more of the same types of houses, low and plain with flat roofs held together with different bits of material.

Dana appeared next to me and stared off into the city. "What do you think?" she asked.

“It’s so poor.” I knew it was obvious, but it’s all I could think about. Downstairs I had been moaning about the bathroom and the lack of privacy, and here were all these people who lived like this day in and day out. Most of the houses weren’t even as nice as Se Tata’s.

“See that little girl?” Dana pointed over to the garbage pile where a little black girl, no more than five, was digging through the garbage.

“What’s she doing?” I watched her as she rifled through the trash in her bare feet.

“Looking for food, or for something that her parents could sell. Even when they’re little, the kids have to work. Some do what she’s doing; others are hired out by their families as servants for richer families. They make about twenty-five cents a day.”

“Twenty-five cents? A day?” I watched the girl find something that she carefully placed in a cloth bag slung across her skinny shoulders. I just stood there watching the scene before me, wondering how it could even be real. Such a tiny girl. Such filth. It seemed so unfair.

After a while Dana said, “We do some good things while we’re down here. But truthfully, I often think they’re better off than most Americans.”

“Seriously?”

“You’ll see.” She smiled and went back to the ladder. I sat down and folded my legs underneath me and stared out into the city. It was so different to be there when just yesterday I was packing at home. My cushy, air-conditioned life back home.

I stayed on the roof until I heard somebody yell that it was dinnertime. As I was climbing down the ladder, I

realized that not once had I wished that Josh would come and join me. Interesting.

* * *

We all gathered around an enormous table where bowls were filled with all sorts of different kinds of foods. Se Tata pointed to each one as she tried to explain what they were. Even though I wasn't too excited about trying a lot of the foods, I took a little of each and plopped them onto my plate. While I picked at the food I watched Andi flirt with Josh near the end of the table.

Why did she have to be here? It made me think about all the girls he would meet at Seattle Pacific. Even though Josh wanted to write to me, it didn't seem likely that it would ever be anything more than friendship. I could get to know him all I wanted, but he would still be three thousand miles away.

And then there was Mark.

I felt a smile creep across my face as I thought about the cute blond guy from back home who had promised to win back my heart.

Even though I was pretty sure he had never lost it to begin with.

The problem was my father, who was very unhappy that I had snuck off with Mark before—even though we didn't really do anything wrong. Dad had said no to actually dating, but it hadn't stopped Mark from making efforts.

My summer could be summed up in two words—guitar and camera. I was taking three guitar lessons a

week and working at Lori's mom's photography studio. Mark came by the studio regularly to say hi. We didn't really get to see each other alone, but boy, did he make my heart flutter with his crooked smile and dimple.

Mark told me that he didn't want to be just friends, and even though Josh was sweet, and definitely more spiritual, there was something about Mark that had latched on inside of me. Too bad Mark wasn't here. Then again, it would be weird and definitely confusing to have them both in the same place at the same time.

After dinner was cleaned up, Pastor Dave had us all cram into a small common area for another team meeting. We were divided into three teams. One team would run the medical clinic, one team would run a vacation Bible school, and the last one would be working on repairing the school. Pastor Dave read off the lists. My name was on the Bible school list, while Josh and Andi were on the medical team.

What was I doing here? The whole reason I came was to spend time with Josh, and now I would barely see him. We broke up into our smaller teams to begin making plans. Dana took charge of our group, which included Darrin and Caitie.

Dana had brought supplies for the crafts that we would do with the kids each day, so at least that part was finished. But then Dana said that we could have hundreds of kids show up for the Bible school. Hundreds? I didn't even like babysitting, and I was going to help run a Bible school with hundreds of kids who, by the way, didn't speak English?

I wanted to go home.