

An Impossible Romance

by Anna Frances Mattea

Part 1

Rapids pummeled Beckett's body. He felt the water closing in. Air. He needed air. He gulped oxygen while there was still time. A split second later, the relentless current pulled him back under, teasing life from him, dragging his bruised body through the water. Beckett fought to reach the surface. His lungs felt as though they would burst. He screamed.

The scream jerked Beckett from his sleep. He turned on the light and held his perspiring head in his hands. *Dear God*, he thought, *when will this nightmare stop?* How could a near-drowning when he was thirteen still torment him eighteen years later? Was there no relief?

Beckett threw off the satin sheets and strode to the open window. The stars sparkled. A soft breeze lifted the summer air to his room. He drank in its sweet, refreshing fragrance. The rapids had not claimed him when he was thirteen . . . they had not claimed him tonight.

Beckett contemplated possible reasons for his nightmare, as he had many other nights. The market had taken a dive today; Beckett had lost some money, but nothing substantial. His business investments enhanced his net worth far beyond what his family had anticipated. He dabbled in commercial real estate for fun. His financial position was secure.

Beckett's parents were eager for him to find a wife, but as far as he was concerned, he still had time to play the field. Beckett had recently been voted Madison's most eligible bachelor, a distinction he enjoyed. He intended to leverage that status to meet and charm as many beautiful women as possible.

And yet, Beckett admitted, only one woman had been on his mind lately—Lauren—the one who rebuffed his advances; the one who refused to spend time with him. He thought of Lauren’s tall, slender, athletic form; her thick auburn hair and sparkling hazel eyes. She cleaned houses for a living, including his home on the lake, which struck Beckett as a complete waste of a beautiful body and a quick mind. His personal assistant, Ms. Michaud, had hired Lauren’s company to clean the lake house, once each week.

Beckett recalled their first encounter. He had stayed at the lake that Friday morning to catch up on his reading. He’d decided to go for a swim. When he opened the French doors to the indoor pool, a woman with a mop jumped to attention. “Excuse me, sir,” she said, “I can come back later.”

Beckett quickly assessed the beauty in front of him. Even in jeans and a t-shirt, with a cleaning apron around her waist and a trash bag dangling from her belt, she cut a remarkable figure. He held out his hand, “I’m Beckett,” he said with a grin.

“It’s good to meet you,” she said, shaking his hand. “I’m Lauren.” Then she blushed and accidentally dropped the mop. He found it endearing.

“Don’t go,” Beckett said. “I’m going to swim laps. I won’t be in your way.”

“That’s okay,” Lauren responded. “Sophie and I have plenty to do. I will clean the pool area later.” And with that she left.

From then on, Beckett made it a point to work from his lakeside retreat on Friday mornings. Sometimes he asked Lauren to have a cup of coffee or take a break with him; each time she politely refused. Sometimes he watched her, unobserved, wondering what prompted this hard working, gorgeous girl to clean houses for a living.

* * * * *

Lauren shuddered as she read the newspaper account. A ten month old had been taken to the emergency room last night with a broken arm, covered in bruises. Human Services had temporarily removed the child from the mother’s custody. The child was

okay, for now. *But abused children never completely recover*, Lauren reflected. She still cringed when she heard an angry voice. She wondered why her mother had tolerated her father's anger for so long . . . and why her sister perpetuated her mother's story. How had she—Lauren—broken free? Why had God planted the seed of determination in her that allowed her to escape?

Lauren had left home when she was sixteen, willing to do anything to get out of the house. Her parents were reasonably well off, but that meant little to her. People seemed to think alcoholism and abuse were afflictions of the poor. Not so. As far as Lauren was concerned, those with money were equally affected. They just had the means to better hide their sins.

Lauren moved into a shoddy apartment with an elderly woman who needed a companion. She lied about her age. She told no one where she was. Lauren began cleaning houses and finished her high school education at night. One afternoon she heard hymns emanating from the rescue mission for the homeless, not far from where she lived. She slipped inside to listen, captivated by the music. Pastor Art noticed her, standing at the back, and spoke with her after the service. She was immediately drawn to their ministry and to the Lord. Months later, Lauren fell on her knees before the living God, seeking His forgiveness, crying out to Him to set her free from her childhood. She felt flooded by peace she never knew existed, relief, joy. . . .

Once Lauren felt established, and she was well past 18, she reconnected with her family. It broke her heart to see there had been no change. Her parents did not understand why she refused their help. But Lauren wanted nothing from them. Their money felt tainted to her, evil somehow; she was convinced it would ensnare her and drag her down.

Lauren determined she would save enough on her own to go to college. She wanted to become a nurse. Her business, Lauren's Clean Team, had now grown to a staff of four. Lauren took classes at the local community college as she could. And yet, all too often, Lauren received calls from the emergency room. Sometimes it was her mom; usually it was her sister, Lynne. . . .

Lauren never failed to give Lynne a place to sleep for the night. She lost count of how many times she'd offered to take Lynne to the women's shelter. Lynne always refused. Lynne was convinced that this time, Victor would change. He really did love her. He just had some problems. Yada, yada, yada. Lynne's refusal to face the truth tore at Lauren's insides. . . .

Lauren silently prayed for her family, once again. She collected her handbag and headed for the Browning home for its weekly cleaning.

Ms. Michaud had hired Lauren's Clean Team to clean Beckett Browning's retreat on the lake. Lauren's little cleaning business had an excellent reputation. She had never met Mr. Browning, but that was fine with her. He had a reputation for being a ladies' man and rather self-indulgent. A spoiled rich boy. But he was willing to pay her top dollar, which put Lauren closer to her goals.

Sophie, an older woman whom Lauren had hired to help, met Lauren on Friday mornings at the Browning home. They tackled the cleaning together. Today, Lauren needed to mop the pool area and clean the dressing rooms. She began dragging the wet mop across the floor with liberal, wide strokes to collect the dirt and brighten the tile. The French doors opened. Lauren jumped. A man stood before her in his bathing suit; a tall, muscular gentleman with a sculptured face, ash blonde hair and deep blue eyes. He must be Beckett. Beckett Browning. The man said something and held out his hand. Lauren blushed. She dropped her mop . . . and found a way to escape as soon as possible.

Lauren could understand why women fell for Beckett. He was handsome, charming, but Lauren was bound to serve God first, the One who had rescued her. Lauren would let nothing get in the way of that relationship; plus, she was determined to become a nurse. Men in any form were a distraction.

Since the pool encounter, Lauren often found Beckett at his elegant lakeside home when they cleaned. He would invite her to take a break and join him for a cup of coffee . . . or see pictures from his latest trip . . . or ask her opinion of some current event.

“I’m sorry,” Lauren would say, “I really can’t talk right now. Our schedule is very tight on Fridays.”

“So how about tomorrow?” Beckett would try, not giving up. “I’d like to take you out to dinner.”

“Thank you for offering,” Lauren would reply, “but I already have plans.”

“Do you have a husband? Or a boyfriend?” Beckett finally asked one morning. “Perhaps I am overstepping my bounds.”

“Neither,” Lauren answered, “I have to study.” And she turned and left the room.

Lauren drove Beckett crazy. She seemed glad to see him and yet she was so aloof, so uncommunicative. Most women would have melted by now; he had to devise another plan.

One Friday in October, Lauren was clearing the dishwasher when Beckett found her.

“Hello Lauren,” he smiled. “It’s good to see you. How are you?”

Lauren’s heart involuntarily skipped a beat.

“Fine, thank you,” she replied, “Sophie and I are just finishing up and then we will be out of your way.”

“You are never in my way,” Beckett countered. “In fact, I want to talk with you about an opportunity to make a little more money.”

Now Beckett had Lauren’s attention. “What’s that?” she asked tentatively.

“Please sit down,” Beckett gestured to one of the bar stools. “It’s hard to talk when you are working about the kitchen.”

Lauren nodded and sat on the bar stool, against her better judgment.

“Lauren,” Beckett said, “I need to attend a political fundraiser tonight for Robert Marsden; one of the candidates for the senate. A friend cancelled on me at the last minute so now I have an extra ticket for a \$1000 per plate dinner. Will you join me?”

“Mr. Browning,” Lauren replied. “It is very kind of you to offer but I would be like a toddler at a coronation. I don’t want to embarrass you. I’m sure you will have no problem finding a companion. . . . So what exactly did you have in mind when you mentioned the opportunity to make more money?”

Beckett sighed. “What do I pay you to clean for me, Lauren?”

“Thirty dollars per hour,” she replied.

“I will pay you fifty per hour to keep me company the rest of this afternoon and this evening, from 1 pm until midnight. Will you agree?”

Lauren was furious. Who did this man think he was? Did he really think he could buy her companionship? Did she look like a paid consort? Still, she could use the money. She wondered how far he would go . . .

“Make it one-hundred,” Lauren said, staring at him steadily.

Beckett smiled. He had finally struck a nerve. They were having a conversation that lasted more than 30 seconds. Her eyes turned brilliant green when she was angry . . . Beckett wondered if she knew how beautiful she was.

“I will pay you three hundred per hour,” Beckett returned, “but you have to at least pretend you are enjoying my company.”

Lauren frowned. She could not believe what she was hearing. That would be eleven hours at \$300 per hour for a total of \$3300. Was the man crazy?

“You have to agree to certain ground rules,” Lauren returned.

Beckett had her. He was enjoying this. “Fire away,” he said.

“No touching,” Lauren said. “I am not an escort service. And do not bother asking me out after this evening. This is a one-time event. If you can agree to these terms, I accept your offer.”

“I may need to take your arm or your hand or place my arm around your shoulder,” Beckett negotiated, “for appearances’ sake. But other than that, I can work within your ground rules. Do we have an agreement?” he asked.

Lauren felt her face grow warm at the thought of Beckett’s arm around her. She would enjoy that. *Stop it!* She told herself. *Do not let his man get in the way of your dreams.*

“Yes, Mr. Browning, we have a deal,” Lauren answered.

Beckett grinned. He planned to give Lauren the time of her life. He pushed back his stool. “It’s 12:45,” he said. “You have 15 minutes before you are on duty. Do what you need to do.”

Lauren paused. “Mr. Browning, I may have spoken too soon. It occurs to me that I have nothing to wear this evening.”

“I anticipated that,” Beckett replied, “we are going shopping. My treat.”

Lauren’s heart raced. He was going to pay her \$3300 AND buy her a gown?

“Can we return it after tonight? What if I just tuck in the tags?”

Now it was Beckett’s turn to be irritated. “The gown is a gift. You may sell it later if you wish. But no woman I am with is going to keep the tags on her dress.”

“Very well Mr. Browning,” Lauren replied. She was definitely having second thoughts.

“Call me Beckett . . .” he directed.

“As you wish . . . Beckett,” Lauren forced a smile. Even forced, her smile went straight to his heart.

Beckett took Lauren to the finest clothiers in the city. She chose a deep blue designer gown with a modest neckline and a low back. When he saw her in the gown, Beckett glowed with admiration. “You look stunning,” he said softly.

Lauren blushed. She wondered if her first assessment of him was too harsh.

Beckett helped her pick out her shoes and jewelry.

“Beckett,” Lauren objected, “the jewelry is far too much.”

“I want this evening to be perfect for you,” he said tenderly. “Even though you’ve made it clear we have no future, I want to give you these gifts.”

Lauren felt guilty. She felt as though she was stealing from him. . . .

On the way back to his estate, Beckett commented, “I know very little about you, Lauren. How did you end up cleaning houses for a living?”

Lauren frowned. She said a quick, silent prayer. How much should she tell him?

“It’s not a pretty story,” Lauren responded, “are you sure you want to hear it?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Beckett replied.

Lauren described her growing up years. She explained why she had left home and her current concerns about her mom and her sister. She described how she started her business and her goal to become a nurse.

Beckett pulled into the dirt parking lot of a nearby park and listened intently. He suddenly felt ashamed of his upbringing, embarrassed by his wealth. He looked at Lauren with deep respect. Her determination and courage spoke to his heart.

Beckett sensed that although she simply stated the facts; there was a river of emotion just beneath the surface. He took her hand and looked deep into her clear hazel eyes.

“I’m not sure if this is within the bounds of our agreement,” he said, “but I want you to know how very much I admire you and respect what you have accomplished. I know you will be an outstanding nurse, Lauren. I know you will make it.

Lauren could not believe her ears. Never had anyone expressed that sort of confidence in her. “Thank you,” she said. She turned away so Beckett would not see the effect of his words.

Beckett put his arm around Lauren’s shoulder and drew her close. “I want to be here for you, Lauren. Please trust me. I want to be your friend . . . if you’ll let me.”

Lauren rested her head on Beckett’s shoulder for just a moment. She loved the smell of him. She loved having him close. *Be careful*, she warned herself. *This is going nowhere. The Lord is first and it’s highly likely this man does not believe in Him.*

Lauren pulled away. “So now it’s your turn, Beckett. Tell me about your life.”

Beckett looked uncomfortable. Lauren read Beckett’s expression and smiled, “It’s okay, Beckett. I am not judging you.”

Beckett reluctantly described his family, his growing up years, life at the university, some of his business ventures . . . but he never mentioned the drowning incident . . . it was too close, too personal.

Lauren listened intently. She felt he was leaving much unsaid, but was grateful for what he shared.

“Thank you, Beckett,” Lauren smiled. She needed to confirm where he stood. “I have a sense that God has His hand on your life . . . do you know Him?”

“I’m afraid I’m an atheist, Lauren,” Bennett replied, uncomfortable under her piercing gaze.

Lauren nodded and smiled. “Then you’ve just given me something to pray about.”

Beckett stepped from the car. He produced some bread and they walked toward the duck pond to feed eager ducks and geese.

“I used to come here as a child,” Beckett explained. When the bread ran out, one of the geese went after Beckett. The angry goose followed him and nipped at his legs.

Lauren laughed. “You have a new girlfriend,” she teased. Lauren picked up a handful of fall leaves and threw them at the goose. The goose fled.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” Beckett grinned.

The next thing Lauren knew, Beckett was throwing leaves at her. She reciprocated, giggling and running from tree to tree. She slipped and fell on her back into a pile of leaves the maintenance workers had left behind. Lauren laughed. Beckett joined her, laying on his back not far from her side, inches from her face . . .

“Look at that cloud,” Lauren pointed, “doesn’t it look like a Leprechaun with a pot of gold?”

Beckett forced himself to focus on the sky. “I see a race car,” he said. He glanced at his watch, “which is what we’ll need if we don’t leave now.”

“I’ll beat you to the car,” Lauren challenged. She leapt to her feet and got a good head start. But Beckett soon sped past her, laughing.

They drove to his estate in a warm, friendly silence. Lauren marveled at how easy it was to be with him, how comfortable she felt.

The butler greeted them at the door and a servant showed Lauren to a room where she could change. “The hairdresser is here,” the young woman mentioned to Beckett.

“Excellent,” Beckett replied. “Lauren, when you are dressed, please see Madame Bouchard in the sitting room. She can assist with your hair and makeup if you wish, although I think you are perfect just as you are.” He raised a hand to touch her face and

then stopped himself. Their agreement. He had to honor it. Lauren's heart stood still. She did not miss the gesture or the sentiment. . . . Silently, she wished he would follow through.

Lauren was amazed. Beckett had thought of everything. When she studied herself in the mirror, she couldn't believe the transformation . . . just like Cinderella. Only Cinderella got the prince. All Lauren was going to get were some nice memories and a mop. She shoved the thought from her mind and hoped Beckett would be pleased.

Beckett's breath caught when he saw her; he let out a low sigh. Never had he seen such radiant, natural beauty. He quickly walked to Lauren's side and took her arm. Lauren frowned, "Am I okay?" she asked softly, uncertain about his reaction.

"Like a fairy tale come true," he whispered. "I would pay a million dollars to have you at my side tonight, Lauren; you did not charge me enough."

The reference to their bargain jolted Lauren back to reality. She looked intently into his kind, blue eyes. "I've decided I don't want your money, Beckett. I misjudged you. I don't want to cheapen the memory of this perfect day by having you pay me for something I am doing gladly and willingly."

Beckett felt his heart race. "What about the other parts of our agreement?" he inquired.

In response, Lauren went to her toes and kissed his cheek. Beckett pulled her close. He had never expected this. He accepted her offering and gently, tenderly, kissed her in return. Lauren trembled. Beckett broke their embrace, taking a step back to maintain control.

"I'm sorry," Lauren apologized, blushing, staring at the ground. "You have been so kind. I simply meant to say 'thank you.'"

"No, Lauren," Beckett assured her. "Don't apologize. You have no idea how much that meant to me . . ."

“I’d like to go back to our original terms, but without the payment,” Lauren said decisively, “physical contact only when necessary; the evening is over at midnight; and no asking me out after tonight.”

“Very well,” Beckett frowned. He vowed not to kiss her again. He would honor her terms. He would allow nothing to tarnish the beauty of this evening.

Beckett smiled and took Lauren’s arm. “Let’s go have some fun,” he said with a boyish twinkle in his eye.

Lauren smiled back. She shouldn’t have kissed him. She silently prayed for forgiveness. She asked God to quell the storm of emotions she felt inside and give her wisdom. *This man doesn’t believe in You*, she reminded herself. *There can be nothing further between us . . . nothing.*

The paparazzi—the sharks—waited outside the Marsden fundraiser along with curious onlookers. They snapped images of celebrities as they arrived, photos that would grace the pages of many newspapers the next morning. When Beckett and Lauren stepped from the limo, the crowd fell silent. Madison’s most eligible bachelor had certainly discovered the world’s most beautiful woman, but no one knew who she was.

“Mr. Browning, who is your companion?” a reporter finally called out. Others followed suit.

Beckett whispered in Lauren’s ear, “Don’t let them bother you. Just follow my lead.”

He smiled and waved to the crowd as he walked the long carpet with Lauren at his side. Lauren smiled and waved as well, amazed at the level of interest. A young girl ducked past the security guards, stopped directly in front of Lauren, and held up a small notebook. “May I please have your autograph?” she asked. A guard immediately stepped in to take the girl away. Lauren waved him off.

“It’s okay,” Lauren said. The girl had large amber eyes, like her sister’s. Lauren noticed a bruise on her arm. She must have been 11 or 12 years old. Lauren took the pen. “What is your name?”

“Cara,” the girl replied, her face glowing with appreciation.

Lauren signed from her heart, returned Cara’s autograph book and gave her a brief hug. “Take care of yourself,” she whispered. “And never give up. Remember that God cares about everything that happens you. You can trust Him.” Cara beamed as she stepped back into the crowd.

Beckett gently tugged at Lauren’s arm. “Your adoring public is waiting for you,” he grinned. He was so proud of her.

The evening could not have gone better. Beckett was amazed at how Lauren seemed to know instinctively how to respond to people. She had a way of connecting with them; engaging their interest as they conversed with her. She moved with grace and poise, never straying far from his side. Various gentlemen invited her to dance or have a drink; Lauren would smile and gently refuse. “Thank you for asking,” she said, “but I am Mr. Browning’s guest and I have been looking forward to spending this evening with him. I’m sure you can understand.” Beckett reveled in her loyalty. She was unlike any woman he had ever met—a royal soul hidden in the guise of a housekeeper.

When the dinner dishes were cleared and the last of the speeches faded away, Beckett checked his watch—11 pm. “We still have one hour,” Beckett whispered to her, “but if you are tired, we can call it a night.”

Lauren smiled, “No way, Beckett. I intend to eke every last minute out of this fairy tale . . . unless *you* wish to turn in.”

“Not on your life,” he responded. He rose and pulled out her chair. Together, they thanked the host and made their way to the coat room.

“Come with me,” Beckett directed. He led her through an employee entrance and out a side door where his BMW was secretly waiting. “One round with the paparazzi is enough.”

“Thank you,” Lauren smiled.

“You know the media will not rest until someone figures out who you are,” Beckett observed.

Lauren laughed. “Imagine how shocked everyone will be to find I live in a run down apartment building on the wrong side of town and I clean houses for a living!” She paused, “I hope that won’t reflect badly on you or cause you any inconvenience,” she said, concerned.

“It’s not a problem for me . . .” Beckett lost himself in her gorgeous hazel eyes, “I would like to change all that for you, Lauren” he said, “but my guess is you would not accept my help.”

“You are correct,” Lauren replied.

Beckett placed his hand on her lower back and gently guided her into the BMW. Lauren held her breath at his touch. She wondered if Beckett had noticed. He smiled. “In another day and time, you would only have to ask and I would willingly become your servant,” Beckett nodded. He closed her door.

Lauren’s heart was pounding. Beckett took her to the playground of an old elementary school. He pushed her on one of the swings. They strolled and laughed and talked. The alarm on Beckett’s watch sounded like an unwelcome intruder breaking into a well loved home. “It’s nearly midnight,” he said. “I have just enough time to drive you home.”

Lauren frowned; she did not want Beckett to see where she lived. She did not want the night to end. Beckett was determined to follow through on his end of the bargain. Lauren directed Beckett to her street and said she would walk from there.

“Not in this neighborhood,” Beckett commanded. “Tell me exactly where you live. I will walk you to your door. I will not rest until I know you are safe.”

Lauren accepted the situation. It was midnight and Cinderella had turned back into a housekeeper. She held back her tears.

When they reached her door, Lauren turned and looked deeply into Beckett’s gentle eyes, savoring this last moment with him.

“I hate that you live here,” Beckett said, “you deserve better than this.”

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Lauren responded.

Beckett changed the subject, “Lauren,” he said, frowning, “is there anything I could do or say to persuade you to go out with me again? If there is, please tell me.”

Lauren paused. She took a deep breath, “Come to church with me, Beckett. Ask God to reveal Himself to you. I cannot get involved with anyone who does not know Him.”

Beckett closed his eyes and sighed. He could never expect her to understand. There was no way he could go with her to church, any church. He turned and left; there was nothing more to be said.

Part 2

Beckett stayed away from the lake for the next few Fridays. He needed to collect his thoughts; he needed to figure out where to go from here. But he missed Lauren. He wanted to see her.

Since the fundraiser, the whitewater nightmare had returned with increasing frequency. Beckett wondered if he should talk with someone. His parents had put him in counseling years ago, but it had done little good. He quickly figured out the responses the counselor needed to hear. His parents congratulated the therapist on the outcome, never realizing that Beckett had fooled them all. Seeing a counselor now was too risky. If word got out, he could be pegged as mentally unstable . . . or worse. The only person he

trusted was Lauren, and she was out of reach. The fourth Friday after the fundraiser, Beckett returned to his home by the water . . .

As soon as Lauren entered the house that morning, she sensed Beckett 's presence. *Please God, she prayed, give me strength.* Lauren and Sophie began their usual routine. Lauren scrubbed the tiles in the entryway, on her knees, by hand.

Beckett watched her for a few moments—the princess, scrubbing the floor. It didn't have to be that way.

“Lauren,” Beckett said gently, making his presence known.

Lauren stopped and stood to face him, her eyes full of warmth. “How are you, Beckett?” she asked.

He took a step forward. “I'm better now that you're here,” he replied honestly. . . . “How are you?”

“I'm okay,” Lauren replied. “Thank you again for that wonderful afternoon and evening,” Lauren said. “It was the best day of my life.”

“Mine, too,” Beckett said with an intensity that made Lauren wonder if she should make a quick exit. She went back to scrubbing tiles.

“Lauren, I would really like to see you again,” Beckett ventured.

“Beckett, I told you. I don't date guys who don't know the Lord. We agreed to that one night. I like you. In fact, I'm crazy about you. But the answer is no.” Lauren scrubbed with additional vigor to underscore her point.

Beckett left and returned with a sponge. He got on his knees, too close. Lauren could feel his warmth. What was he doing? He dipped his hand into the sudsy bucket and began scrubbing the floor next to her. An accidental touch sent electricity coursing through her. Lauren stopped, sat back, closed her eyes and prayed. Beckett watched her intently. “You can't deny we have chemistry,” he said softly.

Lauren glared at him. It was a good thing the angry fire she felt could not flash from her eyes and consume him.

“Don’t push it, Beckett,” Lauren shot back. “If you cannot keep your distance and respect my position, I will send one of the other girls in my place.”

“That won’t help,” Beckett said gently. “No matter where you go, I will find you.”

“That’s enough,” Lauren replied firmly. “If we were meant for each other, you would serve the same God I serve. And as far as I can tell right now, you simply serve yourself.” Lauren hadn’t meant to be so harsh, but she needed to drive him away. Her arrow had found its mark.

“As you wish,” he said, and he left.

Lauren felt sick. She dropped the sponge in the bucket, stood and quickly walked through the kitchen door. Without breaking her stride, she grabbed her keys and her pocketbook. Lauren did not stop until she reached her car. Olivia was free this afternoon. Lauren would send her over to help finish Beckett’s house. Then she would call Ms. Michaud and resign. Beckett could bloody well find another cleaning service.

Lauren drove to the park, sat on a bench near the duck pond and cried. She hadn’t meant to be unkind, but if she didn’t push Beckett away, she was afraid she would cave in . . . and if she opened her heart to him, all would be lost. Lauren had no idea what to do about Beckett, except to pray for him . . . and for herself. God had gotten her through far worse than this, but never had she felt so conflicted, even when her father had taken his fury out on her after all his empty promises. Lauren asked God to please make her love for Him more intense than her desire to be with Beckett. She pleaded with Him to fill in the gap.

A chill filled the November air as Lauren sat on the park bench. Next week was Thanksgiving. Lauren’s family did not celebrate Thanksgiving. Her mom was usually drinking. Her sister’s household was so dysfunctional, Lauren found little to be thankful for when she was there. Instead, Lauren helped at the rescue mission. Pastor Art

welcomed her assistance and the families who came were always glad to see her along with the other volunteers.

The night before Thanksgiving, Lauren woke to the sound of something . . . or someone . . . banging on her door. It was 4 am. "Who is it?" she called through the door, expecting her sister's husband, looking for Lynne in a drunken rage.

"Lauren, it's Beckett. Please let me in. I need to talk with you."

"Beckett? Are you drunk?"

"No, but I really need to talk with you, Lauren."

"Beckett, it's 4 am!" She opened the door a few inches to see what condition he was in, keeping the security chain fastened. Lauren was concerned at what she saw. Beckett seemed thinner, he looked as though he hadn't slept in days, his eyes were dark . . .

"Beckett, what happened?" she demanded.

"I can explain. I just need to talk with you," he pleaded.

"Okay. But we can't talk here. I'll be right back."

Lauren threw on her jeans and her boots, ran a brush through her hair, grabbed her coat and undid the security chain. She stepped outside, meeting the brisk November air.

"Thank you," Beckett said softly. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too, except you look as though you've been run over in a stampede. What happened, Beckett?"

"Am I really that bad?" Beckett asked, combing his fingers through his hair.

"Yes. Come with me. There's an all night coffee shop around the corner. We can slip in there and talk. Where's your car?" Lauren asked.

"I walked," Beckett replied, "all fourteen miles."

“No wonder you look like you need to be recycled,” Lauren observed.

The couple slipped into a booth at the back of the coffee shop and ordered coffees. Lauren did not recognize the waitress. Her name tag said Sylvia. The waitress eyed them curiously.

“So what’s going on?” Lauren asked once Sylvia was out of earshot.

Beckett rubbed his hands over his face and sighed. “When I told you I don’t believe in God, I wasn’t being entirely truthful, Lauren. I’ve been feeding off my father’s beliefs all these years, not my own. . . .

“When I was thirteen, I went on a whitewater rafting trip with some friends. My friend Eddy and I were the daredevils in the group. We came across some class 5 rapids; everyone pulled out, except the two of us. We were determined to ride the water on our own. At first it was exhilarating, but the raft capsized and all of a sudden I was being tossed and dragged by a current stronger than any I had ever known. I couldn’t get enough air. I started to take in water. I cried out to God to please save me. If He would just let me live, I promised I would serve Him for the rest of my life.”

Beckett’s face darkened at the memory. He rubbed his eyes and glanced at Lauren’s face. She was with him.

“Eddy did not survive,” Beckett said quietly.

Lauren reached for his hand. “I am so sorry,” she whispered.

Beckett continued, “When I went under that last time, I felt a presence—I can’t explain it, compassionate, warm . . .” He studied her face, “you are going to think I’m crazy.”

“No I do not,” Lauren reassured him.

Beckett explained, “It was as if someone, or something, released the current and brought me to shore. I will never know exactly; I passed out. When the group found me, I was at the edge of the river, bruised, but breathing. I have never understood why I was saved and Eddy was not.”

Lauren nodded.

“After I recovered,” Beckett continued, “I spoke with my dad about my promise to God. I wanted to follow through but wasn’t sure what that meant—should I become a priest? serve the poor?—I had no idea. My dad sat down with me and explained that I had no obligation because God did not exist. I was saved by my own strength. God was an ancient concept made up by people who were suffering, by the under classes. Believing in God gave them some sort of hope, enabling them to get through their miserable lives. But, my father explained, the Brownings were self-made and self-reliant people. We did not need to pretend there was a God because we could take care of ourselves.”

Beckett sighed. “I think my father was wrong, Lauren. I keep having nightmares because I made a commitment to God and I never followed through.”

“When I met you, there was something familiar about you, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Last night, it became clear to me. For some reason, you remind me of the presence I felt under the water—that warmth, the compassion—there’s no way you were there, but . . . I can’t explain it . . .”

“Perhaps it is His Spirit, Beckett” Lauren said softly. “His Spirit lives in every believer. He may have been the One you sensed when you were under the water.”

Beckett sighed, “If only that were true . . .”

Lauren noticed the waitress, Sylvia, talking on the phone and glancing in their direction.

“Beckett, we need to get out of here,” Lauren said. “I think that waitress may have recognized you.”

“It doesn’t matter, Lauren,” Beckett replied.

“Yes it does, Beckett. Follow me.” Lauren left money for their coffees and slipped out the side door with Beckett close behind. “You don’t want the reporters to catch you like this. They would have all kinds of fun distorting this situation.”

Lauren took Beckett's arm and they walked together down the street. Dilapidated storefronts greeted them on both sides. Bars were over the windows in most of the buildings. In others, glass was knocked out. They passed a homeless person asleep in a doorway.

"Where are we going?" Beckett asked.

"To see a friend," Lauren replied.

She turned the corner and headed toward the rescue mission. The door was open. Lauren and Beckett stepped inside.

"Happy Thanksgiving," she said to the older man at the door.

He smiled, "Hello Lauren. What brings you here at this hour?"

"We need a place to talk, Milo. I was wondering if we could borrow the chapel for a bit."

"It's against the rules for a woman to be here at night, Lauren," Milo frowned.

"It's almost dawn, Milo. You can wake Pastor Art if you wish, but I'm sure he will be okay with this."

"Well, alright. Since it's you, Lauren. Come this way."

Milo led them quietly down the hall and opened a door on the right. He turned on the lights. A large cross hung over the altar. Folding chairs were arranged in rows from back to front on the cement floor. Milo left and closed the door behind him.

"It's not exactly built for comfort," Lauren said, "but at least we have privacy."

Beckett was quiet. He sat on the single throw rug at the front, looking up at the cross. Lauren sat cross legged beside him. After a long silence, Beckett spoke. "Lauren, how do you know without a doubt that God exists? And if He does, why did he save me and let Eddy die? And if He did rescue me, what is my obligation to Him? How do I make good on my promise?"

Lauren prayed silently once more. “I’m not sure which question to tackle first, Beckett. But I’m convinced that somehow, God protected you. I don’t know why he kept you alive any more than I understand why he rescued me from my family. But I do know Him. I know He is here, right now, and He cares deeply for you. He loves us beyond what we could ever imagine.”

“I wish I could be as certain as you are,” Beckett replied.

There was a knock at the door. The tall, imposing figure of Pastor Art made his way toward them, “Good morning children, what brings you here?”

Lauren introduced Beckett to the graying minister. “Your timing is perfect, Pastor Art. You are in a much better position to answer Beckett’s questions than I am.”

“Beckett?” Pastor Art said, surprised. “Beckett Browning?”

“Yes,” Beckett replied.

Pastor Art grabbed Beckett’s hand and shook it vigorously. “Thank you for your donation, young man. You have no idea how much of a difference your generosity has made around here. We were all praying that God would provide enough funds to get us through to the end of the year and you came forward, thank you!”

Lauren smiled. She loved that Beckett had contributed to the mission without any fanfare, without ever mentioning it to her. Beckett looked embarrassed.

“Now what are your questions, young man,” Pastor Art continued.

Beckett repeated his story briefly and asked about his promise to God. Pastor Art explained from the Scriptures who Jesus Christ was, what He accomplished on the cross, about our need to turn away from our self-serving pursuits, about the amazing new life that Christ offers. Beckett felt his concerns melting away. He asked Pastor Art if they could pray. Beckett asked God to forgive Him; he opened his heart and his life to Christ.

When they finished, Beckett felt an amazing sense of relief. He had a new life. The one God had planned for him all along. Lauren and Pastor Art enveloped him in hugs.

“Welcome, brother,” Pastor Art exclaimed.

Beckett turned to Lauren, “Does this mean if I ask you out, you will say yes?” he asked intently.

Lauren smiled, her eyes glowing with anticipation. “Why don’t you ask me and find out?”

Pastor Art cleared his throat, “Before you continue,” he winked, “I want to invite you both to spend Thanksgiving here with us. There will be a brief service at noon; dinner is at 1 pm.”

“I was planning to come early and help, Pastor,” Lauren said.

Beckett smiled, “I will join you.”

Pastor Art excused himself, smiling at the connection he sensed between these two young people. He prayed silently for their future.

Beckett took Lauren’s hands and studied her face . . . “I’m expected at my parents’ later, Lauren, around 4 pm. Will you come with me?”

“Is this a date?” Lauren teased.

“No,” he replied seriously. Lauren looked at him, puzzled.

Beckett smiled. “I hope it’s the beginning of a lifetime,” he said as folded his arms around her.

Lauren smiled. She hugged Beckett back with all her strength and thanked God with all her heart.

The end.