

Love
Beyond Tomorrow

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Chapter Twenty-Two

"Ben!" Lauren exclaimed as she spotted him coming through the terminal on Friday afternoon. She ran toward him and threw herself into his arms, feeling all the tension of a week without him instantly draining away.

He hugged her back, but she sensed something different about him. She stepped back and looked up into his face, and for the first time, she noticed how completely exhausted he looked. His face was tired and drawn, and he looked as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Ben, are you okay?" she asked with concern, trying to read the veiled expression in his eyes.

He nodded cautiously. "Yeah, I'm okay. I just have a lot on my mind, that's all."

"Things didn't go well in Boston?"

"Actually, they went better than I expected," he told her, pushing a hand through his travel-rumpled hair. "My father and I talked, and I think we might be able to work things out."

Lauren's eyes lit up. "Oh, Ben, that's so great! I was praying that things would work out for you there."

In some ways they did, but not in others, he thought miserably. He forced a smile onto his face for her sake and glanced toward the baggage claim terminal. "I guess I should get my luggage."

Lauren looked at him strangely. "Are you sure you're okay? You don't look... I don't know, happy, I guess. Did something else happen?"

"No, no," he said quickly, "everything's fine. I guess I'm just tired from all the traveling, that's all."

Lauren continued to study his expression for a long moment, noting how carefully he was managing to avoid her gaze. Something was wrong. Very wrong. But she knew if he wasn't ready to talk

about it, there was no way she was going to be able to force it out of him.

“Well, come on,” she said, slipping her arm through his and guiding him toward the baggage claim area. “Let’s get your bags and go home.”

Half an hour later, they were on the highway heading back to Rexburg, and Lauren found herself stealing glimpses of him out of the corner of her eye. He remained eerily quiet as he stared unseeingly out the passenger window, and no matter how many times she tried to start up a conversation, her attempts failed miserably. She’d come to know him well enough over the past few months to know this sullen silence wasn’t like him. He seemed distant, distracted. Whatever was eating at him had to be pretty serious, and she had no idea what to do or say to make it better.

She sighed and turned her attention back to the road. Whatever it was, he would tell her when he was ready. At least, she hoped so.

Ben spent the next several days in intensive prayer and fasting, searching for the answers that continued to elude him. He felt lost and insecure as doubts started to creep in about what he was doing with his life, and whether or not coming to BYU-Idaho had been the right thing to do. Coming to Idaho had helped give him the faith and self-reliance he needed at a very dark time in his life, but now he found himself at the precipice of another life-altering decision. Did he give his life back to his family, or did he refuse to look back and follow his heart by marrying the only girl he’d ever loved?

He felt Satan working on him day and night, and he finally turned to Bishop Warner for a Priesthood blessing. It did help him feel more at peace when he was told that if he followed the Spirit, his answers would be given to him, but it didn’t help him know exactly what he was supposed to do. He had some hard choices to make, and he knew there weren’t going to be any simple answers.

He did his best to maintain a semblance of his relationship with Lauren, occasionally going out with her to a campus movie or dropping by her apartment to see her, but he knew she could tell something was wrong. He’d see the pained look in her eyes when he refused to open up, and his heart wrenched when it became apparent that his standoffish, distant behavior was hurting her.

But he didn’t know what else to do. He couldn’t talk to her about the decisions he was facing. What was he supposed to say? That he couldn’t marry her because his father wouldn’t approve? Yeah, that

would go over well. And he was sure it would go over just as well if he told her that he was thinking about taking an internship in Boston, but because he wasn't in a position to marry her yet, he'd drop her a few postcards from time to time.

So, where did that leave him? He found himself growing more and more withdrawn with each passing day as his mind churned over the decisions he had to make, and he could tell Lauren was quickly losing patience.

Things with Lauren finally came to a head the last Saturday night in January when he opened his apartment door at the sound of insistent knocking and saw her standing there with a rather determined expression on her face.

"May I come in?" she asked coolly.

He nodded and stepped back, letting her into the room. He shut the door behind her, then walked over to the couch and sat down. "What's up?" he asked, his anxiety growing as he noticed the careful distance she kept between them.

"Okay, I'm just going to say this before I lose my nerve," she began, trying not to let the familiar warm, brown eyes detract her from giving her prepared speech. "Ever since you got back from Boston, you've been different. You keep insisting nothing's wrong, but I know you too well to believe that. I'm sure you have your reasons for keeping whatever it is to yourself, so I've tried to be supportive and give you your space. But enough is enough."

She took a deep breath, then forged on. "I'm worried about us, Ben," she confessed, an emotional hitch in her voice. "Whatever this is you're trying to work through, it's driving a stake between us. I'm not going to just sit by and watch our relationship fall to pieces. I love you too much for that."

Ben saw her lower lip start to quiver, and his heart clenched painfully. He fought the urge to rush over and gather her into his arms, knowing that what he needed was to maintain his objectivity until he could figure out what he was supposed to do.

Pushing himself up off the couch, he shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and crossed over to the window. "I'm sorry I've been distant," he said quietly. "And you're right, I am trying to work through some things. I haven't said anything to you or anyone else about it because this is something I have to figure out myself, you know?"

He turned back to find her staring sadly at him, and he felt his resolve to maintain his emotional distance weaken. But it was that look of sadness that proved to him that it wasn't fair to let his own twisted emotions affect her like this. She deserved so much better.

“Lauren, look,” he tried again, unable to meet her gaze. “I’ve got so many things going on in my head right now that I just... I don’t know.” He sighed sadly. “I know I haven’t been much of a boyfriend lately, and I’m sorry. But I’ve got some hard decisions to make, and I need to make them on my own.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat, then forced out the words he hated to say. “So, um... maybe it’s better if we just take a little break.”

The instant the words were out of his mouth, he took one look at the shocked and pained expression on Lauren’s face and wished he could take them right back.

“A break?” she asked in a hoarse whisper. “Are you saying you want to break up?”

“No!” Ben blurted, his eyes widening. “No, I don’t want us to break up. I just need a little time to think about things, so maybe some time apart would be a good idea—”

Lauren laughed humorlessly as her expression became a mixture of pain and anger. “Come on, Ben, don’t play me! Either you want to be with me or you don’t. You can’t have it both ways.”

“I do want to be with you,” he insisted, taking an urgent step toward her. “But things are just so complicated right now—”

“What things?” she yelled in frustration. “Why can’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

His eyes reflected his sadness as he shook his head slowly. “Lauren, I can’t. Please, what I’m dealing with is just too hard...”

Lauren folded her arms across her chest and glared at him defiantly, trying to ignore the tears stinging her eyes. “So, things get hard and you bail? Is that it? I thought two people who loved each other as much as we do were supposed to stick together through everything, no matter how hard things got. Just tell me what’s wrong and we’ll fix it. Don’t I mean enough to you to even do that?”

He flinched. For a moment, he couldn’t say anything. Finally, his expression turned determined and steely. “I’m sorry, Laur. I just can’t.”

When Lauren saw his determined stance and the unwavering look in his eyes, she felt as if he’d just ripped out her heart and sent it through the grinder. “So that’s it? You don’t care enough about our relationship to try to make things work?” She waited for a response, but when she didn’t get one, her jaw tightened and she nodded abruptly. “Fine.”

She whirled around and stalked to the door, yanking it open angrily. Before she went out, she turned back to him and was surprised to see what appeared to be a momentary look of panic flash

into his dark eyes. But the pain in her heart was too intense to let it affect her and she simply brushed it aside.

"You know," she said bitterly, "all this time I thought you were different. I thought I'd finally found a guy who was mature enough to handle an adult relationship, someone who I could trust not to hurt me, someone to give my heart to and be loved in return. But I guess I was wrong. You're nothing like I thought you were, Ben. You're just like all the rest of them." And with that, she turned and left, slamming the door behind her.

Telling herself not to look back, Lauren was across the parking lot and halfway down the street before she finally stopped running. Tears blurred her vision, and her breath came in short, labored gasps. She kept hoping to hear the sound of footsteps behind her, to hear Ben calling out to her, telling her that he'd made a terrible mistake and that he was sorry for being such a jerk. But she didn't. All she heard was the sound of her own crying.

And the sound of her heart breaking.

What went wrong? she asked herself in bewilderment. She'd planned out exactly what she was going to say when she went over to Ben's apartment to talk to him, and had every intention of walking out of there with things right between them and their relationship back on solid ground. But things had escalated and completely unraveled before her eyes, and before she knew it, it was over.

When she finally reached her apartment, she rushed into her darkened bedroom and threw herself down on her bed, sobbing uncontrollably. *You don't need him*, she told herself fiercely. *You were fine before Ben Morrison walked into your life, and you'll be just fine without him. In fact, you'll probably be better off without him wreaking havoc with your emotions and monopolizing your time. In no time at all, you'll be over him and will have forgotten all about him. Just you wait and see.*

But as she continued to sob into her pillow, she knew she was fooling herself. As hard as she tried to convince herself to the contrary, she doubted her life was ever going to be the same again.

