

HER VALENTINE FAMILY by Renee Andrews

Deleted Scene – Original Chapter Two

Chapter Two

Jessica was a big believer that God often gave you little signs, signals around you that would let you know what was to come. Right now, for example, while driving her father's car to Chad and Becky's house, she'd have welcomed a bright sun in the horizon. Maybe even a rainbow, to show the same thing it did way back when for Noah, that everything would truly be okay again.

But there was no sun in the sky, and there was no rainbow.

Only rain.

"God, what are you telling me?"

She pulled into their driveway as Becky made a mad dash to the old Volkswagen beetle that she and Chad shared. She was wearing her blue Blockbuster employee shirt and smiling in spite of the pummeling rain. Her auburn hair was pulled in a high ponytail with a gold bow that matched the gold trim on her shirt. She looked young and carefree, happy to be alive, the exact way Jessica had felt...yesterday.

Becky eased her window down as Jessica got out of her dad's car. "Hey! One of the guys at work called in sick so I'm taking his time for extra hours. More beach money for us – yea!"

She and Jessica had signed up for the annual trip to Florida with the church youth group. Becky went every year and volunteered to help with the vacation Bible school program at the

small Florida congregation that always hosted their group, but this was the first time Jessica was getting to go. Her parents had said she could go when she turned sixteen, and she and Becky had been making plans for the trip all year. Saving their money for laser tag games with the other teens. Planning to purchase matching airbrushed t-shirts. Inventing fun games they would play with the children at the VBS.

Jessica tried to smile, but couldn't make it happen.

"Hey, you look terrible," Becky said, talking to Jessica from the small crack in her car window. "I'm sorry, I wasn't even thinking about you being sick this morning. Are you feeling better? You should get out of the rain." As usual, Becky talked nonstop and hardly left room for Jessica to answer between questions. Jessica, on the other hand, was simply standing in the rain and wondering how to tell Becky that she'd once again be making that trip to the beach without Jessica.

"Go on inside," Becky continued. "Chad's home, and he has something exciting to tell you. Don't ask me what. I promised I wouldn't ruin his surprise."

Again, Jessica was speechless. She had a surprise too, and she was fairly certain hers was the bigger of the two.

Waving, Becky backed out, then slowed long enough to roll down her passenger window.

"Hey, silly. Are you trying to catch pneumonia? Go inside!"

Jessica forced a smile, then turned and ran toward the side porch. She reached for the door handle, but it moved before she grabbed hold, with Chad swinging it open.

"Becky didn't tell you, did she?" he asked, grinning. "She promised she wouldn't, and I'll have my little sister's hide if she lied on this one."

Jessica let him pull her inside and against his frame. His arms ran up and down hers, then slid around her back, enveloping her with his warmth.

He smelled the way he always did, like a brisk soap and like, well, like Chad. He was tall, a good four or five inches taller than Jessica. She guessed at least six-one, with sandy blond hair and the prettiest eyes in the world. They were mostly dark green, but with tiny specs of gold and a thin line of brown around the edges. Hazel was the word most people would use, but they were more unique than one mere word. They were special, like him. She suddenly wanted to look at them, and she leaned away from him far enough to look up at those eyes.

His smile faded a little as he took in her appearance. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry you’re sick.” He brushed a kiss on her forehead and smoothed a lock of her hair behind her ear. “You still feeling rough?”

Jessica suddenly remembered she hadn’t even brushed her hair since this morning. Thankfully she’d brushed her teeth after that last time throwing up, or she’d be afraid to even say a word to him now. And she did have to talk to him, to tell him...everything. He was looking at her as though she was the prettiest girl in the world right now, in spite of the fact that her hair was dirty and sloppy, and she didn’t have on a lick of makeup. How would he look at her when he knew that she was going to have his baby?

“Your texts were kind of vague. You never said what was wrong, and I’ve been worried. Was it a stomach bug or what? Did you go to the doctor, or just try to handle it on your own? I wish I could have skipped school and come taken care of you, since your folks went to work. I should have.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” she said. “Those colleges will look at your attendance record, and I’d die if I blew your chances to get in one of those schools. You’ve got to have it all for a full scholarship, the grades and the dedication. And you’ve got both. I won’t let you throw that away for me.”

Her words immediately hit home, reminding her that she could be giving him a much

bigger obstacle in his plans to go to college and major in pre-med. He had his life planned out, pre-med, med school and the whole doctor thing. He was going to make it happen, and with her bit of news, she could throw a major wrench in that plan.

Or could he—could they—make it through school and a baby? Maybe she could work while he finished school, and then after he was done, and after their little boy, or girl, was in school, she could go to college and get her own degree.

That could work, couldn't it?

“Jessica?” He ran his thumbs tenderly along her cheeks.

She'd started to cry, and she hadn't even realized it. “I'm sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me.”

“Well, I do. You're sick. You're as white as a sheet, and you look like you're about to pass out. Girl, you shouldn't have driven over here tonight. You should be home in bed taking care of yourself.” He smiled when she whimpered. “But I'm glad you're here. I really wanted to see you, and I didn't want to have to wait until school tomorrow.”

“You said you have news.”

“I do, big news. But I'm thinking that maybe you should go back home, drink some juice and take care of yourself. When you're feeling better, then I'll show you what I got today.”

Jessica cleared her throat and made herself smile. “Oh no, you don't. You can't tell me that much and not give me the whole story. What news do you have?”

“Come on, I'll show you.” He slid his arm easily around her, cradling her body next to his, and she shivered from the close proximity. Chad had that effect on her, he was a best friend and the guy she loved all rolled up in one amazing package. Their relationship was new, and yet it seemed as if it had always been. True, she'd been Becky's friend as they were growing up, but after he'd changed the way he saw her, after he'd really looked at her and had seen that she was a

young woman, that she was the type of girl he'd been looking for—his words, not hers—then he'd finally given her a chance at his heart. And his heart was hers. She knew it. They fit together so comfortably, whether they were talking about their goals and plans, or sitting and watching a rented DVD, or...

Her mind drifted back to that day, the day they'd made a child. She so wished they hadn't gone so far. She'd told Chad immediately how she felt, that she had planned to wait until they were married and that she was ashamed that she'd thrown that huge goal out the window when her desire for him got the best of her. He'd had mixed emotions, naturally. He'd enjoyed being with her that way, but he'd also said that he hated that she had any second thoughts or regrets about what they'd done and that he'd never, ever ask her to go that far again. He'd also promised that he would wait for her, until after they'd finished college and were married.

That had seemed the perfect solution. She knew God would forgive her if she asked Him, and she sure had asked him, over and over again.

But now there was another, tiny little person involved in the scenario that happened that afternoon. And that made it even harder for her to forget what had happened that day.

She felt the blush creep upon her cheeks, and since Chad always knew her thoughts and feelings, he didn't miss the response. And he didn't miss where her mind had headed.

"Hey, wait a minute," he said, pausing his trek toward the living room. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Jessica, we've talked about it, and I thought we were okay. I still love you, whether or not we're together that way again." He smiled shyly, and the deep dimple in his left cheek winked at her. "I mean, sure, I enjoyed being that close to you. A lot. But I can wait. Really." He ran a finger across her lower lip, trembling slightly at the emotion overpowering her very soul. Then he leaned down and put the softest of kisses on her lips.

And once again, she started to cry.

“Jess, I will wait. You’re worth the wait. We’ll have all of that again one day, when we’re supposed to, after we’ve finished school and after we’re married. Because we are getting married, you know. Married, little Chads and Jessicas, the whole nine yards. And I’ll be Doctor Chad Martin, and you’ll be Mrs. Martin, favorite kindergarten teacher of all little five-year-olds.”

More tears flowed.

“Listen, you’re obviously feeling rough. Maybe you shouldn’t drive. I could take you home.”

She laughed through her tears. “One, how would we explain why you’re driving me home to my folks? And two, Becky took your car.” Then she added, “And you still haven’t shared your big news.”

“I know, but somewhere between the back door and here, I lost you. Or I should say you started thinking of other things, or one other thing, for some reason. I want you happy when I tell you, and you’re not exactly in the best of moods right now.”

“It’s the...sickness,” she said. “I really do want to know what you were so excited about.”

“Okay, then, come on, I’ll show you.” His arm eased around her and pulled her to his side again, and she welcomed the warmth of his long, lean frame. For some reason, she’d felt inexplicably cold, and he took the cold away. He always knew what to do, what to say, to make her feel better. He fixed all of her problems, squashed all of her insecurities and fears. Now she just needed him to fix the biggest problem—no, not a problem, a—what? A blessing? Would he see this baby that way?

“Jess?” He’d led her to the couch, and she’d lost focus again, but now she zeroed in on the one item that was out of place, a single white envelope in the center of the coffee table in

front of the sofa. A white envelope addressed to Chad Martin.

A fancy white envelope with an embossed return address for the University of Georgia.

“Chad? What is it?”

“Open it,” he said, grinning. “Read it.”

She sat on the couch, picked up the envelope and immediately felt a stirring in her stomach, as if the baby inside of her was issuing a protest to what she was about to learn. Her baby wouldn't be moving like that yet, but something was making her feel very, very sick. “I'm afraid I'm not feeling too good.”

He took one look at her face, scanned the room and quickly grabbed a small wastebasket from the other side of the couch. He helped her lean over and even held her ponytail back out of the way.

Jessica wanted to die. This was the most embarrassing thing she'd ever done, but mercifully she didn't have any food left in her to toss. “I'm okay,” she whispered.

“No, you're not. Man, I'm worried about you.”

She'd come over here to tell him about the baby. This was the perfect opportunity, an explanation to why she was so miserably sick to her stomach. But there was that letter, and she feared she knew exactly what it said. “Let me read your news. I bet I can guess what it is, can't I? From Georgia? Did you get it? You did, didn't you? You got the scholarship.”

He pulled back the flap of the envelope and withdrew the single sheet of paper that would change Jessica's life forever.

“Dear Mr. Martin: We are pleased to inform you that you have been awarded a University of Georgia Foundation Scholarship, with an annual value of \$14,700 stipend for out-of-state students, as well as a University of Georgia First Generation Scholarship, with an annual value of \$5,000.” Chad looked up, his smile absolutely beaming. “Then it goes on to give a few

more details, but that's the main gist of it. And they've got an amazing pre-med program. What do you think?"

"I think it's wonderful!" she exclaimed, and she meant it. It was wonderful. Chad's dream was going to come true. He was going to college, the first in his family to do so, and he was going on scholarship. His mother must be so proud. She'd worked as a waitress ever since Chad and Becky's father ran out on them when Chad was only three, and she'd scraped together every dime she could to make sure he and his sister had everything they ever wanted.

Foregoing his desire to play sports in high school, Chad instead put in at least thirty hours of work each week at the gas station down the street to help his mother make ends meet. And at the same time, he'd worked diligently at keeping his grades at the top of the class. Because he wanted to have a better life than the one they'd had. He wanted to make a name for himself in spite of the fact that his father abandoned them. And he wanted to take care of his mother, keep her from working so hard until she died. He'd shared this aspiration with Jessica, and she'd loved him even more because of it.

Now he had a chance to set that huge plan in motion.

Unless he had to stay with her and help her raise their baby. She'd been kidding herself when she'd thought that they could marry and he could go to college while she stayed home with the baby. Chad wouldn't do that. He'd go to work, earn a real living for his child, the way his father had never done. He'd probably give up that scholarship and never look back.

"It is wonderful, isn't it?" he said, looking at the letter and missing the emotions playing across her face.

Jessica swallowed. "Definitely wonderful."

She stood from the sofa, put a hand on her belly. "I'm sorry. I can't get over this stomach thing. I really am happy for you, but I probably should get home and take it easy."

He stood beside her and hugged her. “It means a lot that you came over, even when you were feeling bad. I was about to die to tell you, but I didn’t want to do it over the phone. I’m just sorry you’re not feeling better so we could celebrate properly. Tell you what, when you’re feeling better, we’ll grill out. Steaks and potatoes, as soon as your stomach is up to it, sound good?”

As if on cue, her stomach convulsed, but she held the pain in check. The thought of steak and potatoes nearly had her hurling again. “Sounds good.” Or rather it would sound good, in a few days. She hoped.

“Come on, I’ll walk you to your car.” He steered her through the house and opened the back door. “Still raining.”

She nodded. It was raining even harder, as though God was telling her something. And she thought she knew what. This, her and Chad, wasn’t meant to be. Not now, anyway. If she told him about the baby, he’d give up his dream. And she should have said no that day anyway. If she’d have said no, he would have stopped. He’d stopped before when she’d put on the brakes. But she didn’t, so this was really her burden to bear, wasn’t it? She wasn’t meant to share the load with him, even if the baby was his.

Is that right, God?

“Hang on, I’ll grab an umbrella.” He moved into the tiny laundry room near their back door and took out a dark gray umbrella, stuck it out the door and opened it. Then he ushered her underneath and they crossed the driveway to her car. Holding the umbrella over her as she climbed in, he said, “Call me when you get home and let me know you made it okay.”

He really did love her.

She nodded, unable to speak at the moment.

“Jess?”

“Yes?”

“I love you, girl.”

She smiled. “I love you too.” Enough to let you go.

Jessica drove mechanically through their small town, pausing at each stop sign to let her tears fall. She knew what she had to do, but that didn’t make it any easier. And she knew exactly how she’d do it, since Chad had given her the idea when he’d seen her crying earlier. It was true, after all. She did regret that they’d given in to temptation. She was ashamed of what they’d done.

So, after she reached her house, she turned off the car and sat there, watching the raindrops slick down the windshield in steady, long streams. Like tears from Heaven itself. Then she picked up her cell phone and dialed the only boy she’d ever loved.

“Hey,” he answered on the first ring. “You made it home?”

Jessica swallowed, closed her eyes, and prayed. Help me, God, please.

“Jessica? Jess?” Chad continued.

“Yes, I’m home,” she whispered. “And I-I have something to tell you.”

“O-kay,” he said, his hesitance apparent. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes, and I should have said something earlier, but you were wanting to tell me about the scholarship, and I really did want to hear your news. Then it just didn’t seem right to tell you, but I need to. It’s important.” Her words came out in a rush, in one big exhalation, as though she was afraid to take her time because she’d never make it through. Which was true.

“What? What do you need to tell me, Jessica?”

“You know what we talked about earlier, when I was crying, about how upset I’ve been over what we did that day.”

“And I said we don’t have to mention it anymore. I can wait, Jess. I swear it. I told you,

you are worth the wait.”

You are worth the wait. His words pressed against her heart and squeezed.

“I know you said that, but I can’t stop thinking about it. I feel guilty, Chad, and I feel ashamed. And every time I’m with you, it hurts me.”

“Jessica, it doesn’t have to be that way, honey. In time, you’ll be better with it. When you see that we don’t need to go that far again. I know you want to wait, and I’m wanting to do that too, because of you.”

“I’m sorry, Chad. It bothers me too much, and I—” She didn’t know if she could finish. Her head was pounding, her heart was breaking, and her baby seemed to be twisting within her, upset by what she was doing with his, or her, daddy. Forgive me, my little baby. But this is what I have to do. What your Mommy has to do...for your Daddy.

“You what, Jessica? What is it, Jess? Please, tell me.”

“I can’t see you anymore. I’m sorry, Chad. I am. But I can’t live with what we’ve done. It’s—it’s over.”

“Jessica!” he yelled, but the sound disappeared as she closed the phone.

She sucked in a hard gasp, climbed from the car and ran inside her house.

Her parents were waiting in the living room, sitting on the couch and staring at the door expectantly.

“Jessica, we need to talk,” her father said calmly.

“I know,” she said, finding the strength to walk into the room and face them. “And I know what I want to do. I want to move to Tennessee and live with Granny. You were right, Mom, that’s what is best for me, for you and Dad, and for the baby.”

Her mother blinked in obvious surprise, her father sighed loudly, and Jessica realized that she’d blatantly lied to Chad about more than the fact that she didn’t want to see him anymore.

She'd told him she couldn't live with what they'd done. In fact, she would be living with it, with the little boy or girl that would arrive in about eight months, for the rest of her life.