

HER VALENTINE FAMILY by Renee Andrews

*Alternate Beginning – Original Chapter One*

"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:9

Chapter One

Jessica Bowman watched with anguished dismay as a pale blue vertical line crossed the horizontal one at the end of the plastic strip. Swallowing thickly, she blinked past the urge to cry and turned the box so she could read the information on the third and final pregnancy test she'd taken this afternoon. The previous two had the same results, and this one didn't differ.

*A plus sign means you're pregnant.*

"God, please. Help me," she whispered, leaving her bathroom and dropping on her bed. Her mother would be home from work any minute, and she had to get herself together before Mom took one look at her and knew something was wrong. Then again, she'd been sick when her parents left this morning, so maybe that'd keep her mom's curiosity at bay long enough for Jessica to figure out what she was going to do.

*"It only takes one time, Jessica,"* Anna Bowman had warned repeatedly over the last few years, ever since Jessica had gotten her first period at twelve. And it *had* only taken one time.

One time. Now she had a tiny little baby growing steadily inside of her.

She pressed her hand against the t-shirt covering her stomach. Her flat stomach. It wouldn't be flat for long. "One time." Her cheerleading uniform, black and gold with red sequins, hung on the knob of her closet door. She'd finally made the varsity squad just a week ago. She bit her lower lip and sucked in a shaky breath. The first football game was in late August. She'd be a good four months along by then. Ever since she could remember, she'd wanted to be on that field, wearing that uniform and cheering on the tigers.

Not this year.

Another sob pressed forward. Not any year.

Her parents had always been afraid that she'd end up like them, having to marry way too young and struggling to make it without a higher education because of the child they had to raise.

Because of her.

*"We want you to achieve your dreams, get everything you ever want. You're smart, Jessica,"* her mother had said with a smile. *"Smarter than me, for sure."*

And what had that meant? That she should feel sorry for her mom because she'd had Jessica so young and missed the opportunity at college or at a better job than the one she'd had since Jessica had been born, working as a receptionist for Dr. Halley?

What would her mother say now? She had been eighteen when she had Jessica.

Jessica was only sixteen.

Sixteen, and pregnant.

Her dad wouldn't like it either. Disappointed, that was the word he'd probably use. The word that would hurt the most. She hated disappointing him, and this would definitely, undeniably disappoint him.

*Disappoint?* Who was she kidding?

*Devastate* was more like it.

Jessica closed her eyes, felt the tears push beneath her lids, slide a steady path along her cheeks and trickle miserably into the shell of her ear. And while the tears flowed, she recalled his words when she repeatedly asked why she couldn't go out on dates like the other girls at school.

*"The reason we're so tough on you, honey, is because we're trying to protect you. There will be plenty of time to date when you're older. These parents letting their girls go out so young are simply asking for trouble. You can double-date when you're sixteen, single date at seventeen. That's our final verdict, take it or leave it."*

If they only knew. She still hadn't been on a date. She and Chad hadn't needed to date. She was with him every day. She'd known him for forever and had loved him since she knew the meaning of the word. And finally, just this year, he'd started seeing her the same way. He did love her, she was sure of that. But would he want a baby with her? Would he be upset that this had happened...or would it make him happy?

A brief glimmer of hope pressed its way to the surface. Would he be happy?

He'd said the words, that he loved her. In fact, the first time he'd said them was on that afternoon a little over a month ago, when he'd wanted to show her just how much. Like always, he hadn't wanted to stop. But that time, that one time, because she'd known that he finally loved her the way she loved him, she hadn't said no.

Her stomach gurgled. She was going to throw up again, and she wasn't looking forward to it. That'd been the tell-tale sign of what she'd suspected to be true, the nausea that brought her to her knees beside the toilet this morning. Paying homage to the porcelain throne, that was the way the kids at school described it when they were puking their guts up after a night of drinking.

But Jessica had never done that. She'd never drank at all. In fact, she was the poster child for a "good girl" in the tiny town of Claremont, Alabama. She didn't drink, didn't smoke, went to church every time the doors were open. And everyone at school knew she wasn't allowed to date because she'd often complained about it. No one except Becky knew about her relationship with Chad, and Becky was her best friend. She'd never, ever tell. She wouldn't want Jessica to get in hot water with her folks, and she also wouldn't do anything to hurt Chad, since she worshipped the ground her brother walked on. But she also didn't know that Jessica and Chad had given into the ultimate temptation that once.

What would Becky say now, though? Now that her best friend was pregnant with her brother's baby?

Another rumble in her belly sent Jessica stumbling back to the bathroom. She pulled her messy brown ponytail away while she doubled over the commode and waited for another round. Wasn't it called morning sickness for a reason? Shouldn't it only happen in the morning?

She'd been sick all day.

Would it be like this the whole nine months? How would she go to school? Or would she? That senior girl who'd gotten pregnant last year had dropped out of school and gotten her GED so she could stay home while she was pregnant and then take care of her baby. Her little girl wasn't born until the summer, so technically, she could have waited until after she graduated. But everyone was staring at her constantly, watching for her stomach to grow, and it was probably too much for her to want to deal with every day.

Jessica would have to deal with that too, if she stayed in school.

But if she dropped out, if she got her GED, did that mean she couldn't go to college? She wanted to be a teacher, had wanted to be one for as long as she could remember. Was that not even a possibility anymore?

Her stomach pitched. Heaven help her, it hurt.

*God, help me. It hurts.*

But being sick had given her a reason to stay home today and think. Thankfully she was old enough that her parents didn't feel the need to stick around and baby her when she tossed her cookies. With her assuring them that she could take care of herself through this "stomach bug," they had finally gone to work, and she'd immediately headed to the pharmacy in Stockville, one town over from Claremont. No way could she go to the sole pharmacist in Claremont. Mr. Johns might not call her folks and inform them of her sin, but Miss Ellie at the checkout wouldn't miss a beat. She could only imagine what her parents would have done if Tellie Ellie had given them a call with that little tidbit.

Then again, did it really matter? This wasn't exactly the kind of secret she could hide from the world. Not for long, anyway.

Since she hadn't eaten a bite since this morning's scrambled eggs, and since that had been rejected by her queasy stomach within an hour, Jessica had nothing but dry heaves this time around. Even so, her jerky stomach still made her feel like she wanted to die, and she dabbed her face with a cool cloth then moved back to her bed.

She'd barely put her head on the pillow, though, when she heard the front door close and then her mother moving about downstairs. Jessica crawled under the covers, turned her head away from the door and attempted to slow her breathing to something similar to sleep. Maybe Mom would think she was resting and wouldn't come in to chat about how Jessica was feeling or ask to take her temperature. Maybe she'd simply allow Jessica to sleep through this stomach virus and in the meantime, Jessica could decide when and how to tell her parents that in about nine months, they would have a grandchild.

Jessica clenched her mouth together and bit back a moan. She wasn't sure which her

mother would be most upset about, the fact that Jessica was pregnant, or the fact that she was going to be a grandmother at thirty-four.

“God, help me,” she prayed again.

Her mother’s loud gasp, penetrating the walls and echoing up the stairs, caused Jessica’s eyes to open. Had Jessica left a mess in the kitchen? She didn’t think so. But something had Anna’s traditional shocked exclamation ringing through the house, and Jessica prayed that it wasn’t what she feared.

“Jessica Diane Bowman!” Her mother’s yelp coincided with her footsteps rapidly making their way up the stairs toward Jessica’s room.

There was no way to feign sleep with her mother being that loud, so Jessica rolled over, stared at the door and waited. Her mother’s use of her full name was never a good sign, and Jessica suddenly wished that she *had* left a mess in the kitchen. Then she might not be so scared about what had her mother pounding her way toward her room.

She watched as the doorknob twisted, then her mom entered...carrying the two empty boxes from the first two pregnancy tests. Jessica had double-bagged them in Kroger bags, knotting the top and then placing them beneath an empty cereal box in the kitchen trash can. She’d thought that was good enough to avoid her mother’s typical noseyness.

She’d thought wrong.

“Wh-what is the meaning of this?” Mom’s eyes were blinking so fast that Jessica could barely make out that they were blue. And the hand holding the Kroger bag was quivering, causing an eerie plastic rustle that only drew more attention to the two empty boxes in her other hand, like a crackling speaker with the power to magnify the sound of the truth.

The sound of her sin.

Jessica gathered up every ounce of courage she could muster and cleared her throat.

“Where did you find those? Whose are they?” Playing dumb seemed a good idea, until she saw her mother’s scrutinizing eyes scan her room and draw a bead on the plastic stick that Jessica had stupidly left on her nightstand.

Anna crossed the room in two strides, picked up the stick and wailed. “How? When?” Then she paused, swallowed, and yelled, “Who!”

As if things could possibly get worse, Jessica heard the front door slam, and then her father’s questioning yell. “Anna? Jessica? What’s going on?”

His solid footsteps steadily made their way up the stairs while Jessica’s mother simply shook her head disbelievingly at the evidence acknowledging Jessica’s betrayal of everything they’d ever taught her.

“I just don’t understand,” her mom said, her whispered words quaking past her lips. She put a hand against her heart, and since she still grasped the two pregnancy test boxes, that’s the first thing Bryant Bowman noticed as he entered the tiny bedroom.

Jessica had never believed that she was claustrophobic before, but right now, her room closed in around her, and unfortunately, her parents were included in the shrinking box.

“Anna,” Jessica’s father said solidly. “What’s going on?” His words were spoken to her mother, but his eyes never left the boxes currently crushed within her fists.

“Maybe you should ask our daughter.” Her voice broke in the middle of the sentence, and her head never stopped shaking. “Maybe she can tell you why I found these in the trash.”

He took a deep, audible breath, then turned to face her. “Jessica?”

There was no use denying the truth. She’d had it confirmed three times over.

“I’m pregnant.”

“How...” he started, but he was interrupted by her mother.

“Well, we know how,” she snapped. “But what I want to know is when, and with who?”

She whimpered. “Lord, Jessica, we did everything we could to keep this from happening. You haven’t even been out with anyone. You’re never alone with anyone. Who have you been seeing? And when? Have you been skipping school? Surely we should have been notified. I haven’t been called or anything. Well, you can guarantee I’ll let the school board know about...”

“I haven’t been skipping school,” Jessica broke in.

“Who is he?” her father asked.

Jessica swallowed, thought about how precious her relationship with Chad was and how she didn’t want him finding out from her folks. She wanted to tell him. She wanted to see how he’d react and if, maybe, he’d want to start a family with her, take this as a blessing, as a gift from God, and have this baby together. Yes, it’d be tough, but other people had made it work. Her parents had done okay, although neither of them looked overly happy now. Which was exactly why she didn’t want to tell them before she told Chad. She had to talk to him first.

“I can’t tell you.”

Anna Bowman dropped the boxes and took her palm to her mouth. “Has there been more than one?” she said, her words muffled behind her hand.

“Of course not, Anna,” her father said. “Jessica, for goodness sakes, tell her there hasn’t. Tell us who it was, honey, and we’ll go talk to him. We’ll work this out.”

Exactly what Jessica didn’t want to happen. “I can’t.”

A piercing wail filled the room as Anna moved to the bed and took Jessica’s hands.

“You were raped! How? When?”

“No, mom, I wasn’t. But I-I can’t tell you who, not yet. Please, don’t make me. I need to see if, well, how he feels about it all. Maybe...”

Her mother’s mouth gaped, and then she quickly recovered. “Maybe what? Maybe



you'll suddenly age five years to something remotely reasonable for a girl to have a child? How old is he, anyway? Is he in your class? Another sophomore? How in the world are two kids your age going to start a family nowadays? Do you know how expensive things are, Jessica? Do you know how expensive kids are?" She inhaled, released it loudly. "And what do you think everyone around town will say? What will everyone say at church?"

In the back of Jessica's mind, she'd been wondering the same thing all day, but she'd also been wondering something else. "Don't you think if God can forgive me, then everyone else could too?"

Anna Bowman actually hissed. "Oh, He can forgive you. And maybe some folks can, but this isn't a forgetful town, Jessica. You don't even realize what you've done to your name, to our name. And your future." She laughed bitterly. "What future now? You'll end up just like me."

"Anna," Bryant said softly. "Let's calm down and think this through."

Her mother's head moved from side to side. "There's nothing to think about, Bryant. She's pregnant. She's sixteen years old, and she's pregnant. You know what people around here will say, how they'll look at her, and at us. And the church. She's been the one they always referred to when they talked about how our young Christian girls should be." Another hoarse laugh. "In fact, I thought they accepted us so well because she'd turned out okay, because she was so incredibly good."

"Calm down," Jessica's father directed. "We'll work this out and decide what's best to do, for Jessica, and for the baby."

Anna Bowman stood, her eyes focused on her daughter as though she'd never really looked at her before. "Are you wanting him to marry you? Will he? Is that what you're thinking?"

“I don’t know.” Jessica’s stomach quivered, and she moved her hand to it to steady the nauseous feeling, which caused another shake of her mother’s head.

“Well, find out if that is going to happen, if he’s planning to marry you, and if he isn’t— if he isn’t—then I think, I think you shouldn’t stay here.”

“Anna, what are you saying?”

“She’ll be the laughingstock around this town, Bryant, and you know it. People will look down at her, and everywhere she goes, she’ll feel the shame. I felt it, and we’d gotten married. And then they’ll look at that child as though it shouldn’t have been born.”

Jessica realized what she was saying, that people had looked at her that way when she was little. But she didn’t remember any of that. And everyone seemed to approve of their family now. Should she mention that?

“Anna,” her father said, his voice filled with a new emotion. Pity.

“It’s okay. I’m fine now, and we survived the stares and whispers. But I don’t want to go through that again, Bryant. I won’t. She needs to go away. Maybe to your mother’s place in Tennessee. She could homeschool for a year while she’s pregnant. And then, she could put the baby up for adoption and come back, finish school here and no one would have to know.” She nodded, as though this was the perfect solution.

“Adoption?” Jessica whispered.

“I don’t think that you’ve taken enough time to think this through,” her father said.

“Jessica hasn’t even told the boy yet. They might decide to marry and raise the child together.”

“We don’t even know who he is,” her mother said. “Or how she’s been seeing him, or how long she’s even known him. All questions that I want answered,” she added. “But I hardly doubt there’s a long-lasting relationship in the making here. We need to think about what’s best for the baby, and for Jessica. And I think that what’s best is to give this baby to a good home

and to protect Jessica's reputation."

"By sending me away?"

"I'm not sure that's the answer," her father said, while her mother moved past him to the door.

"You and I need to talk in private," she said to him. "And I need Advil." She left the room without even glancing back at Jessica.

"Dad?"

He closed his eyes, slowly opened them. "Jessica, I'm very disappointed, but we will work this out. And we need you to help us by telling us who the baby's father is."

"I can't, not yet. Not until I talk to him, please."

"Which will happen, when, exactly?"

"By tomorrow, I promise."

He nodded, apparently finding that sufficient. "Okay, I'll tell your mother." He turned to go.

"Dad?"

He paused at the door.

"Can I go see Becky? I, well, I could really use a friend to talk to, if that's okay."

"Have you told her about this, Jessica? Have you told anyone?" His blue eyes suddenly seemed a bit more gray, and Jessica hated that she'd hurt him so much. That she'd disappointed him so much.

"I haven't told her. I just really want to be with a friend now."

He waited a second, evidently thinking through whether to let her go, then said, "I'm sure you could use a friend now. But let's not tell her just yet, okay? Let's figure out what we're going to do. I know Becky is your friend, and that she wouldn't intentionally hurt you by

betraying your confidence. But this kind of news is sometimes too hard to keep to yourself, and I remember how much it hurt your mom when her friends betrayed her.”

“I won’t tell her.”

“And Jessica, just so you know, neither of us regret our decisions back then.” He smiled softly. “Your mom had a hard time with the way people treated her, and I hate that, but that’s the way things go in a small town. They all came around, but unfortunately, she hasn’t forgotten the way she was treated. And the main reason she’s so upset now is because she just doesn’t want you to be hurt the same way. She loves you more than anything. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay. Well, you can go see Becky. That is where you’re going, right? You aren’t going to see the baby’s father? Because you could tell me if you were. I want you to trust us, and I want to be able to trust you too. We’re all in this together, you know.”

“I know. And I really am going to see Becky.”

*And Chad.*