

****BONUS MATERIAL****

As a bonus treat for you all, I am super excited to reveal (for the first time!) the opening chapter of my upcoming YA contemporary, *BECAUSE I LOVE YOU*. It's releasing on May 17, 2016 through Blaze Publishing under my alternate pen name, Tori Rigby! Hope you enjoy!

BECAUSE I LOVE YOU

Tori Rigby

CHAPTER ONE

The lights in Brad's Mini Mart flickered as I swiped the pregnancy test from the shelf, tucked it under my arm, and sped out of the aisle.

A woman smiled at me as I passed. I shrank back and shoved the box higher in my armpit. Could she see what I was holding? I stood like a statue as she turned into a new aisle, and, when she didn't look back at me, let out a breath. I needed to get out of this store.

My pulse hammered in my ears as I neared the counter. Every glance in my direction catapulted my stomach to my knees. I bounced on the balls of my feet, waiting for my turn to pay and dash. *Come on*. Any minute now, I was going to vomit all over the old lady in front of me who was taking her time counting each individual penny.

I tapped my foot, glancing again and again at the storefront. The last thing I needed was for Heather or Carter to come in here, wondering if I'd died, and spot the bright pink box. Especially since Carter was the whole reason I was taking this test in the first place.

I nearly pushed the old woman out of the way when the cashier handed her a receipt.

"Can you put that in a paper bag?" I asked, dropping the pregnancy test on the counter.

The girl stared at me like I was counting my pennies too. Then she turned and yelled across the store, "Neil! I need paper bags!"

My skin crawled, and I fought the urge to plug my ears.

"God, Lacie. I'm just down the damn aisle," a familiar voice said.

Oh, no. My heart leapt into my throat. Neil Donaghue—town bad boy, the older brother of my worst enemy, and my ex-boyfriend—approached the register. Had I known he worked here, I never would've asked to stop.

"You know what? Never mind." I threw a twenty on the counter, grabbed the test, and ripped the package open as I raced from the store. *Should've just done that in the first place.* I tucked the two plastic tests into my purse—along with the directions—and tossed the rest in the trash.

Carter's red BMW idled near the front door. I plopped in the backseat, praying I didn't vomit all over his leather interior.

"God. You took so long that I thought we were gonna turn into pumpkins," Heather said. "Did you even buy anything?"

Carter peeled out of the parking lot. "Give her a break. She looks like she's going to puke."

"No, seriously," Heather continued. "I could use one of those antacids. I drank too much pop at the theater. Think I'm gonna be sprouting some nasty farts here, soon."

Carter's nose scrunched. "You never cease to amaze me."

"They didn't have what I was looking for," I said, answering Heather's initial question. "Sorry."

"You going to be able to go to the party?" Carter asked.

I knew enough about pregnancy to know you didn't drink if you were. Although I wasn't sure yet, I didn't want to chance it. Which meant I would stand out like a cardinal in a flock of crows when I didn't repeatedly fill my cup. And if anyone questioned why, I'd break.

"No. Just take me home," I said.

"Aw, man." Heather turned in her seat, pouting. "Now who's gonna talk me down from sneaking upstairs with Brady Montgomery? Have you seen that guy? He's h-to-the-double-t *hot*."

"There's so much wrong with that statement that I don't know where to start," Carter replied.

Usually, I'd be cracking a smile right now. This type of conversation was pretty typical, especially when Heather was tipsy. It wasn't really pop she'd been drinking at the movie theater. Pre-gaming was her solemn ritual. But, right now, a smile was impossible. I tapped my shaking hands on my knees to keep Carter and Heather from noticing.

When Carter pulled into my driveway, I refrained from jumping out of the vehicle so I didn't look like someone poked me with a cattle prod. Gripping my purse, I told them to have fun and not to do anything I wouldn't—which got a few snickers from Heather, who said I should know better—then hopped out of the car.

She leaned out the window and screamed, “Bye, feel better!”

And with a squeal of his tires, Carter peeled down the driveway and out of sight.

I stared at my home, willing myself to go inside. My feet felt like they were sinking, as if my driveway had turned into quicksand. If I looked at my house the right way, a face stared back at me, the front door a gaping “o.” The same expression I expected my mom to make when—*if*—I told her I was pregnant. A face that said, “oh-my-God-how-could-you-do-such-a-thing-I-thought-you-were-better-than-that?”

My stomach couldn't take it any longer. I ran to the bushes along the right side of my house and puked until my guts turned inside out. Then I pulled a Kleenex from my purse and wiped my mouth before punching the security code into the garage door's keypad.

“Annie home!” Micah, my three-year-old cousin, yelled as soon as I stepped into the kitchen. Tiny arms wrapped around my legs, and I nearly toppled as my cousin bounced without unleashing me. My aunt and uncle were on leave from their missionary work in England and had been staying with us this past week. I'd hoped to sneak upstairs after a quick “hello,” but my mother was still seated at the kitchen table, grading papers. Which meant my aunt and uncle were still at the church after the Saturday night service. Uncle Doug was this weekend's guest speaker—another reason they were home.

And since they were apparently still chatting with attendees—or schmoozing people to empty their wallets to fund their missionary work—in ten seconds, “baby duty” would be handed over to me.

Great.

“Yes, Andie's home,” Mom said weakly from beneath her curtain of dark hair. Man, she sounded tired. “Give her a second to breathe, buddy. She'll play with you in a minute.”

Micah somersaulted into the living room before jumping on the sofa like a baby kangaroo.

“What happened to the football party?” she asked without looking up from her work.

I dropped my purse on the counter and slipped off my lavender ballet flats, scrambling for a reason that would keep her from shoving a thermometer down my throat. “Just didn’t feel like going.”

She glanced at me, and I kept my face as impassive as possible, though my heartbeat thudded in my ears. My act of indifference seemed to work. Mom started scribbling again.

“Okay, well, can you help me with Micah, then?” she asked. “I need to get these graded by tomorrow. Doug and Kathy should be back in an hour.”

I sighed. After Dad died two years ago, Mom had taken a teaching job at the University of Denver. Most nights, she had a lot of work, but tonight, her stack of papers might as well have been the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It was going to be a while before I could take the pregnancy test.

I marched across the living room’s tan, plush carpet. Micah’s gaze stayed glued to the television as he held out his arms—still bouncing—and I rested him on my hip. He’s what my mom called “an unexpected gift from God.” My aunt had never planned to have kids, then, three years ago, she got married and—whoops. Would Mom think the same thing if I popped out a grandchild at sixteen?

I re-entered the kitchen and pulled Chinese leftovers from the fridge. As the microwave beeped and Micah bounced in my arms, singing along with the Dora theme song, I silently prayed that Mom would stay away from my purse, that I’d make it through the next hour without puking.

And that my missed period was just a fluke.

But it was ten o’clock before I got a moment alone. After Aunt Kathy and Uncle Doug returned and put Micah to bed, Mom insisted I sit and tell her about my day. And, with Mom, a simple “it was good” never sufficed. She always wanted details. Details, details, details. That was definitely one trait I didn’t inherit from her. I would’ve hated to be a student in one of her English classes. She regularly marked off points for “not enough fluff.”

After locking my door—which was against the rules; God forbid I wanted privacy—I pulled the two tests out of my purse with shaking hands. I entered my attached bathroom, read the directions, and then tried not to break into a fit of hysteria as I peed on “the stick.” That’s what Heather would’ve called it. Then I placed the test on the counter and plucked my cell phone from my pocket.

Three minutes. How was I going to be able to wait three minutes? Sitting on the toilet lid, I watched the seconds count down on my timer.

Two minutes. My legs jiggled, and my pulse raced.

One minute. I bit my lip, hard. Sweat ran down my face.

A second before my alarm went off, I hit the “End” button, stood on wobbly legs, and with a deep breath, I grabbed the directions off the counter. *Two lines, pregnant.*

One line, not pregnant.

“Okay, I can do this.”

I shook my hands out at my sides, like I did before every cheerleading competition and half-time show, and closed my eyes. As I let all the air out of my lungs, I snatched the test off the counter and opened my eyes.

Two lines.

The room spun.

My back hit the wall with a thud, and I slid to the floor.

The edges of my vision darkened.

Climbing onto my knees, I threw open the toilet seat and left my dinner in the bowl.

I glanced at the stick again. Maybe I’d read it wrong.

Still two lines. I bit my finger to keep from screaming.

I was pregnant. *Pregnant.* With Carter’s baby.

I rocked back and forth, my face in my hands, and hyperventilated into my palms. Any dreams I had of becoming a doctor were gone. My year as co-captain of the cheerleading squad was over. My clothes would stop fitting. My boobs would swell to the size of over-filled water balloons. And I would be the laughingstock of River Springs, Colorado.

Heather’s going to kill me. She’d admitted to me the night after Carter and I slept together that she had a crush on him, but I didn’t have the courage to tell her what happened. Not only had the three of us been best friends since kindergarten, but we’d made a pact at the beginning of freshman year that we’d never date each other and ruin our three musketeer status. She’d told me she was only letting me know because she had to tell someone. That she’d never act on her feelings.

Oh, God, what did I do?

Another wave of nausea heaved through my body. Amazing that I had anything left in me. After another round of vomiting, I tucked the pregnancy tests deep in my book

bag and made a mental note to throw them in someone else's trash on the way to school on Monday. I unlocked my bedroom door, climbed onto my bed, and then burrowed under the blankets.

Would Mom lose her job at the university if she had to pick up another to make ends meet? We lived in a tiny, conservative, church town. Would anyone hire me for an after school job, knowing I was pregnant? And my school was a private prep school. Would they kick me out?

Burying my face in my pillow, I tucked my comforter under my chin as tears burned my eyes.

My life is over.

I didn't stop crying until I fell asleep.