

# UNPREGNANT

Mile 

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Unpregnant

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First Edition

Sitting on the icy-cold toilet seat in the third stall of the girls' bathroom, I desperately squeezed my thighs together and concentrated on not peeing.

"Ronnie, you done in there? We gotta book it if we're gonna make it to first period," Emily asked. No, I wasn't almost done. And a tardy slip was the least of my concerns.

"Uh, go ahead. I've got . . . girl issues." Just not the monthly kind.

I prayed Emily would leave quickly. That second glass of orange-guava juice this morning had definitely been a mistake. Curse its pulpy goodness. Finally, she opened the door. The bathroom echoed with pounding footsteps as everyone hurried to class, then . . . silence. I remained frozen, straining to hear the slightest sound of a student, or worse, a teacher, approaching. But there was only the occasional drip from a faucet. Everyone

was in homeroom. I let out a sigh of relief. And almost peed.

It was time to find out if my nightmare was over or only just beginning. I slowly unzipped the front pouch of my backpack and winced as the sound reverberated off the tiled walls. Even though I was alone, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone would know what I was about to do. I reached deep into my backpack, felt around the pens and broken pencils scattered at the bottom, and found what I'd hidden there. I sat back down and studied the object in my hand. It felt heavier than I remembered.

I'd read the instructions last night. Then again when I woke up. And once more after breakfast. I was nothing if not a good student. But now that the moment had come, my throat constricted with panic. What if I missed the stick? What if I did it wrong? I only had one of these and I couldn't mess it up. I took a deep breath. I had a freakin' 4.56 GPA, a membership in the National Honor Society, and was going to Brown University in the fall. I could damn well pee on a stick.

I ripped open the thick foil and pulled out the pregnancy test. The little plastic window stared back at me, blank, waiting to tell my fate. Trying not to think of what I was about to do, I stuck the thing between my legs and peed.

For a moment I was lost in the bliss of a rapidly emptying bladder, then a stab of panic struck. I'd forgotten a step. The instructions had said to pee a little first and *then* stick the test down there. Would not doing that invalidate the results? I

looked down to see if the test was working. The fibrous wick was soaked, and the little plastic window was turning a light gray. Was it supposed to do that? Or did that mean I'd broken it? Should I stop peeing?

Then, in the window, a thin pink line began to appear. My stomach dropped, until I remembered the little pamphlet had called it a control line. Two lines needed to appear to indicate pregnancy. I hoped the line meant the test was working right. Especially since I was out of pee. Careful to keep the test as flat as possible—as per the instructions—I pulled it from between my legs. Three minutes. I could read the results in three minutes. They were going to be the longest three minutes of my life.

I looked anywhere but at the little window. I wasn't the type to fix my makeup obsessively or smoke illicit substances, so the girls' bathroom wasn't exactly a place I'd spent a lot of time in over the last four years. Forty-five seconds of staring at the stall walls told me I hadn't missed much. The only thing to distract me was one mildly amusing caricature of our principal and several dire warnings about the diseased genitals of the football team—no surprise there. I dared a peek at the test. Still one line.

Hope exploded in my chest. Maybe I was just late. Maybe this was me panicking over nothing. Like when I thought I'd bombed the second essay on my AP English test. Even though I hadn't fully elucidated the thematic similarities between

Camry, her seat leaned way back, she gave me a lazy wave. Emily wrinkled her nose.

"Ugh. What does Walmart Greeter Class of 2020 want with us?"

"Right there's the reason I'm not leaving that cabin until I've got my calc notes memorized." Kaylee pulled out her textbook. "No way am I ending up like that."

Jocelyn turned to me. "Weren't you, like, friends with her in junior high or something?"

Emily's eyes widened. "I totally forgot! Didn't she get arrested on our field trip to the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum last year?"

"I heard she carved her name on a wagon," Kaylee added.

"No, she stole a bonnet," Emily countered.

"Who cares? You were friends, right? She came to your birthday party freshman year." Jocelyn persisted. I felt my friends' eyes on me, waiting for an answer.

"Only because my mom made me invite her. But we weren't, like, close. Because, you know, she's a total psycho," I said, making a little airily gesture with my finger around my ear. The girls laughed.

I immediately regretted my words. There was no good reason I shouldn't have told the truth. My friends wouldn't have cared. So why did I?

Ten minutes later, I climbed out of the back of the van and trudged up the cracked asphalt driveway to my front door. My

dad was already home. His Ford was in the driveway, its bumper plastered with "My child is an honor student at Jefferson High" stickers.

Carefully opening the front door so it didn't squeak, I tiptoed through the foyer and up the stairs to my room. I flipped open my laptop and quickly scanned through every social media platform I could think of, searching for Bailey's profile. But it turned out she really was a rebel. The only thing I found was an old Facebook page, and the only thing on it was a picture of Bailey giving the finger. I sighed, feeling some of the tension in my stomach unspool.

Then with trembling fingers, I typed the two words I'd known I'd type as soon as I saw those little pink lines. Abortion. Clinic.

The sun had set and my room was lit only by the glow of my laptop screen, bathing my hands in an eerie blue light. I was limp with exhaustion. Typing those words had been the easiest part of the process. I'd spent the last few hours wading through outdated information and misleading sites. Finally, I had my answer.

There was a clinic two hours away. I was saved.

I could see my future again. Meeting my new roommate at Brown. Studying late in the library. Debating with my professors. An eventual internship. Graduation. A career in a big city. A downtown loft. Fancy shoes. A roomful of people listening

to me as I led them through a meeting. Drinks after work. My own Netflix account. But my phone lay beside me untouched. I couldn't seem to type in the number. What would happen if I didn't?

A baby cried. I jerked away from my laptop, startled.

"Ronnie, come down to dinner. Your sister's here," my mom called. I slammed my laptop closed and hurried downstairs.

At the dinner table I sat in the seat I'd been sitting in since I could remember, right under the sign asking God to "Bless This Mess," next to my dad. My gingham cushion on the old oak spindle chair was stained and so thin I might as well have been sitting on wood at this point. The room smelled of the thousand casserole dinners that had been served in it over the years. The whiff of chicken and cheese was faintly comforting, especially since at that moment the decibel level in the room was somewhere between rock concert and airport tarmac.

My little brother, Ethan, was on my dad's phone, blasting sounds blaring from its tiny speakers. My five-month-old niece was screaming as Melissa, my sister, tried to shove a bottle in her mouth. Next to her, my two-year-old nephew was throwing goldfish crackers on the floor, yelling, "Find Nemo! Find Nemo!" My brother-in-law was chasing their oldest kid, Logan, around the table, begging him to sit down. Logan had some sort of robot that was flashing lights and making laser noises. Through all this my dad just sat there, sipping his beer. My mom entered wearing a bright smile and carrying a

creamy chicken noodle bake.

"Shall we say grace?"

We all held hands, my oldest nephew wrangled into his chair by his father threatening to take away Mr. Roboto. My dad held my hand firmly. It was big and rough and familiar.

"Dear Lord," my mom began, "thank you for this meal—"

"Logan! Get back in your seat!" Melissa screamed. My nephew had slid under the table. I could feel him playing with the laces of my shoes.

"And thank you, Lord," my mother continued unperturbed, "for blessing our daughter Veronica with her acceptance to Brown. The first in our family to go to college." My dad squeezed my hand, his eyes sliding over to meet mine, a small smile twitching his lips upward.

"Logan! Right now! One! Two!" my sister counted.

My mom yelped and grabbed her leg. "Logan, don't bite Grandma. It's not nice."

"Just give him a kick," my dad muttered, but I think I was the only one who heard him.

"Petel Control him!" my sister snapped as the baby took that moment to spit up on herself. My dad laughed, then tried to turn it into a cough.

"Amen," my mom finished, and dipped a serving spoon into the casserole. "Who's first?"

The rest of the dinner went reasonably well, with only a minimum amount of noodle bake thrown at the wall by little

Logan. We'd moved on to ice cream sundaes when my sister stood, clearing her throat.

"We have a little announcement to make."

"You're finishing your nursing degree?" I asked.

"No," my sister giggled, then added, beaming, "We're pregnant!" My mom immediately jumped to her feet with an ear-piercing screech of joy. My dad exhaled, long and slow, and seemed to sink a little farther into his chair. I saw his eyes slide over to my hand, as if reassuring himself my purity ring was still there, before pasting on a smile and managing a hearty "congratulations" for my sister.

I twisted the ring on my finger, feeling its familiar whorls and grooves. It had been my dad's idea. I'd leaped at it, eager to stand in front of my church and make a promise that had meant next to nothing when I was twelve, just so I could show him I was better than my sister.

I wasn't supposed to know, of course, but I'd heard the arguments. Our house was small and the walls thin. Vision of devoted motherhood that she was now, Melissa got started a little earlier than anyone in my family would care to admit. When she'd cried to my parents that night, she'd only known Pete a few weeks, and she'd just started her nursing degree.

Dad didn't yell. He left that to my mom. No, my dad was calm but immovable. As far as he was concerned, my sister was a parent now, and her needs would always come second to her children's. That's what he and my mother had done for us.

Every argument Melissa made, my dad countered with love. With comfort. He promised help. Money, babysitting, whatever they needed. Finally, he'd begged, his voice thick with tears. By the weekend my sister was engaged and smiling, whatever plans she'd had for her life forgotten. How can someone's dreams withstand that much love?

I knew mine couldn't.

Of course, my dad probably didn't anticipate my sister's complete lack of parenting skills.

I felt a tug on my jeans and looked down. Logan was under the table, grinning, a baby carrot shoved halfway up his nose. I stood, my chair scraping the wood as I shoved it back.

"May I be excused?"

Five minutes later I was sitting in my closet, my laptop on my knees, phone in hand. A high school career's worth of formal dresses surrounded me like a cocoon, the scratchy lace of my homecoming dress brushing my cheek, the smooth satin of my prom dress sliding against my arm. They still smelled faintly of perfume and hairspray. I breathed in the scent and tried to slow my pounding heart. I was hoping my closet would provide a little extra soundproofing for the call I was about to make. I pushed the final digit of the number and held the phone to my ear. An automated voice answered. I was relieved. Maybe I wouldn't have to talk to anyone. I selected the appropriate number and waited.

"Planned Parenthood. How may I help you?" My breath

caught in my throat. The words wouldn't come. "Hello?" the voice on the other end of the line asked.

"Hi, I, uh, need to make an appointment." I cringed at how small my voice sounded.

"And what is this appointment regarding?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, as if that would somehow keep me from hearing the words I needed to say. "I need . . ." But I couldn't say it. If I did, it would make it real. "I'm doing a report on abortion and I, uh, wanted to speak to a doctor."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. It seemed to go on forever, but couldn't have lasted more than a second. Within that second I could feel the shame and terror I'd stuffed down deep inside me well up, ready to burst out. Luckily, before I could dissolve into a puddle of choking sobs, the operator spoke.

"Honey, how old are you?"

"Seventeen." There was another pause. A longer one.

"You can get an appointment to see a doctor for your 'report,' but in the state of Missouri you need a parent's permission if you're under eighteen. Is that going to be possible for you?" For a long moment all I could do was sit in my cocoon of sequins and satin, taking quick, shallow breaths while something inside me shattered.

"No. I don't think that will be possible. Is there, uh, any way . . ."

"You can petition the court, but that can take a while. And you'll probably need a lawyer." She said it gently, but I got the sense that she'd had this conversation more than once and knew exactly how laughable her suggestion was.

"Oh. Okay. I don't think I'll be doing that. The report's not that important. Um, thanks for your help." My finger was sliding to the end call button when the operator spoke again.

"There are other places where you don't need parental permission for your . . . report." My finger froze over the button.

"There are?"

"Yes. Where do you live?"

"Columbia."

The line went quiet while she accessed something on her computer. "It looks like the closest place for you is in Albuquerque."

"There's an Albuquerque in Missouri?" I asked, confused.

"No."

"Oh." I cleared my throat, nervous. "Um, about how far away is that from Columbia?"

"Nine hundred and ninety-four miles."

**Kevin: Three days without you. Not sure I'll survive.**

I got the text from Kevin while studying the route from my house to the ~~Planned Parenthood~~ in Albuquerque. The Planned Parenthood operator had been right. It was the closest location. A