

BEING SPECIAL

By Jenny Robson

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CHAPTER 1

I think I'm pregnant! Imagine! I'm still getting used to the idea. Every time I think about it, I get this sudden burst of excitement that explodes and fills up my whole chest. And a little bit of panic. Of course there is panic.

It's been six weeks now since I last had my – well, you know what. So that means I am two weeks overdue. That's the first sign of pregnancy, isn't it? And usually I'm quite regular. Well, I have been for this past year. I still asked my mom to get me some – well, you know what – from the supermarket. Just so my mom wouldn't start getting suspicious.

I'm lying in the bath, looking down at my flat stomach, imagining how it will look as it gets bigger. Imagining what amazing things are happening inside it right now. A real baby, growing and growing, developing in there all on its own, with tiny hands and tiny feet and its heart already starting to beat to its own rhythm. How strange and special is that? Or is it too early for that? I will have to check on the Internet.

Don't get me wrong. I also feel scared. But right now, the excitement part is much stronger. Much more real.

Will it be a boy or a girl? I think I want it to be a girl, a little mini-me with my dimples and my nicely-shaped mouth. But I hope her eyes are like Vincent's eyes: dark and gentle. That was what made me fall in love with Vincent right from the start – those beautiful eyes of his. I looked up into them the first time and I could hardly bear to look away.

But whatever she looks like, I will love her. From the bottom of my soul. And she will love me. Imagine how special that will be – to have someone else to love completely, and to be the centre of someone else's whole world! Oh, and I will hold her and cuddle her. I can almost feel her in my arms. How will I ever be able to put her down, even when she is sleeping?

"Tumi?" my mom calls through the bathroom door. "Tumi, how long are you going to be in there? Don't forget you still have homework."

"Getting out now, Mama," I call back. But it takes me ages to dry myself and put on my pyjamas. I keep stopping, forgetting what I am supposed to be doing.

Names! I will have to choose a name for my baby. Agnes after my grandmother who is late, but she was always so good to me? Or maybe something like Beyonce or KeSha? Something radical and modern. Or Brenda after my most favourite singer in the whole world? Or maybe something traditional to show I am proud of my roots?

I suppose Vincent must decide with me. That is only fair. Or maybe he can choose the name if it's a boy and I get to choose the name if it's a girl? Oh wow! So many exciting things to think about. This is surely the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me in my whole life!

“Tumi! Come on now!” Mama is calling through the door, sounding stern.

So I quickly finish up. Get my gown on and sit on my bed with my school bag.

“What homework have you got, Tumi?”

I show my mom. It's an assignment from Mr Ndwapi – but he has given us a week to complete.

Mom takes a look at the assignment. But then she lifts her face to frown at me: “Tumi, what is going on?”

I can feel my heart beating faster. “What do you mean, Mama?”

“Is there a problem, Tumi? You've been acting strange these past few days. You don't seem yourself. You know you can tell me anything and I will do my best to help you. You know that, don't you? Is it school? Has something happened there?”

“No, school is fine,” I answer. Almost, almost, I blurt out that I am pregnant and excited and afraid all at the same time. But

the moment passes. Not yet, I tell myself. Let me keep it a secret for a little while longer.

My mom gives me a long, searching, worried look. “Please, Tumi, please don’t tell me that you’re...” She doesn’t finish her sentence.

“Tell you that I’m what, Mama?” I ask. It feels like my heart is going to burst right out of my chest. Has my mom guessed my secret already?

CHAPTER 2

But my mom just shakes her head. She says, “No, nothing. I’m just being silly. You get on with your assignment, sweetheart.”

Mr Ndwapi wants us to plan a business, something entrepreneurial. Something new and exciting, providing either goods or services. Something that people will want to hand over money for.

Mr Ndwapi is very keen on entrepreneurship. “That’s the employment of the future, people,” he always says. “Don’t wait around for someone to give you a job. Get out there and make your own job!”

So I sit on my bed, struggling to think of some goods or services that I could provide. It’s difficult though. All I really want to think about is my little baby. Beyonce. I can almost see her here, lying beside me, wrapped in a pink blanket, sleeping peacefully while I work. I can almost smell her sweet baby smell.

In the end I give up on my assignment. It's just too hard to think straight. But I still have another six days. No sweat.

I lie in the darkness, listening to my mom's sewing machine purring. She makes clothing for extra cash, in her spare time.

And how will she react when I tell her I'm pregnant? Will she be angry and shout at me and tell me I am a foolish child?

Will she say, "Don't think I'm going to support you as well as a grandchild. If you think you are so grown up, go and get yourself a job and support yourself." Will she throw me out of the house? That happened to my friend Naledi.

Or perhaps Mama will weep. "How many times have I warned you? You should have listened. What about your schooling, Tumi? You were doing so well and now you will have to give up your dreams for university. Once you are a mother, you will have no time for school."

The thought makes me want to cry too.

But no, I reckon Mama will be happy once she gets over the shock. I know it will be a shock at first. Of course. But later she will say, "A new baby is always a blessing. How wonderful. I have been longing for a grandchild. Yes, and Tumi, I will be by your side all the way, supporting you. I will take care of little Beyonce so you can continue with your schooling."

Yes, I think that's what Mama will say. Because my older sister Ludo has never had children. She is a researcher at the

University and she is not interested in ever being a wife and mother. She makes my mom cry sometimes.

So yes, I think Mama will be happy about having a grandchild – and she will not care what the neighbours say. I go to sleep smiling. For some reason, I dream of when I was a little girl and my mom made me a beautiful outfit: a traditional Xhosa outfit in bright orange, with white and black trims.

And when I wake next morning, I know exactly what my business will be for Mr Ndwapi's assignment. Yes! My business will make and sell traditional outfits for babies and little children. How cute will that be?

At breakfast I am telling my mom all about my idea. She smiles at me.

“Tumi, I am so happy about your studies. You make me so proud.”

But suddenly I feel sick. I look down at the scrambled egg my mom has cooked for me and my stomach heaves. I have to rush to the bathroom. I vomit until my stomach aches and I am left feeling weak and shaky.

“Tumi?” says my mom. I can hear the worry in her voice. “What is wrong? I hope you aren't getting the flu.”

My mom goes into a panic whenever I am sick. It has been this way since I was little.

CHAPTER 3

I can see the worry in my mom's eyes. For one mad second I want to tell her that it may be morning sickness, just to stop her worrying. But no. The thought is too frightening.

So I lie. I say, "It is probably that pie I shared with Victoria yesterday. It tasted strange."

"Well, I hope you feel better soon, my angel," says my mom. At least she doesn't sound so worried now.

My angel! Mama calls me that often. Yes, and that's what I will always call my little daughter too. It makes me feel special when my mom calls me that. And more than anything else, I want my little girl to feel special. Always. Since she is already making me feel special.

The moment I think about her, all the fear and panic disappears. And only the excitement and the joy stay behind.

At the school gates I meet up with my friends.

"Tumi, what are you smiling about so?" asks my very best friend, Victoria. She is Vincent's sister.

"It's a secret," I say still smiling. "You guys will know soon enough."

"I bet I know," says Maria. "Oh yes, I can tell just looking at you."

“What?” I ask. And my heart is back to pounding in my chest. If Maria knows, then soon everyone in the school will know. Maria has a heart of gold, but she is the world’s worst gossip. She just can’t help herself. And if the whole school knows, how long before my mom gets to hear it? Two of our teachers attend the same church as my mom.

“What?” I ask again. I am glaring at Maria now.

She giggles. “Don’t have a fit, girlfriend. I just reckon you have a great idea for Mr Ndwapi’s assignment. Am I right?”

I nod, lying again. This being pregnant is like being on a rollercoaster. Up and down and up and down: full of joy one minute, crazy with panic the next. I don’t know how much longer I can cope.

And there is Vincent, at the gate with his friends. He gives me a big wink when the other guys aren’t looking. It is our secret sign. I wink back at him. He is so handsome and I am so lucky he belongs to me. If he ever dumped me, my heart would break into a million pieces.

All through our Science lesson, I am thinking about Vincent. I don’t hear a word Mr Abrahamse says. But Mr Abrahamse doesn’t notice. He is getting too carried away at the white board, with his chemical formulae.

Should I tell Vincent before I tell my mom? And when shall I tell him? Surely not here at school? Maybe this weekend when we go down to the river with our friends.

But what will his reaction be? I am not sure at all.

Maybe he will be very angry. “Pregnant, Tumi? How can you be pregnant? You told me it was safe. You said it was a good time and we didn’t need to use a condom. Have you done this on purpose, just to mess up my life?”

Or maybe he will refuse to have anything more to do with me. “I’m too young to be a father. I want to have fun and enjoy being a teenager, not get dragged down by responsibilities and serious stuff. You’re on your own, Tumi. This is all your fault anyway.”

And that is true. I read up about safe times on the Internet. And when we hooked up, I was so sure it was a safe time of my monthly cycle. I mean, I sat with the calendar, carefully counting days. Then double-checking.

So yes, it is my own fault. And what if he is so angry that he breaks up with me? And I am left all alone and pregnant? How could I bear that?

But no. I don’t think so. Vincent is the most loving, decent guy. Even Victoria agrees with me and she knows him better than anyone.

So I think he will say, “It’s okay, Tumi. We will get through this together. I will be by your side all the way and we will love and care for our little baby together.”

Maybe he will even feel as excited and special as I feel. Maybe, maybe he will even ask me to marry him so that our baby can have a family. That happened with another girl from

school, Mmegi. She got pregnant and her boyfriend married her straight away. But the difference was that her boyfriend was older and out of school and with a good job.

CHAPTER 4

When I get home, Mama is still worried about me. “I panic when you are sick, Tumi. Shall I take you to the doctor, my angel?”

But I tell her that I am feeling way, way better. Then I ask her to help me with my assignment. That way she’ll forget her idea of taking me to the doctor. Because I am sure the doctor will easily guess what is wrong with me.

So we sit at the table and Mama shows me how to draw designs of the baby clothes I want to sell. She gets out a book with traditional outfits from various cultures. I love spending time like that with my mom. And all the while, I am imagining how it will be with baby Beyonce here too. She will be sitting on my lap, cuddled up in a pretty pink babygro, making cute baby noises, resting her tiny head against my chest. How lovely that will be! For a moment I long so much for her that I wish she was here right now. Right this minute! And that I don’t have to wait months and months for her to arrive. Nine months, right? Well nine months minus two weeks.

Mama says, “Have you thought about a name yet?”

For one crazy moment I think Mama is talking about the baby. But of course she is talking about my business.

“I’ll need time for that,” I say. “It has to be something really special.”

And in bed that night, just as I am falling asleep, the best name just comes into my mind. Boom! Just like that! ‘Rad and Trad’. Yes, ‘Rad and Trad’. Rad for radical and Trad for traditional.

I go to sleep with my hands spread across my stomach, whispering, “Goodnight, my little Beyonce. Good night, Mommy’s brightest angel.”

And next morning at breakfast, I get sick in my stomach again. I understand about morning sickness. Your body is busy making space for a whole new little human being. How amazing is that?

But my mom is really worried now. “No, Tumi. Now we must get you to a doctor. I don’t like this at all. As soon as you come home from school, alright my angel?”

I try to argue. I try to tell her that now I feel much better. But she will not listen.

So when I get to school today, I am not smiling.

My best friend Victoria is also worried. “What is it, Tumi? What’s happened? Have you and Vincent broken up or something?”

For a moment I am tempted to tell her that in a few months time, she will be an auntie. The thought cheers me up at once. See? Just like a rollercoaster. Up and down and up again. No wonder my stomach is upset!

Because: imagine that! What could be more perfect than my baby having my best friend for her auntie? Or his auntie! I must be careful, I tell myself. If it is a little boy, I don't want him to feel like he was second best. Maybe I must start thinking about a boy's name too.

I am going to be the best mother in the world, I tell myself with a smile. Yes, I will get it just right. I will look up on the Internet for everything I need to know.

But then I remember about the doctor's visit this evening and I feel awful all over again.

CHAPTER 5

In the end, we don't go to the doctor.

Mama says, "I was sick in my stomach too, Tumi. Today as I got to work. So maybe we both have a stomach bug. Let's wait and see if we're better in a few days."

I am relieved to hear that. But I think I must check for myself if I am definitely pregnant. I know they have testing kits at our chemist. I've seen them there. Yes, I will get a testing kit and then I will know for sure. And then I will tell Vincent and my mom. I must get this part over with so I can stop feeling so confused and crazy.

Vincent phones me just then. "Hi, beautiful," he says. But he sounds worried. "Are you okay? You looked a bit stressed out at school today. And Victoria tells me you weren't your usual cheerful self. What's the problem, baby?"

“We’ll talk about it at the weekend,” I say. “Down at the river.”

Now he sounds even more worried. “Oh Tumi, you aren’t going to dump me, are you? Have you met someone else?”

“Of course not!”

“Cause I’m telling you, beautiful, I don’t know how I would go on without you.”

It is so lovely for me to hear that. And surely that just goes to prove that he will stand by me? That he will man up and be a good daddy to his little daughter. Or his little son.

I say, “Vincent, I promise, I couldn’t go on without you either.”

“So what is it, Tumi? Just please don’t tell me that you’re pregnant!” he says. But now he is laughing as if that is the craziest, most impossible idea.

So I say nothing. I just laugh along with him. Lying again, by keeping quiet.

“Okay then. I’ll wait till the weekend. Love you. Bye!” he says, the way he always does.

“Love you too.”

Mama and I sit together after supper. And she shows me how to make a little traditional outfit, a really small size. It looks

absolutely adorable. I can just imagine my little Beyonce wearing it. How cute she would look!

Mama says, “This assignment of yours is going to be great, Tumi. I bet Mr Ndwapi will give you high marks. But what we really need is a baby.”

For a moment I feel confused and panicky. Why is Mama saying that?

But no – it’s nothing to worry about. Mama continues. “If we could put this outfit on a baby and take a few photos, that would be perfect to hand in with your assignment. ‘Rad and Trad’ – I really like that name!”

I remember about Naledi’s baby and tell Mama. “I’ll take the outfit there tomorrow,” I say. “I’m sure Naledi will be happy to see me.”

Next day I have the outfit in a packet. The beads are clicking together as I walk. But first I go to the chemist. Yes, there they are: a whole shelf full of pregnancy test kits. Just then Mrs Dube, Mama’s friend from church, walks by. So I pretend I am looking at body lotions instead. I leave the chemist without buying anything. And then I head for Naledi’s place.

Naledi lives in a backyard shack with her baby. Her grandmother threw her out of the house when she found out she was pregnant. Her grandmother said she was already struggling to feed and clothe five grandchildren on her pension and very little else. So there was no money for a sixth person.

I wonder how things are going for Naledi.

CHAPTER 6

I can hear the baby crying even before I reach the shack door. And there is Naledi, sitting on the bed beside her baby. I catch my breath in shock.

Her hair is wild. Her clothes are a mess. And her eyes look dull and hopeless. I can hardly believe this is the same girl I knew last year. She was about the prettiest girl in the class. She was a lead dancer for the traditional dance group. She was a drum majorette – and only a few special girls get chosen for Mrs Thebe’s drum majorette troupe.

I try to smile. “So? Is it a boy or a girl?” I ask.

“A boy,” says Naledi and picks him up in her arms. He carries on screaming and arching his back.

“What’s his name?”

“Joel. But I don’t know what’s wrong. He’s been crying all night.”

“Maybe you should take him to the clinic?”

Naledi shrugs. “Yeah, right. Where am I supposed to get extra money for taxi fare?” But at least Joel has stopped screaming.

“So how is school?” she asks. “Man, I can’t tell you how much I miss school. And all my friends. And dance practices.”

I say, “Well, at least you have Joel. At least you have a cute little baby.” What else can I say?

But now Naledi is crying. Tears run down her cheeks. “Crazy. That’s what I thought when I was pregnant. I thought it would all be so lovely, you know, having my own little baby to cuddle. Being able to dress him up. Just like in all the TV adverts. Well, real life is not a TV advert, that’s for sure. Real life as a teenage mom sucks. It sucks big time! You tell all those girls at school, Tumi. Tell them to be careful and abstain. Or else use protection. Tell them having a baby is a nightmare.”

I pat her shoulder. I try not to let her see the dismay on my face. But it won’t be like this for me. No ways. My mom will never throw me out the house. My Beyonce won’t be crying and screaming all the time. I won’t let myself turn into a hot mess and stop caring how I look. And for sure I’ll keep going to school. Yes, we’ll work something out: me and Mama and Vincent.

Then Naledi says the most appalling thing: “I should have had an abortion.”

I look at her in horror. How can she say such a thing, sitting there with baby Joel in her arms? How can she even think such a thing?

“Don’t look at me like that, Tumi,” she says. “It’s legal. It’s not against the law.”

I can’t help myself. I say, “What does it matter if it’s legal or not? It’s murder.”

Naledi glares at me. “Oh yes, that’s easy for you to say. It’s easy for you to act all holy and self-righteous. You don’t know what it’s like trying to keep a baby fed and clothed with no money. You don’t know what it’s like to lose everything. My life is destroyed, Tumi. I feel like my future has been murdered. My future and all my dreams. I wanted to be a model, you know. But look at me now. No chance!”

I empty out my purse onto the bed for her. All my money. Then I run out of there, out of the shack and the backyard. With the beads in my packet clattering against one another wildly. I run from the sound of Naledi’s baby who is screaming again.

CHAPTER 7

I handed in my assignment on time. And today Mr Ndwapi is going to give us our marks.

I’ve only been sick two mornings this past week. And both times I managed to do it without my mom noticing. But I have made up my mind: today I am getting a pregnancy testing kit. I don’t care who is walking around the chemist. I don’t care who sees. I need to know for sure.

Ever since I visited Naledi, I have been having nightmares and I wake with my arms wrapped around my stomach and tears running down my cheeks.

I’m sitting in our English class next to Victoria when suddenly I feel familiar cramps in my stomach. I cannot believe this! Quickly I excuse myself and rush to the cloakrooms. And yes,

it is true. The proof is there clear as daylight – well, you understand what I mean. I am definitely not pregnant!

For a long time I stare at myself in the mirror there. I tell myself I should feel relieved. No more worrying about telling Vincent or Mama, no more worrying about how they will react. No more crazy rollercoaster of excitement followed by fear followed by joy followed by panic. Yes, I have had a lucky escape! I should feel grateful.

But all I feel is sad. Heart-broken, actually. I am no longer special, no longer Beyonce’s mother-to-be. Now I am just ordinary: an ordinary teenage schoolgirl in an ordinary school uniform about to go back to an ordinary desk in an ordinary classroom.

Next lesson is with Mr Ndwapi. He leaves my assignment marks for last. Then he announces, “The highest marks go to Tumi for her fascinating baby-clothing business idea: Rad and Trad.”

Around me everyone is clapping, Victoria especially. And by break time, Vincent has heard about my triumph too. He comes across to talk to me.

“Hey, beautiful! Great job! I’m really proud of you.” And yes, I can see the pride shining there in his beautiful eyes as he looks down on me.

I understand suddenly that I have lots to make me feel special. Like producing a top-class assignment, like having a gorgeous boyfriend who calls me ‘beautiful’ and a loving

mother who calls me 'my angel'. And the most special best friend in the world.

Yes, being a mother myself and having a baby can wait. Something special to look forward to, sometime in the distant future. After I have finished school and my studies.

What I must do now is go to the clinic and find out all about contraception, find out about ways that are safer and surer than what day of the month it is. I wonder if Vincent will come with me? Or will he feel too embarrassed? But that would be something really special: him and me together talking to a counsellor like two careful, sensible teenagers who value their future.

Yes, I will ask him this weekend.

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