



THE BILLIONAIRE'S
LEGACY

Reese Ryan

MILLS & BOON
Desire

Reese Ryan
The Billionaire's Legacy

“Just for tonight.”

Until their chance reunion takes a sharp turn...toward twins.

Tech billionaire Benjamin Bennett can't resist a steamy weekend with Sloane Sutton—his crush on her goes *way* back. But when he tracks her down, she's pregnant—with twins! Now their fling needs trust to survive. Benji wants a wedding; his family claims she's a gold digger. But Sloane won't be bought—or married. Can they find common ground...and a shot at forever?

REESE RYAN writes sexy, deeply emotional romances full of family drama, surprising secrets and unexpected twists.

Born and raised in the Midwest, Reese has deep Tennessee roots. Every summer, she endured long, hot car trips to family reunions in Memphis via a tiny clown car loaded with cousins.

Connect with Reese at ReeseRyanWrites on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook or at reeseryan.com/desirereaders.

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MILLS & BOON

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To my best friend, entrepreneur, aesthetician, makeup artist, proprietor of The Brow Snob, a cancer survivor and an all-around badass Tonie Jones. I'm thankful you just celebrated another cancerversary, and that we're still friends three states, two marriages, four children, two grandchildren and thirty-five years later.

To the amazing readers who faithfully read my books, fall in love with my characters and share your enthusiasm for my work with your friends and family online and off...I'm so grateful to have you as a reader. I honestly can't thank you enough.

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Prologue

“Benji? Oh, my God, is that you?”

Benjamin Bennett shifted his attention to the source of the husky female voice he knew as well as his own.

“Sloane.” He hadn’t seen Sloane Sutton in nearly a decade yet he recognized her instantly. The passing years had been good to her; she was even more beautiful than he remembered. “I wasn’t sure you were coming to the wedding.”

Sloane wrapped him in a hug that seared his skin and sent electricity skittering down his spine. He released her reluctantly.

“I just decided a couple of days ago.” Sloane smoothed down the skirt of her brilliant blue, floor-length gown. It hugged her heart-stopping curves, showing off the glowing brown skin of one toned shoulder. “I didn’t even tell Delia I was coming.”

That explained why his sister hadn’t mentioned it.

“Well, it’s good to see you, Sloane. You look...incredible,” he stammered, his face and neck warm. The passage of time hadn’t lessened Sloane’s effect on him. He was as tongue-tied in her presence now as he’d been at fifteen.

His crush on her began the moment he’d first laid eyes on her. He was five years old and Sloane was ten.

“Thanks.” Sloane beamed. “You look pretty darned handsome yourself.”

“Blake must’ve been glad to see you.” Benji nodded toward the groom. He loosened the collar of his shirt, which suddenly seemed too tight.

“It’s good to see Blake so happy.” Sloane’s gaze softened, but sadness suddenly crept into her voice and clouded her brown eyes. “Savannah seems really sweet, and their baby, Davis, is adorable.”

“He’s a cute kid,” Benji acknowledged, shoving his hands in his pockets and shifting his weight to his other foot. “And Savannah is really sweet. You’ll like her.”

Getting to the altar hadn’t been easy for his cousin and Savannah. When they’d first met, Savannah was on a mission to infiltrate the company founded by Blake’s grandfather to prove that half of King’s Finest Distillery belonged to her family. But somehow, they’d managed to move past the pain and distrust to find love and happiness.

Sloane caught the eye of someone on the other side of the room and nodded. She turned back to him. “I’d better go, but we’ll catch up later.”

“Count on it.” Benji watched as she walked away.

Sloane Sutton.

Growing up, he’d adored Sloane. She and his sister, Delia, had been thick as thieves. He’d spent countless nights as a boy kept awake by their girlish giggles, heard through the thin wall between his and Delia’s bedrooms. Sloane had been everything to him, but she’d seen him as an honorary little brother.

She'd been a beautiful girl, but she'd grown into a stunning woman. When they were young, she'd had the toned body of a farm girl who was no stranger to physical labor; her lean, athletic body had given way to softer, fuller curves. The hair she'd worn in a thick, black braid down her back was now cut short on the sides with thick, glossy curls piled atop her head.

A small, barely there diamond stud adorned her left nostril. And when she'd turned to walk away, he'd noticed shooting stars tattooed on the back of her neck. The tattoo disappeared beneath the fabric, which dipped low between her shoulder blades.

"Better close your mouth and stop drooling or everyone will know you've still got a thing for Sloane Sutton," Parker Abbott, his best friend and first cousin, said matter-of-factly.

"I didn't have a *thing* for Sloane Sutton." Benji straightened his navy tuxedo jacket, hoping he wouldn't be struck by lightning for the whopper of a lie he'd just told.

Of course he'd had a thing for Sloane.

He'd been a red-blooded teenage boy and she was...well, she was Sloane Sutton. Confident, beautiful, funny, slightly irreverent.

She hadn't thought him strange because he preferred *Star Trek* marathons and sci-fi books to spending time playing outside. Nor had she ridiculed him for his fascination with computer programming and astronomy or his love of data. Instead, she'd told him how smart he was, and that one day he'd change the world. She'd said it with such confidence, she'd made him believe

it, too.

How could he not have had a thing for her?

"I know that reading people isn't my thing," Parker said, "but if *that* wasn't the very definition of having a thing for someone, I'll marry Kayleigh Jemison." He nodded toward the woman he'd escorted down the aisle during the wedding ceremony.

Parker and Kayleigh had been at each other's throats for as long as Benji could remember. But since Kayleigh was close friends with Parker's new sister-in-law, he'd been charged with escorting her down the aisle.

"Speaking of having a thing for someone." Benji chuckled.

"Me? Have a thing for Kayleigh?" Parker's cheeks colored, though he dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. "You must've fallen and banged your head."

The wedding photographer beckoned them, indicating it was time to join the rest of the wedding party for some group shots.

Benji was thankful for the distraction. Still, he couldn't help scanning the crowd, hoping to catch another glimpse of Sloane.

* * *

Sloane nibbled the gloss off her lower lip as she studied Benji from across the room. He took another sip of his beer, then laughed at something Parker said.

She could hardly believe that the incredibly sexy man whose muscular frame filled out his fitted tuxedo in ways that did wicked things to her was the shy, sweet little boy she'd once known.

When his gaze captured hers again, an inexplicable warmth settled low in her belly and her breath caught.

“Are you all right?” Her best friend, Delia, tilted her head. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were staring at someone at the bar.”

Delia turned to look over her shoulder, but was distracted as her father approached with her daughter in his arms. The two-year-old girl was as beautiful as Delia and generally just as sweet. At this moment, though, she was crying hysterically, demanding her mother.

“Evie, what’s wrong, sweetie?” Delia stood, taking her daughter into her arms.

“Your mother says she feels warm.” Richard Bennett said. “We were going to offer to take her home with us, but she’s insistent that she wants her mama.”

“It’s okay. Thanks, Dad.” Delia kissed the girl’s face and she seemed to immediately calm down. She leaned over and kissed Sloane’s cheek. “Sorry about this, hon. We’ll take up this conversation later. How long will you be in town?”

“I’ll probably head back to Nashville tomorrow, but don’t worry about me. We’ll talk later. Just take care of Evie.”

Sloane watched as Delia and Mr. Bennett made their way through the crowd. She sighed, eyeing her half-finished glass of bourbon punch.

With Delia gone, she felt alone—even in a room filled with people she’d known her entire life. Her family and the Abbotts

didn't run in the same circles. She just happened to have hit it off with Blake Abbott and his cousin Delia Bennett when they were in grade school. Blake was preoccupied, and Delia was on her way home with little Evie.

There was no reason to stay.

Sloane gulped the rest of her drink, returning the glass to the table with a thud. She stood, bumping into a solid expanse of muscle.

Benji.

He gripped her waist to steady her.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there." She took what she hoped was a subtle step backward. Just out of his reach, but still close enough to savor his provocative scent.

"It was my bad." Benji revealed the sheepish smile that had been his trademark as a kid. He rubbed a hand over his dark brush waves.

Sloane couldn't help smiling, remembering how obsessed Benji had been with perfecting them.

"It was good seeing you again, Benji." Sloane turned to leave, but he placed his strong hand on her arm.

"You're not leaving already, are you? I've been patiently waiting for a chance to catch up with you. My sister has been monopolizing your time all evening."

"You know how we are when we get together." Sloane smiled. "Not much has changed. We're still basically those same two giggling teenage girls."

"I'd say a lot has changed." Benji's heated gaze drifted down the length of her body, before returning to meet hers.

"I guess you're right." Sloane cleared her throat.

Some things certainly had changed.

Benji had always had a crush on her. There was nothing unusual about a little boy having a crush on his older sister's best friend. Back then, she'd thought it sweet. But Benji Bennett wasn't a little boy anymore. He was a grown-ass man and a fine one at that.

What she saw in his intense dark brown eyes wasn't the misguided admiration of a little boy. It was lust, plain and simple. The same feeling that crawled up her spine and made her heart beat faster.

His confident smile indicated that he could sense her attraction to him.

Pull it together, sister. This is little Benji Bennett you're gawking at here.

Benji had gone to college in Seattle, where he still lived. He'd started his own tech company in his junior year. A company he'd just sold for more than two billion dollars, according to Delia.

Benjamin Bennett was a catch by anyone's standards—even before you factored in his healthy bank account. But he was her best friend's little brother. And though he was all grown up now, he was just a kid, compared to her.

Flirting with Benji would start tongues wagging all over Magnolia Lake. Not that she cared what they thought of her.

But her mother and grandfather still lived here. So did Delia, for most of the year. If the whole town started talking, it would make things uncomfortable for the people she loved.

Sloane tore her gaze from his and scanned the room. "I'd better go."

"Don't go. Please. Just one dance." Benji held up a finger, his eyes warm and pleading, his smile sexy and sweet. Then he extended his hand. The same one she'd held when she'd helped him across the street on the way to school when he was five.

Sloane looked at him, then glanced around the space as she nibbled her bottom lip, her heart racing. No one was paying attention to them. The other guests were wrapped up in their own conversations and enjoying the open bar, courtesy of the Abbotts, owners of King's Finest Distillery.

"I guess one dance won't hurt." She placed her hand in his much larger one and let him lead her onto the dance floor.

Benji walked to the center of the dance floor and held her in his arms. He swayed to Jeffrey Osborne's smooth vocals on L.T.D.'s "Love Ballad."

"God, your parents loved this song. They played it so much that your sister and I hated it. Which is a shame, because it's a pretty perfect song."

"It is," he agreed. "You still working for the record company in Nashville?"

"I am. I love what I do, but I've got my eye on a spot on the management team."

“You’re the most determined girl I’ve ever known.” Benji smiled. “If you’ve set your sights on it, it’s as good as done.”

“Is that a nice way of calling me stubborn?” It was a familiar put-down from the older folks in town.

“No.” His tone was apologetic. “I hated when people said that about you.” He sighed softly. “I liked that you were determined. You wanted to move to Nashville and work in the music industry, and that’s exactly what you did. I’d say your determination has served you well.”

Warmth filled Sloane’s chest. Benji had grown up to be extremely wealthy and incredibly handsome, but at his core, he was the same sweet, thoughtful guy she’d always known. His gift for making her smile was still intact.

“Thanks, Benj. That means a lot.” Sloane was slightly unnerved by his intense gaze. “Which reminds me, I haven’t congratulated you on your big deal.” She was eager to turn the conversation away from her. “I should be asking for your autograph. Never met a billionaire before.”

The muscles of Benji’s back tensed beneath her fingertips and the light in his eyes dimmed. “I’m the same guy I was before I signed the big deal, Sloane. The same guy I’ve always been.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” She’d only meant to tease him, but she’d struck a nerve instead.

“I know you didn’t.” He sighed. “I’m just a little fed up with people treating me differently. You wouldn’t believe how many obscure business ideas I’ve been pitched tonight.”

She hadn't considered that there might be a downside to becoming a multibillionaire. But for her, never having to worry about how she'd pay second mortgages on her condo and their family farm would outweigh the disadvantages. "I'm sorry you've had to deal with that."

"Don't apologize. You're just about the only unattached woman in the room who doesn't see me as a golden lottery ticket." He nodded toward the gaggle of women in the corner of the room, whispering to one another and staring at him. "Not one of them would've given me the time of day back then. Their only interest in me was whether I could hook them up with one of my wealthy cousins. Now they've been stalking me all night. But you—I had to beg you to dance with me."

A knot tightened in her stomach. She had a good job and owned a cute little condo that she was slowly renovating in one of the hottest neighborhoods in Nashville. But she was in debt up to her eyeballs. Not because she was a frivolous spender addicted to retail therapy, but because she'd sunk every penny of her savings into helping her mother save their family farm. Then there were the bills that had been piling up since her grandfather's costly heart surgery.

Her budget was so tight it had practically squealed when she'd purchased the fancy dress she was wearing, despite finding it on the clearance rack at a designer dress shop.

If there was one thing she'd learned from her grandfather, Atticus Ames, it was pride. She'd work three jobs and sell plasma

before she'd ask Benji or anyone else in this town for a handout.

"I told you that one day they'd regret ignoring you." Sloane grinned. She honestly couldn't have been prouder of Benji if he'd been her own flesh and blood.

"You did." A soft smile played across his handsome face. "I was an awkward kid trying to figure out my place in life. But you always made me feel that just being me was good enough. You said that everyone else was just slow to catch up. That eventually they'd figure it out. You made me believe it, too."

Sloane's heart swelled. She was moved by his confession. "You were a special kid, destined for great things. I always knew that. And look at you... You've exceeded my wildest expectations."

He smiled, looking bashful, yet deliciously handsome. Her heart beat a little faster; she needed to change the subject.

"Evie's gotten so big, and she looks just like Delia. I'm surprised your parents aren't urging you to settle down and give them more grandchildren."

"You know them well." Benji grinned. "My mother sneaks into the conversation whenever she can. Don't get me wrong. Evie's a cool kid and everything, but 3:00 a.m. feedings and dirty diapers just aren't for me."

Sloane understood exactly how Benji felt. The primary reason her ex had filed for divorce was because he was ready to start a family but she wasn't. Though, truth be told, it was just one of the many reasons their marriage had failed.

"What about you? Are Davis and Evie giving you baby fever,

too?” Benji teased.

“Me?” She forced a laugh. “Between rehabbing my condo and being completely focused on my career, I forget to feed myself most days.”

True. Still, holding little Davis, with his chubby little legs and sweet baby scent, made her think for the briefest moment about one day having a baby of her own. A thought she dismissed immediately.

Finally, the song ended.

“Thanks for the dance.” Sloane slipped out of Benji’s embrace, determined to banish the inappropriate thoughts that had commandeered her brain and made her body ache for the warmth and comfort of his strong arms.

Benji lowered their joined hands but didn’t let go. Instead, he leaned down, his lips brushing her ear and his well-trimmed beard gently scraping her neck. “Let’s get out of here.”

It was a bad idea. A *really* bad idea.

Her cheeks burned. “But it’s your cousin’s wedding.”

He nodded toward Blake, who was dancing with his bride, Savannah, as their infant son slept on his shoulder. The man was in complete bliss.

“I doubt he’ll notice I’m gone. Besides, you’d be rescuing me. If Jeb Dawson tells me one more time about his latest invention —”

“Okay, okay.” Sloane held back a giggle as she glanced around the room. “You need to escape as badly as I do. But there’s no

way we're leaving here together. It'd be on the front page of the newspaper by morning."

"Valid point." Benji chuckled. "So meet me at the cabin."

"The cabin on the lake?" She had so many great memories of weekends spent there with Delia and her family.

"My parents hardly used it after they bought their place in Florida. I bought it from them a few years ago and Cole completely rehabbed it. I'd love for you to see it."

Just two old friends catching up on each other's lives. Nothing wrong with that.

She repeated it three times in her head. But there was nothing friendly about the sensations that danced along her spine when he'd held her in his arms and pinned her with that piercing gaze.

"Okay. Maybe we can catch up over a cup of coffee or something."

"Or something." The corner of his sensuous mouth curved in a smirk. A shiver ran through her as she wondered, for the briefest moment, how his lips would taste. "Meet you there in half an hour."

He disappeared into the crowd, leaving her missing his warmth.

* * *

Benji made two more cups of coffee and added creamer to Sloane's before setting the cup in front of her.

She thanked him and reached for her cup. But her eyes widened when she caught a glimpse of the time, flashing on her

fitness watch when she flipped her wrist. “I didn’t realize it was so late. You must be exhausted, and I’m keeping you up.”

“You can’t possibly think I want you to go.” Benji placed his hand on hers. “The last two hours were the best time I’ve had since I’ve been back in town.”

“Me, too.” Sloane smiled. A deep, genuine smile. Then she frowned, a crease forming between her brows as she slipped her hand from beneath his. She stood abruptly, smoothing her dress over her hips. “Which is why I should go.”

Benji stood, too, his eyes searching Sloane’s. For the first time in his life, Sloane Sutton wasn’t treating him like a little boy with a crush. Tonight, she saw him as a man. A man she desired.

He could see the passion in her brown eyes. Feel the heat that had been building between them all night.

When he was ten years old, he’d decided he was in love with Sloane because she was the nicest, prettiest girl he knew.

The passage of fifteen years hadn’t altered his opinion. With her standing this close, her luscious scent washing over him, his boyhood conviction was reinforced.

He wanted to be with this woman. To hold her in his arms. To tease every inch of her gorgeous body. Make love to her.

Get her out of his system once and for all, so he could stop living in the past.

They hadn’t seen each other in ten years. And in three days he’d be boarding a flight to Japan for the six-month-long consulting gig he’d agreed to when he sold his company. When it

was over, he'd return to Seattle and Sloane would be back home in Nashville. Who knew when they'd see each other again?

Speak now, Benj, or forever hold your peace.

Benji stepped closer, his gaze locked with Sloane's. She inhaled audibly, her body tensing as he leaned down and cradled her face. The sound of Sloane breathing and the frantic beat of his heart filled his ears.

Sloane didn't object to the intimate gesture. Her pupils dilated, and her chest rose and fell heavily. He moved in closer, and she leaned in, too. She pressed a hand to his chest and her eyes drifted shut.

He kissed her, easing into it at first, reveling in the softness of her lips and the way her body nestled against his. Her lips parted on a sigh, granting his tongue access. Her mouth tasted rich and sweet. Like premium bourbon and pecan pie.

As the urgency of his kiss escalated, Sloane's response matched his intensity.

Eager. Hungry. Demanding.

His heart thundered in his chest, his need for her building. He hauled her closer and groaned with pleasure at the sensation of his length pinned between them.

Sloane slipped her arms around him and tugged his shirt free from the back of his pants. Her fingernails scraped gently against his skin.

Benji groaned, hardening painfully as the sensation—part pain, part pleasure—heightened the euphoric feeling that

vibrated beneath his skin. Made him desperate to finally have her. He lifted her onto the table, nestling in the space between her thighs.

He swallowed her gasp in response to the sudden move, kissing her harder. Losing himself in the clash of lips and tongues and the delicious sensation of their bodies moving against each other, desperate for more contact than their clothing would permit.

He savored her intoxicating scent and relished the feel of her full breasts with their hardened peaks pressed against his chest.

She glided her fingertips down his stomach and fumbled with his belt buckle, loosening it.

“You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this,” he whispered, his lips brushing her ear.

Sloane’s hands froze. Her eyes opened and her gaze had shifted from one of intense desire to one of regret.

“Hey, beautiful.” Benji traced her cheekbone with his thumb. “Did I say something wrong?”

“I shouldn’t have come here, and we shouldn’t be doing this.” She lowered her gaze.

He was seconds away from making his boyhood fantasy a reality and he’d blown it, because he couldn’t keep his stupid mouth shut.

Way to go, Benj.

“Why not?” He spoke calmly, trying to put her at ease. “We’re consenting adults.”

“I’ve known you since you were five. You’re my best friend’s

little brother. I've introduced you as *my* little brother." She shook her head, her eyes still not meeting his. "This is bad. What would Delia say? And what would your parents think?"

"My mother will never believe anyone is good enough, and my sister adores you." Benji dropped a slow, lingering kiss on her lips.

"Because I'm her friend, who she trusts not to blow into town and screw her little brother." She jabbed him in the gut, but her lips parted to his tongue when he kissed her again.

"You're too young for me, Benji," she whispered against his lips as he slid the silky, blue material down her shoulder.

He kissed the shell of her ear. "Five years mattered then. It doesn't now."

"I'm not looking for a relationship, Benj." She pressed her hands to his chest, halting his movement as her gaze met his. Still, she hadn't moved an inch. Her legs framed his as she awaited his response.

"Neither am I," he said finally. "That doesn't mean we can't be together. I want you, Sloane. And I know you want me, too." He slowly tugged the zipper down her back. The silky, cobalt blue material slid from her shoulders, giving him better access. He trailed kisses down her shoulder and across the top of her breasts, exposed by a pale pink strapless bra. "Just for tonight."

She sucked in a deep breath and let the material slip down her arms and pool around her waist. Sloane unbuttoned his pants and inched the zipper down. The sound echoed off the solid oak

floors and shiplap walls. She leaned in to kiss him. “Just for tonight.”

* * *

Usually an early riser, Benji refused to leave the warmth of Sloane’s curves. Her naked bottom was nestled against him, making him painfully hard. Which gave him hope they’d pick up where they’d left off just a few hours earlier when sleep had finally pulled them under.

Starting at her neck, he planted gentle kisses to the shooting stars that tattooed the length of her spine. By the time he reached the stars inked between her shoulder blades, she stirred.

“Mmm. Nice way to wake a girl.”

He rolled her, so she was facing him. Her pebbled brown nipples betrayed her arousal. “I can think of an even better way to wake you.”

“Bathroom first,” she mumbled through the hand clamped over her mouth.

“Anything you need is in there.” He nodded toward the adjoining bathroom before dropping another kiss on her shoulder. “Just hurry back.”

When Sloane returned, he was seated with his back propped against the padded leather headboard. Her bashful smile slowly gave way to a determined one. Her eyes locked with his as she straddled him. Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she leaned in and kissed him, tentatively at first.

He fought the urge to take over. Instead, he let her dictate the

pace and manage the heat building between them. Sloane palmed his face and angled her head, her tongue gliding against his and her slick folds gliding along his heated flesh. She swiveled her hips, the pace and intensity of her movements more frantic.

Benji groaned with pleasure, losing all sense of control as he dug his fingers into the soft skin at her hip that bore a mandala tattoo with a rose at its center. He jerked her hips forward and then back. They were both getting closer to the edge, and he ached with the need to be inside her again. He flipped them over, so he lay atop her, and reached into the nightstand for a foil packet, fumbling to put it on.

He was desperate to get his fill of the woman who'd haunted his dreams since puberty. The only woman he'd ever really wanted.

Sloane wrapped her legs around him as he moved inside her. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders and her breath caught as she flew apart beneath him. His name rolled off her tongue as her muscles tensed, pulling him beneath the river of pleasure that washed over them.

Benji tumbled to the mattress, his skin slick with sweat and his breathing labored. He pulled her to him and kissed her damp forehead. "Come to Japan with me, Sloane."

The words he'd whispered impulsively into her hair took him by surprise. They'd agreed to one night together, not a six-month-long commitment.

Smooth, Benj.

His brain urged him to revoke the invitation. But everything below his neck desperately wanted her to say yes.

“Sure. It’ll be a blast. We can eat sushi every day, sing karaoke every night and ride the bullet train on the weekends. Besides, seeing the cherry blossoms in bloom is on my bucket list. Just give me a few hours to throw a travel bag together.”

“You’ll come with me?” Abject terror and genuine excitement battled in his chest. The way they did during the seconds when a roller coaster made its painfully slow ascent to the summit before plummeting toward the earth.

“Wait...” Sloane lifted her head from his chest and blinked, her head cocked. “You’re not serious, are you?”

His shoulders tensed. “Dead serious.”

“Benji, I can’t. I thought you understood that this was just...”

“A game?”

“Fun. A release. Two people being a little naughty for the weekend.” Sloane pulled the sheet around her, suddenly self-conscious. She sat up, her back against the headboard. “But us getting serious? That can’t happen. I thought you were clear on that.”

“I am, and that doesn’t have to change. But it was nice to wake up to someone who made me want to spend the day in bed.” He shrugged. “I haven’t had that in a long time.”

“Neither have I, but—”

“Then why not keep doing it? In Japan,” he added.

Sloane dragged her fingers through her messy curls and

huffed. “And while you’re working every day, what am I supposed to do? Lounge around, waiting for my sugar daddy to get home? No thanks, Benj. I’m not interested in being anyone’s kept woman. Not even a billionaire’s.” She climbed out of bed, taking the sheet with her as she wrapped it around her body and rummaged on the floor for her bra and panties. “Besides, I have a job and responsibilities, and I don’t have a passport. Never needed one.”

Benji dragged the remaining covers up to his waist. “I wasn’t thinking of the arrangement that way at all. We’d just be two friends hanging out.”

“And screwing. On your dime.” She looked at him pointedly. “Plus, you just called it ‘an arrangement.’ So if it looks like a duck and it quacks like a duck—”

She had a point.

He had just turned into *that* guy. The one who thought he could buy anyone and anything. Even the woman he adored.

“Point taken.” He cleared his throat. “Like I said, that wasn’t my intention.”

“I know it wasn’t. And I’m flattered you asked.” Her tone and her gaze softened. She gripped her blue dress to her chest as she approached him and brushed a soft kiss to his lips. “If the situation was different...” Sloane wouldn’t allow herself to finish the thought.

It was just as well. No point in musing about some alternate universe in which she would say yes.

Benji did the only thing there was left to do. He tugged her to him. Her dress tumbled to the floor, quickly joined by the pale pink bra and panties.

One

Six months later

Benji inhaled the scent of the roses, lilies and snapdragons overflowing his arms as he approached Sloane's building.

The edge of his mouth curled in a faint smile. Sloane had always loved the scent of the snapdragons his mother grew in their front yard.

He halted in front of the red door and drew in a deep breath.

It's just friends going out for coffee. No big deal.

At least that was the first step of his grand plan. He'd invite her to coffee where they could have a discussion on neutral ground about the possibility of picking up where they'd left off before he'd departed for Japan.

He'd casually inquired about Sloane during his absence, but his sister had been unusually tight-lipped about her friend, so he didn't press. It would only raise his sister's suspicions about why he was so interested.

So he'd simply told Delia that he needed Sloane's address for his Christmas list. Not a lie, but not the primary reason he was asking.

Benji had considered picking up the phone and calling Sloane while he was in Japan. But she'd been so adamant that walking away was the right thing to do. There was no way he would've

been able to persuade her with a long-distance phone call.

He'd kept himself busy with work, but when it was time to book his flight home, he realized he'd arrive on Valentine's Day.

It had seemed like a sign.

So instead of flying directly to Seattle, he'd booked a flight to Nashville. He needed to speak to Sloane in person.

Maybe he was crazy to believe there could be anything more between them. But dealing with Sloane's rejection would be a lot less painful than suffering a lifetime of regret.

Clutching the flower arrangement in one arm, he rang Sloane's buzzer.

"You looking for Sloane?" The woman in the unit across from Sloane's peered down from the balcony where she was sweeping. "She left a couple of hours ago, but if you have a delivery for her, I'll sign for it."

"Thank you." Benji tried not to sound as defeated as he felt. "But Sloane's an old family friend. I was hoping to deliver these in person."

"Then you're in luck." The older woman pointed toward a vehicle that had just turned down the lane next to the building. "That's her truck pulling around back."

Benji thanked the woman and made his way behind the building. Sloane had parked her car in the garage and was rummaging in her trunk.

He approached her silently, still replaying in his head exactly what he planned to say. Gripping the flowers in one arm, Benji

stopped a few feet short of where she stood. He shoved his free hand in his pocket.

“Hey, Sloane.”

“Benji?” Her body stiffened, and she glanced over her shoulder. “What are you doing here?”

Not the reception he’d hoped for. He forced a smile anyway.

“I wanted to surprise you for Valentine’s Day. I thought that, if you don’t already have plans, maybe we could do something together.” He cleared his throat when she still hadn’t turned around. “I flew straight here from Japan because I really needed to see you.”

“You shouldn’t have come.” She turned back to the groceries in her trunk. “This isn’t what we agreed to.”

“I know it isn’t, but—”

“You should go. Now. Please.” She arranged the grocery bags in her trunk into two rows, her back to him.

“Can’t we at least talk about this?” He hated that he sounded like a kid negotiating his bedtime with the babysitter. He was a grown man. A business owner. A self-made fucking billionaire whose business advice was in demand.

So why did he revert to a love-struck little boy whenever he was around Sloane?

“No.” Sloane stood up straight, abruptly smacking her head on the raised deck lid. She swayed, her body going limp.

“Sloane!” Benji dropped the flowers to the ground and surged forward, catching her before she hit the concrete.

"I've got you." He hoisted her into his arms. She was noticeably heavier than she'd been when he'd carried her to his bed six months ago.

Is that why she didn't want to see him? Was she self-conscious about her weight gain? She should know him well enough to realize that would never matter to him.

"Sloane. Sloane! Honey, are you all right?" His heart beat faster.

She was breathing but unresponsive.

Benji carried her to the passenger side of her car and put her in the seat to drive her to the hospital. He stretched the seat belt to put it over her, his gaze trailing down to her burgeoning belly.

"Sloane, you're... I mean...are you—"

"Pregnant?" The word came out as more of a moan as her eyes fluttered open. One hand moved to her belly and rubbed it in a soothing circle. "Yes."

"Exactly how pregnant are you?"

"Very." Sloane forced a weak laugh, then winced. When he didn't react, she cleared her throat and her expression grew serious, too. Her response was little more than a whisper. "Six months."

"Is it... I mean...am I..." He felt as if he were suffocating, unable to get the words out. He swallowed hard and tried again. "Is the baby mine?"

"I haven't been with anyone but you since my divorce, so my money is on you. I'm not really the immaculate conception type."

He narrowed his gaze at Sloane. How could she joke about the fact that he was going to be a father in just a few months and she hadn't even had the decency to let him know. "Were you ever going to tell me?"

"Honestly? I don't know." The sarcasm she'd been using as a shield evaporated, and he noticed that the corners of her eyes were suddenly damp. Her gaze didn't meet his. "That weekend, you made it pretty clear that you weren't the daddy type."

"What do you—" He stopped midsentence, recalling their conversation about his niece.

Evie's a cool kid and everything, but 3:00 a.m. feedings and dirty diapers just aren't for me.

"I was speaking in hypotheticals. As in, I had no immediate plans to have children. Not as in, I'm such a coldhearted bastard that I wouldn't want to know my own baby."

"Babies." Sloane emphasized the *s* at the end of the word as she reached up and rubbed the spot where the lid of the trunk had tagged her head. She grimaced.

"Twins?" Benji's voice reverted to the high pitch of a boy entering puberty. He cleared his throat and tried again. "We're having twins?"

Benji's gaze returned to her belly. For a moment he felt weak. As if everything was spinning around them.

"*I'm* having twins." Sloane's voice deepened as she gripped her belly and winced. "Hopefully not at this moment. It's too soon, but something doesn't feel right."

Benji felt the knot rising on her head, then touched her stomach, but drew his hand back. Despite everything they'd done that weekend, the simple act of touching her belly suddenly felt intrusive. Too intimate.

"I'm getting you to a doctor." He stretched the seat belt across her body and secured it, then demanded her keys.

She stared at him as if she wanted to give him the finger, but she reached into her pocket instead, and handed him the keys without a word.

Benji retrieved the bouquet he'd brought for Sloane from the ground and got into the driver's seat.

"Those are for me, I presume." Her voice was softer. Apologetic.

"Oh, yeah. Here." He handed her the flowers that looked the worse for wear after he'd clenched them in a Vulcan death grip and then dropped them to keep her from falling. "Happy Valentine's Day," he mumbled bitterly.

"Snapdragons." She whispered the word as she inhaled their scent. Suddenly tears were running down her face.

"Are you in pain?" He gripped her arm.

"Yes, but that isn't why I'm crying." She sniffled. "It's these stupid hormones and..." She sniffled again, louder this time. "You remembered that I like snapdragons."

Benji sighed and gave her a pained smile despite the anger that was burning inside his chest. "I remember everything about you, Sloane. No matter how damn hard I've tried to forget."

* * *

Benji's words hurt.

More than the physical discomfort of one of the twins bouncing on her bladder while her belly felt as if it was being squeezed in a vise.

He'd tried to forget her. Meanwhile, Benji had been all she could think of even before she'd learned she was pregnant—with twins, no less.

Because when she screwed up, she did it big.

She'd spent the two months after their night together regretting that she hadn't taken him up on his offer to join him in Japan, daydreaming about their incredible night together and wanting him. She'd been so preoccupied with work and thoughts of Benji that she hadn't noticed that she'd missed not one but two periods. Until the sudden, severe case of morning sickness she developed made it clear she was pregnant.

"I'm sorry you had to find out like this." Sloane stared out the window, not wanting to see the hatred and disappointment in his eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?" His words vibrated with hurt and anger. Pain.

"I know I should've, but..." She turned toward him, needing to see that he was okay. She licked her lips, her throat incredibly dry. "This isn't what you signed up for. We agreed to a one-night stand, not an eighteen-year commitment as parents. Besides, you made it pretty clear that kids weren't something you wanted."

"I was speaking in generalities, Sloane." He clenched the wheel as he turned a corner.

"You said, and I quote—"

"I'm aware of what I said. I remember everything that happened between us that night." He took another sharp turn, following the directions of the GPS app. "But how could you think that meant I wouldn't take care of my own flesh and blood, or wouldn't want to know that I have a son or daughter somewhere out in the world?"

"It's both." She winced again, pressing a hand to her belly, trying to calm herself as the pain got worse. "A boy and a girl."

He glanced at her quickly before returning his gaze to the road. "Does this happen often? The pain, I mean?"

"Not like this." Tears stung her eyes, more from fear than from the pain. It was too early for the twins to be born. Not if they were going to be okay. She forced a laugh. "Usually it's just discomfort from your son bouncing his big head on my bladder and your daughter doing some kind of calisthenics. I swear, that girl is going to be a gymnast."

"Everything is gonna be okay." He reached over and squeezed her hand, despite the reserved anger in his tone. "First, we make sure you and the babies are all right. Then..."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," she said, grateful to see the hospital sign come into view. "I promise."

* * *

Benji hadn't stopped pacing outside Sloane's hospital room

since they'd admitted her.

He was going to be a father of two babies—a boy and a girl. He still couldn't wrap his head around it. He'd been responsible and used protection every time they were together.

How could this have happened?

Benji's phone vibrated in his pocket and he glanced at the screen. It was his mother. Probably checking to see if he'd returned safely from Japan. But he didn't dare answer the call. Not yet. Not until he'd gotten some definitive answers from Sloane about why she hadn't told him he was going to be a father. Regardless of what he'd said that night, he couldn't believe that was the only reason Sloane had kept something this important from him.

He respected the fact that it was Sloane who was carrying these babies, but they were half his, too. What about his right to know? And to be part of his children's lives? Sloane's father had left home when she was around ten. She understood the pain of living without a father. Why would she intentionally subject their kids to the same fate?

The door opened, and the doctor introduced herself and invited him into the room where Sloane was hooked up to an IV. She gave him an apologetic smile before lowering her gaze to her hands, which were pressed to her belly.

"Is Sloane okay? Will the twins be all right?" he asked Dr. Carroll.

The older woman placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Sloane is

going to be just fine, Mr. Bennett. She's experiencing something called Braxton Hicks contractions. It's basically the uterus practicing up for child labor." Her smile deepened. "They're usually painless, but Sloane is experiencing particularly intense ones today. She's dehydrated. That likely contributed to it."

He nodded dumbly, his hands shaking and his head feeling light. None of this seemed real.

"Perhaps you should have a seat." Worry lines spanned the doctor's forehead as she indicated a sofa along the wall. She sat beside him. "Just take a deep breath. I realize this must seem very overwhelming, but everything is going to be fine."

"Sorry, this is all kind of a surprise."

"I know." The woman nodded gravely. "Sloane explained the situation to me. I can only imagine what a shock it must've been. But the good news is, you have the opportunity to be there for the birth of your children. And you and Sloane still have lots of time before the twins are born to hash things out." She looked pointedly at both of them in a firm but kind manner. "The twins are counting on you two to do that."

"Will she be released today?" Benji wasn't ready to talk about making nice. Not until he got some straight answers.

"I want to observe her for another hour. But as long as everything looks good, yes, she can go home. This isn't preterm labor, but I still want her to take it easy." The woman shifted her gaze to Sloane, and her tone and expression turned more serious. "Make sure she understands my instructions that she refrain from

working. That includes not hauling groceries around. If she can't comply with my limited restrictions, I'll have to put her on full bed rest."

"I understand," Sloane said, her expression contrite. "I would never knowingly put the babies in jeopardy."

"I know you wouldn't, Sloane. But you're carrying multiples. That makes everything a little trickier. So let's err on the side of caution." Dr. Carroll moved beside Sloane and squeezed her arm briefly before making a few notes on the tablet in her hand and checking the monitor.

"Any other specific things she shouldn't be doing?" Benji was on his feet beside the doctor.

"Nothing strenuous. No lifting or high-impact exercise. Walking, swimming and gentle yoga should be okay." She turned to Sloane. "But you should monitor how you're feeling. Make sure there's no pain or unusual discomfort." She turned back to Benji with a sly smile. "And there are no restrictions on sex, within reason. If that's what you're asking."

Benji's cheeks heated and he sputtered, "No, that isn't what I was asking."

"Relax, Benj." Sloane and the doctor were laughing. "I have no intention of jumping you when we get back to my place."

Benji glared at her, not acknowledging her jab. He returned his attention to the doctor. "I was referring to the bump she took to the head. She passed out momentarily. Does she have a concussion? Will it impact the twins?"

“Relax, Mr. Bennett.” Dr. Carroll’s voice was patient and soothing. Like she was trying to convince a man in a straitjacket that he hadn’t been abducted by aliens. “She has a little knot there, but no concussion. We applied an ice pack to reduce the swelling. Something she should continue to do off and on this evening. But if she suddenly seems woozy or disoriented, by all means, bring her back.”

“Will the Braxton Hicks contractions always be this strong?” Sloane asked. Her voice was strained, the levity gone.

Benji quickly made his way over to Sloane and let her grip his hand. It seemed to ease her discomfort.

When he looked up at the doctor she was smiling, seemingly pleased by his instinctive need to comfort Sloane.

“If you stay hydrated, knock off strenuous activities and reduce your stress levels, hopefully they won’t be as intense. In fact, you might not feel them at all.” Dr. Carroll turned to Benji. “If they do become intense, give her fluids and get her to walk around a little. That should relieve them.”

The woman handed him a pamphlet from her pocket. “I went over this with Sloane earlier. It outlines the difference between Braxton Hicks contractions and preterm labor—which can be dangerous for the babies at this stage. Study it. Memorize it. We want these babies to gestate until at least thirty-seven weeks, if possible.”

“Benji doesn’t live here. He’ll be going back to Seattle,” Sloane interjected.

“No, I won’t. I’m not leaving your side until the twins are born. Not up for discussion,” he added, glaring at her again when she opened her mouth to object.

She snapped her mouth shut and rubbed her belly.

“Good.” Dr. Carroll nodded approvingly. “Because she’s been trying to do this on her own for too long, and I’ve been worried about her.”

Benji couldn’t help the twinge of guilt in his gut at the doctor’s remarks, despite the fact that he couldn’t possibly have known that Sloane was struggling through this pregnancy on her own. The guilt quickly turned to resentment.

He should’ve been there, and he would’ve been, if only Sloane had given him the courtesy of a single phone call or even a text message.

“All right, I don’t expect to see you again until your next *scheduled* visit at the office.” Dr. Carroll raised one brow at Sloane before turning to Benji. “Walk me out, Mr. Bennett?”

He followed the woman into the hall.

“I know you must be angry and that you have many questions for Sloane.” She pinned him with her piercing blue eyes. “I don’t begrudge you for that. But she doesn’t need any unnecessary stress. So keep that in mind as you search for answers and you two decide what comes next. Capisce?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Good.” Her expression softened. She patted his arm. “Give her a chance to explain. And listen to all the things she’s afraid to

say. She's one tough lady, but deep down she's terrified of going through this alone. So don't let her fool you into believing that she doesn't want or need your help." Dr. Carroll reached out to shake Benji's hand. "You two take care of each other and the two little people growing inside her."

Benji sighed and nodded. "We'll figure it out."

When he returned to Sloane's room, she immediately tensed, her eyes not meeting his.

Benji sucked in a deep breath and pulled a chair up beside Sloane. He sat back in the chair. "Okay, let's talk."

Two

Sloane's heart felt as if it were beating out of her chest. And despite all the water she'd been made to drink in the short time since she'd been admitted, it felt like she was swallowing sand.

Her hands shook, and it took everything she had to maintain his gaze.

He was angry and hurt. Disappointed. In her.

So different from what she'd felt when she'd stared into those brooding brown eyes six months ago.

Her reasons for not telling Benji about the pregnancy seemed honorable and self-sacrificing when she'd made the decision to keep it from him. But now, faced with his resentment, they felt like cowardly excuses to avoid this very moment. When she'd have to face him again.

"I didn't do this to hurt you, Benji. I honestly thought I was doing you a favor by keeping you out of the mess that I've made."

"It's not like you did this alone. I distinctly remember being there, too." He folded his arms.

A wave of heat came over her and her nipples prickled with the memory of what had happened between them that weekend. How he'd made her feel.

"So why in the—" He drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. She could swear he was counting to ten under his breath. Finally he opened them again and released a long sigh. "So why on earth would you think you needed to handle this on your own?"

"Because I'm not twentysomething anymore. I'm old enough to know better. I should never have gone to your cabin that night. Never let you kiss me." Sloane shook her head, tears sliding down her cheeks. *Damn hormones*. She wiped away the tears with the back of one trembling fist.

"I'm not nine, Sloane." His voice was softer, though it still vibrated with controlled anger. "I don't need you to cover for me like you did when I broke Mom's favorite vase." A faint smile momentarily curled the edges of his mouth. "You don't need to shield me from the consequences of my actions. And money, obviously, isn't an issue. I can take care of you and the babies."

"That's just it..." The pain rising in her gut had nothing to do with the Braxton Hicks contractions and everything to do with the rumors that had swirled around Magnolia Lake her entire life. "Everyone back home will swear I got knocked up on purpose. That this was all some grand plan to secure my family's future

by having a billionaire's baby."

"I know Magnolia Lake still feels like a little backwoods town." He practically snorted. "But even they understand how babies are made."

"I'm not joking, Benj." She rubbed her belly. "You don't understand because..." Sloane shook her head and lay back on the pillow, staring up at the ceiling. "Never mind."

"No, tell me." He sat on the edge of his chair. "You say I don't understand, so school me on why rational adults would completely ignore my role in this and blame you."

"They'll say, like mother like daughter." Tears burned her eyes. Her life in Magnolia Lake seemed like a lifetime ago. Yet, the pain of that phrase uttered underneath folks' breath still hurt.

Benji was quiet, as if he suddenly remembered the cruel things folks in town had said about her and her mother. He cleared his throat. "You're not your mom, Sloane. No matter what they say —"

"What they say about her isn't true."

Sloane met his gaze. She didn't always get along with Abigail Sutton. Nor had she completely gotten over her resentment of her mother. But no one else got to talk shit about her. Especially when what they were saying was a bald-faced lie.

Sloane sat up in the bed and adjusted her pillows. "She didn't 'trick' my father into marrying her. She was young and stupid enough to believe he actually loved her. She was too naive to understand that the Suttons would never approve of a poor girl

from the wrong side of town.”

“Look, Sloane, I’m sorry for what a few busybodies might’ve said to make you feel that you were somehow inferior. But we both know that isn’t true. I’ve never believed it. Nor does my family.”

She wanted to tell him she knew his mother had never liked her. It was obvious from the coldness in her voice and in her eyes, despite the fake smile she always managed for Sloane’s benefit. Constance Bennett had merely tolerated her, preferring that she and Delia spend time at their home, under her careful supervision.

But there was no point in reopening old wounds when there were fresh ones gushing bright red blood that needed tending.

“You have to admit, it’ll seem odd that you returned to Magnolia Lake a billionaire and suddenly I’m having your babies. Then there’s our age difference.” She pressed a palm to her suddenly throbbing right eye. “Your sister is going to kill me.”

“Forget everyone else for a minute. This isn’t about any of them. It’s about me and you and...” His gaze was drawn to her belly before he raised it to hers again. “Our babies.” He swallowed hard, leaning closer. “Do you mind if... I mean, would it be all right if—”

Her heart swelled with affection for this man. The sheepish look on his face as he struggled to ask for permission to touch her after the intimacy they’d shared that night was utterly adorable.

“Give me your hand.” She reached out for his, guiding it to

her belly between the two straps from the electronic fetal monitor that crossed her midsection. “Put your hand here.”

“I don’t feel any—”

“Shh...” She closed her eyes, her voice lowered. “Just wait.”

They sat still, his hand on her stomach. The only sound in the room was the intermittent beeping of the IV pump.

Suddenly one of the babies kicked. Sloane smiled when she opened her eyes and saw the look of amazement on Benji’s face.

“I can’t believe it. I could really feel that. That’s incredible.” His voice broke slightly. “That’s my...*our* baby.”

Her chest tightened at his use of the phrase. She’d only ever thought of the babies as *hers*.

“That was your son.” Sloane adjusted her position as the baby kicked again. “I don’t know what my ribs ever did to him, but he’s got it out for them.”

No longer tentative, Benji pressed more firmly on the area where he’d felt the kick. He jumped, startled as the skin high on her belly shifted. Their baby girl started to roll.

“It’s okay. The first time I saw that, I was pretty weirded out, too.” She smiled so much her cheeks hurt. “Looked like something straight out of one of your favorite sci-fi movies.”

That seemed to relax him a little. Benji glided his hand to where her skin stretched and moved. He touched what looked like a tiny little shoulder. It protruded slightly from her belly, then disappeared from sight again.

He stood, staring at her stomach in awe for a few moments

before he met her eyes again.

“I wasn’t around during most of my sister’s pregnancy, so I didn’t see any of that.” He indicated her belly. “It really is remarkable.”

“Speaking of remarkable—” she pointed a thumb over her shoulder at the electronic fetal monitor “—I asked Dr. Carroll to turn the sound off before you came in the room. Turn that dial up.”

Benji went to the machine and turned up the volume. His eyes sparked with recognition as he turned to meet her gaze again. “That’s a heartbeat.” He listened carefully, turning the volume up a little more. “No, it’s two heartbeats.”

She rubbed her stomach again. “That’s right.”

Benji dragged a hand over his head and sat beside the bed. His brows furrowed as the pain and disappointment returned to his face, forming hardened lines that weren’t there before. “How could you not tell me?”

Sloane’s phone rang. She swiped it from the table beside her bed, thankful for a respite from the withering heat of Benji’s stare.

Mama.

Sloane hadn’t thought to call her mother. But the last thing she wanted was to give her mom an excuse to come to Nashville and set up camp at her place. With her growing belly and all of the baby things she was collecting in duplicate, the place already felt too small.

She silenced the phone and turned it facedown. She'd return the call once she was settled in back at her place. No need to worry her mother unnecessarily.

There was nothing to tell.

Except that the man her mother still referred to as "little Benji Bennett" was the father of her babies. And that wasn't a conversation she was prepared to have.

"Everything okay?" Deep worry lines creased his forehead.

"Everything's fine." She pulled the sheet around her and asked him to turn down the monitor again. "Now, about what you said when Dr. Carroll was in here."

"About me not returning to Seattle?" He raised a brow and narrowed his gaze.

"Yes, that." She refused to repeat the words that both terrified her and made her hopeful. "That isn't necessary. As Dr. Carroll explained, there's nothing wrong with me or the babies."

"I missed the first six months of your pregnancy. I'm not missing another minute."

It wasn't a question or even a suggestion.

"You've pretty much gotten the highlights. The first two months, I had no idea I was pregnant. Then there was four months of barfing my brains out before the morning sickness finally subsided." She settled back against the pillow.

"The morning sickness was that bad?"

"It bordered on spectacular. I had acute morning sickness, which, by the way, is a misnomer. There was nothing cute about

not being able to hold down anything or work for the past four months.”

A pained look crimped Benji’s face. “You’ve been out of work for four months? How’ve you been paying your expenses?”

Sloane’s cheeks stung with embarrassment. Her dire financial situation wasn’t a conversation she wanted to have with the golden boy billionaire. She’d gotten herself into this mess and it was her job to navigate her way out of it. If there was one thing she’d learned in her thirty years, it was that when she got into difficulty, no one was coming to rescue her. She needed to figure this out on her own, just as she’d done her entire life.

“Sloane?” he prodded.

“I manage.” She stared down at her ragged fingernails and fought the urge to chew on them.

Benji spoke after a few moments of awkward silence between them. “When you were filling out the hospital paperwork...I couldn’t help noticing the past-due bills hanging out of your wallet.”

“You snooped in my purse?” The heat in her cheeks turned to a butane-lighter-charged flame.

“I wasn’t snooping. I just couldn’t help noticing the words stamped in bold red capital letters.” He raised his hands in self-defense, then sighed. “Sloane, what are you trying to prove? I have all this money. What good is it if I can’t even help the people I care about?”

“That’s not what you said at the reception.” She folded her

arms and glared at him pointedly. “You said you were tired of people treating you differently. Like you were a freakin’ ATM. I couldn’t bear for you, Delia or your parents to ever think I’m no better than the girls who stalked you at the wedding. That I looked at you and got dollar signs in my eyes. That I planned this to ensure I’d get a big ol’ piece of the Benji Bennett pie.”

“Sloane, no one will think that.”

“I’ve been taking care of myself since I was sixteen. I worked a job, in addition to my duties on the farm. Paid my own way. I’ve never needed to ask anyone for anything.” Tears formed in her eyes again. She swiped at them, but that didn’t stop fresh tears from falling. “I should be able to take care of myself and the twins. Without help. But my life is falling apart at a time when I should be able to enjoy motherhood.”

Benji pulled his chair closer to the bed and held one of her hands in his. He lightly kissed the back of it. “You don’t need to do this alone. Accepting help doesn’t make you weak.” He squeezed her hand. “It took two people to make the twins. Stands to reason it’d take both of us to care for them.”

She leveled her gaze at him. It wasn’t fair. She was emotional and feeling vulnerable. His argument actually made sense.

“Don’t do this out of a sense of obligation, Benji. If this isn’t what you want, you can walk out of that door right now and no one else ever needs to know.”

Benji slid his hand to her cheek and cradled it. His voice was soft. “Nothing in the world is more important to me than taking

care of you and the twins. Are we clear on that?"

She nodded, and he leaned in and kissed her cheek. A kiss that was soft and sweet. Yet, it warmed her from the inside out.

He kissed her again, this time a closed-mouth kiss on the lips.

When he raised his eyes to hers, there was the same desire she'd seen there that night. The night they'd made the twins.

Except six months ago she'd been beautiful, and now she felt like a beached whale.

A sly smile curved the edge of his mouth and he leaned in to kiss her again.

"Should I come back later?" A male nurse hovered inside the doorway.

"No." Benji groaned, his gaze still meeting hers. "I'd liked to get her back home and settled in as soon as possible."

He moved to the sofa to give the nurse room to check Sloane's and the babies' vitals. The man put a blood pressure cuff on Sloane.

"Now's a good time to tell my mother and father they're going to be grandparents." He pulled out his cell phone.

"You're going to tell them over the phone?"

Sloane's pulse suddenly raced as she imagined Connie and Rick Bennett's reaction to the news. Rick would be mildly surprised, but Connie would be spitting fire, and she'd probably faint right on the spot. When she recovered, the woman would blame her for corrupting their son. Which she probably deserved.

And Delia. God, her friend was going to be angry with her.

Delia already knew of her pregnancy. Only Sloane hadn't told her friend the whole truth about it. Like the fact that her little brother was the father.

"Why not tell them now?"

"I'm pretty sure that's the kind of conversation that should be had in person."

"We have to tell them eventually, Sloane." He kept his voice even.

"I know." Sloane frowned when the blood pressure machine beeped, and she saw the unusually high numbers. She turned to the nurse. "Can you give me a few minutes and take it again, please? I just got a little worked up. My numbers will go down in a few minutes, I promise."

The man nodded begrudgingly. "Be back in fifteen minutes."

She sighed in relief, then turned to Benji. "I know that we have to tell them, and we will. But don't you think it's better if we figure all of this out first?"

"All of what?" He sat beside her again.

"You said you're not going back to Seattle. Well, fine. But there isn't enough room in my tiny condo for me, you and all the stuff for the babies."

"So we'll sell your place and get a bigger one."

"I can't just sell my place. It needs a lot of work before I can put it on the market and..." Sloane chewed her lower lip. She didn't like talking money with Benji. Feeling as if she had her hand out.

“And?” He prodded.

“And I’m under water.”

“You overpaid for the condo?”

She shook her head, her voice lowered. “I took out a second mortgage on the place.” Sloane fiddled with the strap across her belly. “Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t spend the money on shoes or something. I took the loan out for a good reason.”

“Which was?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your—”

“Sloane!” He inhaled deeply, then lowered his voice considerably. “Just tell me. Why did you need the money?”

“To save the farm. The crop yield hasn’t been good the last few years. Plus, my grandfather needed bypass surgery last year and the insurance didn’t cover everything. Do you have any idea how expensive medicine is for a cardiac patient?”

Benji stood and paced the floor. “Delia mentioned that your granddad had surgery.” He turned to face her, the wheels in his head obviously turning. “Both your condo and your family’s farm have second mortgages on them?”

“Yes.” She whispered the word under her breath. “I had a plan. I didn’t have much cash to spare, but I was paying my bills and theirs. And I was about to land the job as the creative director at the record company until...” She paused, sinking her teeth into her lower lip. She didn’t want to make it seem as if she was blaming him or the twins.

“Until you couldn’t work anymore because of the pregnancy.”

Benji slid into the seat beside her again. "I'm starting to get the picture."

They were both quiet for a moment. Then he leaned forward and gripped her hand. "Look, I know you think the worst of the folks in Magnolia Lake, but I plan to prove you wrong."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let me get the condo ready for sale."

"Even if I got top dollar for it, I'd barely break even with the second mortgage." Her grandfather had implored her not to do it, but she'd been determined to prove to him that she'd made something of herself, despite his predictions that she'd flop in "the big city." Not one of her better decisions. "Besides, if I sell my condo, where will I live?"

"You'll move to Magnolia Lake with me." His brown eyes were earnest, but his expression was neutral.

"I have no intention of moving in with my mother and grandfather." A shiver ran down her spine just thinking of it. "I'd rather live in a tent in the woods."

"Perfect. Then you'll move into the cabin with me."

A tiny ray of hope flared deep in her chest.

Benji was asking her to move into the cabin with him. Did that mean he felt something for her, too?

After their weekend together, she hadn't been able to get him out of her head. She couldn't stop wondering if a future for them was possible. But Benji was the first man she'd been with since her divorce. She cared about him too much to make him her

rebound guy. Once she learned she was pregnant, she'd attributed her feelings for him to her wildly fluctuating hormones.

The same hormones that filled her body with heat as her gaze traced the sensual lines of Benji's strong physique. The same hormones that made her long for his hands to glide along her skin, the way they had when he'd made love to her.

Sloane pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to shake loose the fine image of how Benji's muscles had bunched beneath his brown skin. She needed to focus on the larger implications of what he was saying.

"You're asking me to move in with you?"

"We should get married first, naturally. For the sake of the twins." He released her hand and pulled out his cell phone, tapping out a message. "But it would only be temporary."

"The marriage?" Her heart had inflated and deflated in six seconds flat.

Not that she wanted to get married again. Ever. And she still had a modicum of pride. He wanted to marry her, but only because he felt obligated to, and now he was saying it would be some kind of temporary arrangement?

He looked puzzled, then frowned with realization. "No, not the marriage. Living at the cabin would be temporary," he clarified. "I'm shooting my cousin Cole a message now. We'd live at the cabin until Cole's company can build us a permanent home."

"Hold up there, Andy Griffith." She extended her palm toward

him. "I'm not agreeing to a shotgun wedding. Do people really still have those?"

"You don't want to get married?" The poor thing looked bewildered, as if he couldn't possibly imagine why a knocked-up poor girl would reject the offer to get hitched to an incredibly handsome, impossibly sexy billionaire and commence having his babies.

"Because getting married strictly because of an unexpected pregnancy worked out so well for my parents and for your sister." Baby boy bounced his generous-sized head on her bladder as if in objection.

Of course, you'd side with him. Traitor.

Sloane rubbed her belly, hoping to calm the little one.

Benji's jaw tensed. "We're not either of them."

If he said that a few more times, she'd suggest he put it on a T-shirt. But as things stood, she didn't want to aggravate him any more than she already had.

"No, we're not. They were in long-term relationships, but still couldn't make their shotgun weddings work. We had a one-night stand, Benj. A really incredible one, but still—"

"Then why not just keep doing it?" He winced and swiped a hand across his forehead. "I wasn't talking about sex...necessarily. I just meant being together. The night we spent together, it wasn't just about sex, not for me, at least."

"Not for me, either." She smiled sweetly. Or at least as sweetly as she could manage while baby boy played trampoline with her

bladder and kicked underneath her ribs. “But one night of great sex and reminiscing over the past does not a marriage make. And I really do like you, Benji. Too much to watch our friendship turn into a strained, bitter relationship that’ll make us and the twins miserable.”

Sloane sighed, her heart twisting at the pained look on Benji’s face.

He slipped his phone back in his pocket without sending the message to Cole and scrubbed a hand down his face. “You’re sure about this?”

“I’m positive. Thanks for the offer, Benj, but if I ever get married again, it’ll be for one reason and one reason only—that we’re both head over heels in love.”

Three

Benji drove Sloane’s car, the silence stretching between them. She’d pretended to be upbeat, like everything would be okay, until they’d sent her to the cashier’s desk once she’d been released by the doctor.

The stress and embarrassment she felt were obvious when they’d asked how she’d pay her insurance co-pay. She’d almost whispered the words, “Bill me.”

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