

Pregnant! I blinked back tears. *Twins!* How had this happened? I stared out the open window feeling something akin to horror. I couldn't even look at the doctor. I had never in my entire life believed something like this could happen to me. Of course, I wasn't really that naïve. I knew exactly what had gone down that night, the night Billy bloody Sombero and I had too much to drink, and we took it too far. I swallowed hard. I guess in fairness to Billy, I might have been partly to blame. "Hello?"

Oh my god! The doctor had been talking to me and I hadn't even had the decency to listen to him.

"Pardon?" I gulped forcing myself to look at the bespectacled medical professional sitting opposite me. "What did you say?" He gave me a tentative smile.

"I said, congratulations Ms Baker," he replied, as I chewed on my lip. I felt like slapping him, but I was in enough trouble already, so I resorted to running my hands through my hair. I certainly didn't need an assault charge to be added to my growing list of mistakes.

"Yeah, just what this world needs, more howling kids without decent parents," I mumbled, struggling to control my tears.

"Ms Baker, it sounds as though you would benefit from talking with a counsellor." He rubbed at his chin.

I shot him a look. "I don't need to talk with a counsellor. I need to talk with Billy Sombero," I barked. "He's the one who got me into this mess."

"That will be \$85.00," the receptionist smiled when I presented myself at her desk. I pursed my lips, looking at the picture on the wall behind her. A doting mother breastfeeding her baby was not what I needed to see.

I hit the button for Billy's number as soon as I stepped outside. He didn't know it, but the time had arrived for him to grow up.

"What's up babe?" Billy, my part time boyfriend chirped.

"We need to talk," I said, trying to sound upbeat. I knew this conversation shouldn't be taking place over the phone, but I was shocked and possibly on the verge of hysteria.

"Right then babe, shoot," he chuckled. Now I felt like slapping Billy. He thought life was one big joke.

"Billy," I began, wondering whether he'd think my next few words were going to sound anything close to funny. "I'm pregnant," I blurted. "Fourteen weeks. What do you think of that?" I tapped my foot on the ground and waited, but there was not a word to be heard from Billy. "And do you know what else?" I thundered on.

"Because we've never been a couple to do things in halves, we've managed to hit the jackpot this time."

"The jackpot?" Billy's voice trailed off.

"Yeah, the jackpot. We're going to have two screaming babies to care for ... Billy?"

"Are ya sure they're yours?" Billy joked, giggling into the phone. He always did that when he was nervous.

"Don't be so stupid," I warned him. Most of the time Billy's jokes weren't funny, and this was one of those times.

"Settle down, babe I'm only havin' a bit of fun."

"You had your bit of fun fourteen weeks ago Billy and that means you now have to become a member of grown-up land."

"Grown-up land?"

"You're going to be a father, Billy Sombero, twice over with two real life kids of your own. We need to have a serious talk tonight."

"Hey, I've got footy training tonight, and we're gonna go out for a few beers afterwards."

"Forget the beers," I snapped. "This is something we need to discuss."

"Righto. I'll do my best," he grumbled.

"After footy training then?"

"Okay ... okay ...," Billy hesitated. "You ... um ... you do know there are quick ways to take care of this sort of thing, don't you?" My eyes widened. Did Billy mean what I thought he meant? "I have a few bucks set aside and I'm more than happy to chip in," he continued while I held my breath. "I could ask Tich. He knocked up his

girlfriend a few years ago and for a few hundred bucks, mind you that was for one kid and we're talkin' two here, he managed to get it all sorted. Anyway," Billy went on, "maybe we can get some kinda new customer discount if we haven't got enough cash."

"I don't want to talk about this over the phone," I snarled, as I struggled to come to grips with Billy wanting our two unborn children removed from our lives. I winced. Hadn't I had the same thought earlier? "I'll see you tonight," I snapped again. "Don't be late."

I knew I should've returned to uni after my doctor's visit, but I just couldn't face the subject of early human development when there was plenty of that going on inside my own belly. Instead, I stopped off at an Elizabeth Street café, and watched as a screaming mother and her three fighting kids came bounding in, setting the place up like a war zone.

"Johnny! Don't jump on the seats. Ally! Leave Patty alone. Johnny please don't tip salt and pepper into the flowerpot. Patty! Don't hit your sister." I felt like suggesting to the mother that she donate them to the nearest wildlife park for animals.

My head was spinning. I had to get out of this place. I glanced at my belly. I couldn't believe I would soon have my own version of Johnny, Ally and Patty to deal with in my life. I paid my account and bolted, straight onto the next passing tram. I didn't care where it was going. I just wanted to get away. I looked out the tram window. We were on our way towards the Royal Women's Hospital. *Oh no!* Sometime next year I'd most likely be pushing my insides out in one of their labour wards, giving birth to two helpless bundles of I don't know what. *Shit!* I hadn't even asked the doctor when exactly my kids would be born.

The tram trundled along Flemington Road with a sea of people inside. A few stops later however, there were only about a dozen or so of us left, and that's when I first saw her, a woman huddled in the corner, blowing her nose, and dabbing at her eyes.

I'd never seen anyone look so sad. It made my heart skip a beat. Ever since the doctor had given me my unexpected news, I had felt nothing but anger inside. I knew that wasn't the most appropriate emotion for me to be feeling in my position, but that's how I honestly felt. Now however, I felt something more like pity. This woman was breaking my heart.

The tram stopped when it reached Mt Alexander Road and the woman in the corner made a move to find a seat closer to the doorway. I watched as she stumbled, doing her best to appear composed. The blue ribbon that tied back her long black hair matched both the colour of her jacket and her Versace La Medusa handbag. She seemed so well put together it was hard to imagine how anything in her life could be making her look so sad. The lump in my throat made it difficult for me to swallow. Why was this poor woman so unhappy? I glanced away. It was unsettling to see someone like this. When I looked back, she was standing at the doorway, holding on to one of the handrails. The tram suddenly lurched forward and she almost lost her balance.

"Here! Opposite me," I called out. "There's a seat here."

She stumbled towards me. I'd never seen anyone get lost inside a tram before, but she appeared to have done just that. She flopped onto the seat, her Myki card falling onto the floor.

"Here you go." I picked up her card. "I think this is yours." She let it fall into her purse without even checking to see that she was the rightful owner.

"Thank you." She gave me a watery smile. "You're very kind."

"No problem," I assured her with a smile, noticing the tracks of her tears.

"I'm sorry. I'm a bit out of sorts today," she sniffed, trying to justify her appearance.

"No problem at all. We're all entitled to off-days. I've had better days myself," I responded again feeling the need to elaborate.

"I'm sorry you're not having a good day either." The woman's lips began to quiver.

"That's okay," I sighed, wondering whether she had boarded the tram near the Royal Women's Hospital and whether a visit to that hospital might have had anything to do with the way she was feeling. For my own part, I couldn't help wondering how I

would feel in that hospital when I gave birth to my babies and my life would change forever.

I can't explain why I did it, but I suddenly asked her whether she had ever been inside the hospital. The way her lip quivered again when I asked, made me sorry I'd opened my mouth. She cleared her throat and sniffed.

"Many, many times, however there's no need for me to go in there anymore."

"Oh! I guess that's a good thing then. Everything must have got itself sorted," I chirped, being too naïve to realise that my feigned chirpiness would not be enough to return the sad woman's happiness.

"They say one door closes and another door opens," she sniffed again. "Let's just say, I'm waiting for that other door to open."

"Fair enough," I nodded, not really knowing what we were talking about.

"I feel like staying on this tram forever," I prattled on a short while later, not even sure why I had decided to continue our conversation.

"I do as well," the woman sighed. "I actually feel like travelling to the end of the line and staying there."

"Yep, me too," I agreed. *Why should I hurry home?* "Why don't we do that? We could stop for a cup of coffee. I think we both could do with a bit of a lift."

The woman pursed her lips and took a good hard look at me. What was she going to say to a suggestion so out of left field?

"I'm Maryanne," she smiled as she extended her hand towards me. "And I'd love to have a cup of coffee with you."

"I'm Tayla and I'd be equally delighted to do the same," I beamed, as we gently shook hands.

"Will anyone miss you at home?" Maryanne asked when we settled into our seats at the cafe.

"Nope, I'm actually from Horsham and I'm boarding in a hostel in Coburg while I'm at uni, so no-one is going to notice if I'm not around. What about you?"

"I rang John, my husband before I left the hospital. He won't be home until around 9.00 tonight so he isn't going to notice if I'm missing in action," she smiled.

"I've got to be home before then," I informed her. "Billy and I need to chat."

"Billy's your boyfriend?"

"Yeah, he's been a part-time one up until now, but he's going to have to learn pretty quickly to be a full-time one whether he likes it or not."

"I'm sure Billy will be thrilled to be your full-time boyfriend," Maryanne assured me. "I think it's comforting to know that your romantic relationship is exclusive."

I liked the way Maryanne spoke. She made everything sound kind of sweet, although of course, she had no way of knowing what I was talking about.

"Maryanne," I began, suddenly feeling as though I had known her for years. "It's kind of being forced on us." I let Maryanne soak that in for a moment, hoping she wouldn't think any worse of me when I told her. "I just found out ... I'm having twins."

"Oh!" It was almost a gasp and Maryanne had definitely widened her eyes. I felt my chest tighten.

"I know I'm really young, but we didn't plan for this," I raced on, trying to let her know as fast as I could that I honestly regretted what Billy and I had done. "It was an accident. There's never been anyone but Billy." I didn't want her to think that I was promiscuous either. Maryanne reached out and placed her hand on top of mine.

"Tayla," she whispered, "I'm not judging you, not at all. It's just that I ... I just had my last visit to the IVF Clinic this morning and ... I found out that I'll never be able to have a biological child of my own."

"For real?" I spluttered when I had taken in her words. "I'm so sorry Maryanne, and here's me prattling on about my ... twins. You must think I'm incredibly selfish."

"No ... no ... not at all," she reassured me. "You're in a very different situation to me. I'm not a university student with a part-time or full-time boyfriend. Having a baby in your situation is very different to mine. I am a forty-one-year-old woman with a wonderful, supportive husband and we have been trying for ten years to have a baby of our own." Maryanne turned away momentarily as a lady wheeling a pram came into the café. "It's just that my home has an empty nursery that will never be occupied." She attempted to smile. "And that makes me so sad."

"It's not right, Maryanne" I quickly declared. "That I'm going to have twins I'm so not prepared for, and you can't have the baby you long to have."

"I know it doesn't seem fair, but life is full of twists and turns, Tayla." Maryanne patted my hand. "I didn't know you a few hours ago, but I feel as though I know you very well now and I would love for us to keep in touch, if you are happy to do that too." I felt as though my heart was about to burst. How could I suddenly feel so fortunate now when I had been so miserable before?

I didn't mention my cramps to Maryanne when we jumped back onto the tram. I thought they must have been stress related and would eventually go away, but they didn't. They returned when I reached home, only this time they were much worse. "Billy, where are you?" I cried into the phone. "I need you. I'm in a lot of pain." "Hey, babe I've had too many beers to drive to your place," he grumbled. "Then get a taxi," I shouted. "Okay, I'll see what I can do, but don't hold your breath. You know how hard it is to get a taxi from a pub. The bloody drivers are all scared you're gonna spew up all over their seats."

I wished Maryanne were here. She'd know what to do. When my phone started ringing a few minutes later, I thought it would be Billy calling back to tell me he was on his way, but when I saw the caller ID, I almost shouted with glee, despite my pain. "Maryanne," I panted into the phone. "I've got the most painful cramps. They won't go away." "The twins!" Maryanne shrieked. "You need to lie down, Tayla. I'll be right over."

Maryanne covered me with a blanket and never left my side as we waited for the paramedics to arrive. They whisked us away and later that night they told us that my medical episode while serious, wasn't life-threatening to me or the twins. My response? I burst into tears. Somehow, it seemed weird to me, that after all that had happened that day, losing my babies would have broken my heart.

A short while later the nurse informed us that Billy had arrived. "Would you like me to bring him in?" Maryanne asked.

"Yeah, I guess," I replied, not thrilled at the prospect of seeing his face. "He's going to have to look after me for a while, and then help me with the twins, because I don't want to give up on my dreams and go back to Horsham to live."

Maryanne brushed a strand of hair from my face. "Do you think he will be on board with that?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted, knowing Billy had never even been good at looking after himself.

"Maybe he will step up to the mark when the babies arrive." Maryanne tried to comfort.

"Who knows?" I shrugged. Pretending that everything was going to be okay didn't sit well with me. The road ahead wasn't going to be an easy one.

"Tayla," Maryanne toyed with the sheet on the bed. "You know you have a long journey ahead of you, don't you?" I nodded. "And you're worried about how you're going to manage, aren't you?"

"I am," I croaked. I knew I needed to be braver than this.

"Then I have a proposition to make." Maryanne had a twinkle in her eye.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes, really." Maryanne stopped toying with the bedsheet and placed her hand on mine.

"Could I be part of your journey, Tayla? Every step of the way."

My heart skipped a beat for the second time that day.

"Do you really mean it?"

"Yes, I do," Maryanne nodded. "But you don't have to answer now. Take your time to think about it. It's been a huge day for you."

"I don't need time to think about it. I've got my answer already."

I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes and I knew Maryanne was holding her breath.

“I’d love to have you with me every step of the way,” I grinned. “And if today’s any indication of what lies ahead, it’s going to be quite a journey.”