



Demanding His Brother's Heirs (Billionaires and Babies)

By Michelle Celmer

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Editorial Review

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Holly Shay didn't believe in signs.

But as she tossed Devon's and Marshall's dirty clothes on top of the hamper, her wedding band, loose after she'd dropped the last of her baby weight, slipped off her finger and went flying across the room. Two carats of flawless princess-cut diamonds hit the wall at high velocity, leaving a dimple in the paint, and landed with a clunk on the nursery floor.

Maybe someone was trying to tell her something. That it was time to take it off. At this point she didn't have much choice.

The idea of hocking the ring broke her heart, but she had only a few weeks to find a new apartment. She had no job and not a penny to her name. Only after Jeremy's death last month had she learned of the considerable debt he'd sunk them into over the course of their tenmonth marriage. She would be paying off his debts for many years to come.

But that's what addicts did, or so she had been told. If she had only known she could have helped him. It still astounded her that she had been so blind. She'd known deep down that something wasn't quite right with him. She'd assumed it was the stress of having twin infants. A new marriage—especially the shotgun variety—was a challenge in itself, but toss a high-risk pregnancy, then fragile preemies into the mix and things could get dicey. The boys had been born a month early and had had to spend nearly two weeks in the NICU. When they finally had come home it had been with machines to monitor their breathing and heart rate. It had taken a toll on them both.

But it wasn't until after Jeremy overdosed that she'd put the pieces of the puzzle together. Only then did she recognize the signs. She had been stupidly and irresponsibly blinded by love, by the fantasy of the perfect family she had always dreamed of having. When would she learn that for some people the happily-ever-after would never come? It just wasn't in the game plan.

It could have been so much worse. Holly had lost both her parents when she was a child, but she had been one of the lucky ones. Orphaned ten-year-olds typically were difficult to place in the foster care system, but she had been taken in by a really nice couple with two other foster kids. There never had been much money, but the essentials always had been covered. She'd had a hot meal every night, decent clothes on her back and someone to help with her homework. And though she and her foster siblings all lived at opposite ends of the country now, and her foster parents had retired to Florida, they still emailed and texted on a semi-regular basis. But it wasn't the same as having a real family.

The last pinkish whispers of dusk filtered through the blinds as Holly gazed down into the matching cribs at

her sleeping sons. An overwhelming feeling of love filled the chambers of her heart. She'd never known it was possible to feel such an intense connection to another person. She would hands down give her life for them.

They would be three months old tomorrow, meaning Jeremy had been gone almost a month now. It broke her heart that they would never know their father. Her marriage to Jeremy hadn't been perfect, or easy, but the good relationships never were. She just hadn't realized how imperfect it actually had been.

Was it better that he had died now rather than in a year or two? Had not knowing him spared the twins undue heartache? Or would they go through life with a hole in their hearts that never would be filled?

Could you miss someone you'd never known?

Holly remembered all too well what it had been like after her parents died. She had learned to cope, but it was the sort of thing a person never really got over. It was always in the back of her mind. The unfairness of it. The deep feeling of emptiness. Knowing that she was truly alone. But now that she had the boys, she would never be alone again.

She walked across the room to where the ring had landed and bent over to pick it up. It had always felt clunky and heavy on her hand. Too big and flashy. That was Jeremy's taste, not hers. She would have been content with one carat or less. He'd refused to tell her what it cost, but it must have been thousands. Tens of thousands, even. Hopefully it was worth at least half that much used.

Instead of sliding the ring back on her finger, she slipped it into the front pocket of her jeans. The landlord had taken pity on her and given her an entire month rent-free to get her affairs in order and find an affordable place. She couldn't put it off any longer. Tomorrow morning she would load the boys in the stroller and take a trip to the jewelers to see what she could get for the ring. She'd run the scenario through her head a million times, and the outcome was always the same. She needed money, and the ring was the only thing she had left of any worth. She didn't even own a car. Which made hauling twins around a challenge.

The only question now was, even if she had the money to get a new apartment, would anyone give her a lease? The credit cards Jeremy had opened in her name were all maxed out and in default, and until she could arrange for some sort of child care, getting a job would be next to impossible. She had no family to help her, no friends willing to take on the task of twins full time, and conventional day care for two infants would be astronomically expensive.

In her chest she felt a tightness, a knot of despair that made it hard to breathe. She'd been through difficult times in the past, but never had she felt this hopeless, this sense of impending doom.

She peered into the cribs one last time, smiling when her gaze settled on the boys' sweet angelic faces. Then she turned on the baby monitor and backed out of the nursery, quietly shutting the door behind her.

She and Jeremy had seriously discussed moving but they'd never gotten the chance. Her morning sickness had been so bad the first four months Holly had spent half her time in bed, and the other half hanging over the commode. In her fifth month, just as she had begun to feel like a human being again, she had gone into premature labor. They'd stopped it just in time, but from that day on she'd been on strict bed rest. It hadn't been easy, but they'd managed. At least, she'd thought they had.

Jeremy had promised her that after the boys were born they would start looking for a house. He'd thought

they would buy a fixer-upper in a small cozy town upstate. A place they could make their own. Now she knew that with all of Jeremy's debt, no bank ever would have given them a mortgage. Jeremy must have known it, too.

She felt torn between missing him and wanting to sock him in the nose for not being honest with her. Whatever their problems, they could have worked them out. Why hadn't he just talked to her? It was no secret he'd had trust issues, but they had run deeper than she'd realized. A foster kid himself, Jeremy hadn't been as lucky. He hadn't talked about his past much, but she knew he'd been in the system most of his life, bounced around between group homes and foster homes until he'd ventured out on his own at sixteen. Clearly his past had scarred him more than she'd ever imagined. As his wife she should have known. She should have seen what was happening, right? She could have saved him.

The question was had he wanted to be saved?

She stepped into her bedroom and switched on the light. Their neatly made king-size bed mocked her from across the room. She hadn't slept in it since she'd found Jeremy there. Other than straightening the covers, she hadn't touched it at all. She'd been avoiding the bedroom in general, only going in to grab her clothes, and only because there was no place else in the apartment to store them. She'd been sleeping on an air mattress that she'd first put in the nursery, and recently moved into the living room next to the sofa.

She looked around the room and sighed. She used to love this apartment. Now she could barely wait to leave. Since his death being here felt... wrong. It never would be a home again without Jeremy. His whole life, everything he'd owned in the world, was in that apartment. She was torn between wanting to keep it all and the need for a fresh start.

She grabbed her pajamas and pulled the door closed behind her as she stepped into the hall. It was barely eight o'clock, but these days she slept when the boys slept. That wouldn't be possible when she got a job.

She collapsed onto the sofa, letting her head fall back and her eyes slip closed. She must have gone out instantly, and when she roused to the sound of a knock at the door, it was nearly nine-thirty.

She assumed the visitor was her neighbor Sara from across the hall, who often stopped by after work to chat, so Holly didn't bother checking the peephole. She wasn't exactly in the mood for company, but it would be rude not to say hello.

She pulled open the door, but it wasn't Sara, after all. A man stood there, and though he was facing away, looking down the hall toward the stairs, something about him seemed eerily familiar. Something about the tall, solid build and broad shoulders. The thick, coarse black hair that swirled into a cowlick at the left side of his crown, and the stubborn little tuft that wanted to stand up straight. He would always have to use extra gel—

Her breath caught in her lungs and her heart took a downward dive to the pit of her belly. Oh, God. Whoever this man was, from the back he looked exactly like Jeremy. Except for the clothes. He wore a suit, and Holly had worked in retail long enough to recognize a custom fit when she saw one. The closest Jeremy had ever come to wearing a suit, custom or otherwise, had been dress slacks and a blazer, and then only because she'd forbade him from wearing jeans to the wedding of a good friend. And she'd had to go out and buy the stuff for him.

She'd barely completed the thought when the man turned, and as she saw his face, her world shifted

violently. Staring back at her were eyes as familiar as her own, and though she could see his lips moving, his voice sounded muffled and distant, as if someone had stuffed cotton in her ears. Her vision blurred around the edges, then folded in on itself.

It couldn't be, she told herself. Either she was dreaming or having a complete psychotic break. Because this man didn't just look like her dead husband.

He *was* Jeremy.

Before Jason Cavanaugh could inquire as to the identity of the attractive blonde who'd opened the door to the apartment his lawyer claimed had been his brother's, the color leached from her face. Then her eyes went wide and rolled back into her head. He watched helplessly as she crumpled to the floor, her head barely missing the door frame as she went down.

He sighed and mumbled a curse. His prowess with women was legendary, but even he'd never had one fall to his feet in a dead faint.

As an identical twin, this wouldn't be the first time someone had mistaken him for his brother. Though he had never gotten this reaction before. Angry words, yes, and once he'd even had a drink thrown in his face.

He could only imagine what Jeremy had done to this poor girl. Had he charged up all her credit cards and then bailed on her? Slept with her best friend? Or her mother? Or her best friend's mother?

When it came to Jeremy the possibilities were endless. But all Jason wanted was to fetch his brother's belongings, if they hadn't been disposed of already, and head back upstate. He didn't know if there was anything worth keeping, and he wasn't normally the sentimental type, but he had so little left of his brother. Five years ago, after Jeremy had been through another wasted stint in rehab, their father had had enough. He'd disowned Jeremy, disinherited him and purged their home of anything that reminded him of his troubled son. For all the good it had done. And though he knew it was irrational, deep down Jason still blamed himself for Jeremy's downward spiral. Against his father's wishes, Jason had even set up a monthly allowance for his brother, who had no means to support himself. Maybe that had been a mistake, too.

Jason knelt beside the woman, whom he was guessing couldn't be more than twenty-two or three, and touched her cheek. It was warm and it seemed the color was returning to her face. Long brown hair with reddish highlights fanned out around her head and her T-shirt rode up exposing an inch or so of her stomach, making him feel like a voyeur.

"Hey." He gave her shoulder a gentle nudge and she mumbled incoherently. "Wake up."

Her eyes fluttered open, big and blue and full of confusion as they focused on his face. "What happened?"

"You passed out," he said, offering his hand. "Can you sit up?"

"I think so." She grabbed on, her eyes glued to his face, containing a look caught somewhere between shock and horror. He gave her a gentle boost and though she wobbled a little, squeezing his hand to keep her balance, she managed to stay upright. "Got it?" he asked.

She nodded and let go, still transfixed. "You look just like him. Except..." She reached up to touch his left brow, grazing it with the tips of her fingers. Her touch was so light it was almost provocative. "No scar."

"No scar," he responded.

She blinked several times, then yanked her hand back, as if just realizing that she was touching a total stranger. "I'm sorry. I just..."

"It's okay." However or wherever Jeremy had gotten the scar, it must have occurred in the past five years. Since the day they were born, it had been next to impossible to tell them apart. They were truly identical in every way.

Well, almost every way.

"Jeremy never told you that he had an identical twin?"

She shook her head, appearing dazed and very confused. "He told me that he didn't have *any* family."

Jason was living proof that he had.

"He lied to me," she said, still shaking her head in disbelief. She looked up at Jason, and in her eyes he could see anger and hurt and a whole lot of confusion.

"Why would he do that?"

Users Review

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