

Claiming His Own & Her Little Secret, His Hidden Heir (Harlequin Billionaires and Babies Collec)

By Olivia Gates, Heidi Betts

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Two classic stories of powerful men…wrapped around their babies' little fingers

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Claiming His Own & Her Little Secret, His Hidden Heir (Harlequin Billionaires and Babies Collec) By Olivia Gates, Heidi Betts Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #4761484 in Books
- Published on: 2015-04-21
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.61" h x .94" w x 4.21" l, .39 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 400 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author
USA TODAY Bestselling author Olivia Gates has published over thirty books in contemporary, action/adventure and paranormal romance. And whether in today's world or the others she creates, she writes larger than life heroes and heroines worthy of them, the only ones who'll bring those sheikhs, princes, billionaires or gods to their knees. She loves to hear from readers at oliviagates@gmail.com or on facebook.com/oliviagatesauthor, Twitter @Oliviagates. For her latest news visit oliviagates.com

USA Today bestselling author Heidi Betts writes sexy, sassy, sensational romance. The recipient of several awards and stellar reviews, Heidi's books combine believable characters with compelling plotlines, and are consistently described as "delightful," "sizzling," and "wonderfully witty."

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"And he never came back?"

Cali stared at Kassandra Stavros's gorgeous face. It took several disconcerted moments before she reminded herself her new friend couldn't possibly be talking about Maksim.

After all, Kassandra didn't even know about him. No one did.

Cali had kept their…liaison a secret from her family and friends. Even when declaring her pregnancy had become unavoidable, with Maksim still in her life, she'd refused to tell anyone who the father was. Even when she'd clung to the hope that he'd remain part of her life after her baby was born, their situation had been too. Irregular, and she'd had no wish to explain it to anyone. Certainly not to her traditional Greek family.

The only one she knew who wouldn't have judged was Aristedes. Her, that was. He would have probably wanted to take Maksim apart. Literally. When he'd been in a similar situation, her brother had gone to extreme lengths to stake a claim on his lover, Selene, and their son, Alex. He'd consider any man doing anything less a criminal. His outrage would have been a thousand fold with her and his nephew on the other end of the equation. Aristedes would have probably exacted a drastic punishment on Maksim for shirking his responsibilities. Knowing Maksim, it would have developed into a war.

Not that she would have tolerated being considered Maksim's "responsibility," or would have let Aristedes fight her battle. Not when it hadn't been one to start with. She'd told Maksim he'd owed her nothing. And she'd meant it. As for Aristedes and her family, she'd been independent far too long to want their blessings or need their support. She wouldn't have let anyone have an opinion, let alone a say, in how she'd conducted her life, or the…arrangement she'd had with Maksim.

Then he'd disappeared, making the whole thing redundant. All they knew was that Leo's father had been "nothing serious."

Kassandra was now talking about another man in Cali's life who'd been a living example of "nothing serious." Someone who should also hold some record for Most Callous User.

Her father.

The only good thing he'd ever done, in her opinion, had been leaving her mother and his brood of kids before Cali had been born. Her other siblings, especially Aristedes and Andreas, had lifelong scars to account for their exposure to his negligence and exploitation. She'd at least escaped that.

She finally answered her friend, sighing, "No. He was gone one day and was never heard from again. We have no idea if he's still alive. Though he must be long dead or he would have surfaced as soon as Aristedes made his first ten thousand dollars."

Her friend's mouth dropped open. "You think he would have come back asking for money? From the son he'd abandoned?"

"Can't imagine that type of malignant nonparent, huh?"

Kassandra shrugged. "Guess I can't. My father and uncles may be controlling Greek pains, but it's because they're really hopeless mother hens."

Cali smiled, seeing how any male in the family of the incredibly beautiful Kassandra would be protective of her. "According to Selene, they believe you give them just cause for their Greek overprotectiveness to go into hyperdrive."

A chuckle burst on Kassandra's lips. "Selene told you about them, huh?"

Selene, Aristedes's wife and Kassandra's best friend, had told her the broad lines about Kassandra before introducing them to each other, confident they'd work spectacularly well together. Which they did. But they'd only started being more than business associates in the past two months, gradually becoming close personal friends. Which Cali welcomed very much. She did need a woman to talk to, one of her own age, temperament and interests, and Kassandra fulfilled all those criteria. Although Selene certainly fit the bill, too, ever since Cali had given birth to Leo, being around family, which Selene was now, had become too…uncomfortable.

So Kassandra had been heaven-sent. And though they'd been delving deeper in private waters every time they met, it was the first time they'd swerved into the familial zone.

Glad to steer the conversation away from herself, she grinned at her new confidante. "Selene only told me the basics, said she'd leave it up to you to supply the hilarious details."

Kassandra slid lower on the couch, her incredible hair fanning out against the cushions in a glossy sun-streaked mass, her Mediterranean-green eyes twinkling in amusement. "Yeah, I flaunted their strict values, their conservative expectations and traditional hopes for me. I wasted one huge opportunity after another of acquiring a socially enviable, deep-pocketed 'sponsor' to procreate with, to provide them with more perfect, preferably male progenies to shove onto the path of greatness, following my brothers' and cousins' shiningly ruthless example, and to perpetuate the romantic, if misleading, stereotype of those almighty Greek tycoons."

Cali chuckled, Kassandra's dry wit tickling her almost atrophied sense of humor. "They must have had collective strokes when you left home at eighteen and worked your way through college in minimum-wage jobs and then added mortification to worry by becoming a model."

Kassandra grinned. "They do attribute their blood-pressure and sugar-level abnormalities to my scandalous behavior. You'd think they would have settled down now that I've hit thirty and left my lingerie-modeling

days behind to become a struggling designer."

Kassandra was joking here since at thirty she was far more beautiful than she'd been at twenty. She'd just become so famous she preferred to model only for causes now. And she was well on her way to becoming just as famous as a designer. Cali felt privileged to be a major part of establishing her as a household name through an innovative series of online ad campaigns.

Kassandra's generous lips twisted. "But no. They're still recycling the same nightmares about the dangers I must be facing, fending off the perverts and predators they imagine populate my chosen profession. And they're lamenting my single status louder by the day, and getting more frantic as they count down my fast-fading attractions and fertility. Thirty to Greeks seems to be the equivalent of fifty in other cultures."

Cali snorted. "Next time they wail, point them my way. They'd thank you instead for not detonating their social standing completely by bearing an out-of-wedlock child."

A wicked gleam deepened the emerald of Kassandra's eyes. "Maybe I should. It doesn't seem I'll ever find a man who'll mess with my mind enough that I'd actually be willing to put up with the calamity of the marriage institution either for real, or for the cause of perpetuating the Stavros species. Not to mention that your and Selene's phenomenal tykes are making my biological clock clang."

Cali's heart twitched. Whenever Kassandra lumped her with Selene, it brought their clashing realities into painful focus. Selene, having two babies with the love of her life. And her, having Leo…alone.

"Being a single parent isn't something to be considered lightly," she murmured.

Contrition filled Kassandra's eyes. "Which you are in the best position to know. I remember how Selene struggled before Aristedes came back. As successful as she is, being a single mother was such a big burden to bear alone. Before her experience, I had this conviction that fathers were peripheral at best in the first few years of a child's life. But then I saw the night-and-day difference Aristedes made in Selene and Alex's lives…." She huffed a laugh. "Though he's no example. We all know there's only one of him on planet earth."

Just as Cali had thought there was only one of Maksim. If not because of any human traits…

But Aristedes had once appeared to be just as inhuman. In his case, appearances had been the opposite of reality.

Cali sighed again. "You don't know how flabbergasted I still am sometimes to see how amazing Aristedes is as a husband and father. We used to believe he was the phenomenally successful version of our heartless, loser father."

It had been one specific night in particular that she'd become convinced of that. The night Leonidas—their brother—had died.

As she and her sisters had clung together, reeling from the horrific loss, Aristedes had swooped in and taken complete charge of the situation. All business, he'd dealt with the police and the burial and arranged the wake, but had offered them no solace, hadn't stayed an hour after the funeral.

That had still been far better than Andreas, who hadn't returned at all, or even acknowledged Leoni-das's

death then or since. But it had convinced her that Aristedes, too, had no emotions…just like their father.

She'd since realized that he was the opposite of their father, felt *too* much, but had been so unversed in demonstrating his emotions, he'd expressed them instead in the support he'd lavished on her and all his siblings since they'd been born. But after Selene had *claimed him,* as he said, something fundamental had changed in him. He was still ruthless in business, but on a personal level, he'd opened up with his family and friends. And when it came to Selene and their kids, he was a huge rattle toy.

"So your father was that bad, huh?" Kassandra asked.

Cali took a sip of tea, loath to discuss her father. She'd always been glib about him. But it was suddenly hitting her how close to her own situation it all was.

She exhaled her rising unease. "His total lack of morals and concern for anything beyond his own petty interests were legend. He got my mother pregnant with Aristedes when she was only seventeen. He was four years older, a charmer who never held down a job and who only married her because his father threatened to cut him off financially if he didn't. He used her and the kids he kept impregnating her with to squeeze his father for bigger allowances, which he spent on himself. After his father died, he took his inheritance and left."

Cali paused for a moment to regulate her agitated breathing before resuming. "He came back when he'd squandered it, knowing full well that Mother would feed him and take care of him with what little money she earned or got from those who remained of her own family, those who'd stopped helping out when they realized their hard-earned money was going to that user. He drifted in and out of her and my siblings' lives, each time coming back to add another child to his brood and another burden on my mother's shoulders before disappearing again. He always came back swearing his love, of course, offering sob stories about how hard life was on him."

Chagrin filled Kassandra's eyes more with every word. "And your mother just took him back?"

Cali nodded, more uncomfortable by the second at the associations this conversation was raising.

"Aristedes said she didn't know it was possible for her not to. He understood it all, having been forced to mature very early, but could do nothing about it except help his mother. He was only seven when he was already doing everything that no-good father should have been doing while mother took care of the younger kids. By twelve he had left school and was working four jobs to barely make ends meet. Then when he was fifteen, said nonfather disappeared for the final time when I was still a work in progress.

"Aristedes went on to work his way up from the docks in Crete to become one of the biggest shipping magnates in the world. Regretfully, our mother was around only to see the beginnings of his success, as she died when I was only six. He then brought us all over here to New York, got us American citizenships and provided us with the best care and education money could buy.

"But he didn't stick around, didn't even become American himself, except after he married Selene. But his success and all that we have now was in spite of what that man who fathered us did to destroy our lives, as he managed to destroy our mother. All in all, I am only thankful I didn't have the curse of having him poison my life as he did Aristedes's and the rest of my siblings'."

Kassandra blinked, as if unable to take in that level of unfeeling, premeditated exploitation. "It's mind-

boggling. How someone can be so…evil with those he's supposed to care for. He did one thing right, though, even if inadvertently. He had you and your siblings. You guys are great."

Cali refrained from telling her that she'd always thought only Leonidas had been deserving of that accolade. Now she knew Aristedes was, too, but she felt her three sisters, though she loved them dearly, had been infected with a degree or another of their mother's passivity and willingness to be downtrodden. Andreas, sibling number five out of seven, was just…an enigma. From his lifelong loath interactions with them, she was inclined to think that he was far worse than anything she'd ever thought Aristedes to be.

But while she'd thought she'd escaped her mother's infection, perhaps she hadn't after all.

Apart from the different details, Cali had basically done with Maksim what her mother had done with her father. She'd gotten involved with someone she'd known she shouldn't have. Then, when it had been in her best interest to walk away, she'd been too weak to do so, until he'd been the one who'd left her.

But her mother had had an excuse. An underprivileged woman living in Crete isolated from opportunity or hope of anything different, a woman who didn't know how to aspire to better.

Cali was a twenty-first-century, highly educated, totally independent American woman. How could she defend her actions and decisions?

"Look at the time!" Kassandra jumped to her feet. "Next time, just kick me out and don't let little ol' kidless me keep you from stocking up on sleep for those early mornings with Leo."

Rising, Cali protested, "I'd rather have you here all night yammering about anything than sleep. I've been starving for adult company…particularly of the female variety, outside of discussing baby stuff with Leo's nanny."

Kassandra hugged her, chuckling as she rushed to the door. "You can use me any time to ward off your starvation."

After setting up a meeting to discuss the next phase in their campaign and to go over Cali's progress reports, Kassandra rushed off, and Cali found herself staring at the closed oak door of her suddenly silent apartment.

That all-too-familiar feeling of dejection, which always assailed her when she didn't have a distraction, settled over her like a shroud.

She could no longer placate herself that this was lingering postpartum depression. She hated to admit it, but everything she'd been suffering for the past year had only one cause.

Maksim.

She walked back through her place, seeing none of its exquisiteness or the upgrades she'd installed to make it suitable for a baby. Her feet, as usual, took her without conscious volition to Leo's room.

She tiptoed inside, though she knew she wouldn't wake him. After the first six sleepless months, he'd thankfully switched to all-night-sleeping mode. She believed taking away the night-light and having him sleep in darkness had helped. She now only had the corridor light to guide her, though she'd know her way to his bed blindfolded.

As her vision adjusted, his beloved shape materialized out of the darkness, and emotion twisted in her throat as it always did whenever she beheld him. It regularly blindsided her, the power of her feelings for him.

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