



The Consequence He Must Claim (The Wrong Heirs)

By Dani Collins

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Her boss...

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His baby!

After surviving a violent car crash, Cesar Montero lost the memories of the ardent hours he shared with his effortlessly seductive PA. So when Cesar discovers that their time together resulted in a lasting consequence, he's determined to claim his child and relive the white-hot night he can no longer recall...again and again!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

When Canadian Dani Collins found romance novels in high school she immediately wondered how one trained for such an awesome job. She began writing, trying various genres, but always came back to her first love, Harlequin Presents. Often distracted by family and 'real' jobs, she continued writing, inspired by the romance message that if you hang in there you'll reach a happy ending. In May of 2012, Harlequin offered to buy her manuscript in a two book deal. She is living happily ever after.

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Sorcha ended the call and grabbed a tissue to let the tears release. Oh, she was homesick and filled with self-pity, not that she had wanted her mum to hear it.

Mum was probably doing the same thing. They were both pretending Sorcha's situation wasn't a disaster and this emergency caesarian in London was the icing on the cake. Things really couldn't get any worse.

She so wished she'd managed to get home before going into labor. She might have found a decent job here after quitting right after that disastrous talk with Diega, but Ireland was where her heart was. If her son wouldn't be recognized as Spanish, like his father, she had at least wanted him born on Irish soil.

It hadn't happened.

Her nurse, Hannah, came in with a wheelchair and a chipper offer to take her down to meet him. Finally.

That brought a smile to Sorcha's face. She might be lonely here, but at least she had her son now. She would only be in hospital a few days, Hannah assured her, while the staff confirmed they were both healthy enough to be released. Then Sorcha could make the trek on the ferry and soon be surrounded by the people who loved her.

Her family would adore her son. Little things like being illegitimate just made him more like the rest of them.

Hannah asked how she was feeling and Sorcha started to explain that she had had every intention of delivering naturally, but had gone into labor early and the cord had been in the way, so they'd had to send her for emergency surgery. It had been quite dramatic, arriving on the heels of a tourist bus crash and at the same time as another woman needing an emergency caesarian section in the theater next to hers.

She broke off as they entered the nursery to find crying babies and the other mum from last night. Not that she'd met the stunning Italian woman. Sorcha had only caught a glimpse of a man she'd thought must have been the woman's husband. She'd heard him speaking Italian on the phone as she was wheeled past him.

"Hello. I heard we were competing for the surgeon's attention last night," she greeted. "I'm Sorcha Kelly."

Wait a minute. That wasn't the man from last night. He looked sharper, despite his stubble of beard growth. His hair was decidedly shorter.

He offered a polite nod. "Alessandro Ferrante. My wife, Octavia, and our son, Lorenzo," he said, then glanced at his wife. "That is the name we agreed upon, is it not?"

The other woman seemed...shell-shocked. If she felt anything like Sorcha did, Sorcha sympathized. The anesthetic had made her sluggish and every movement caused the incision across her abdomen to whimper.

Octavia exchanged a look with her husband that Sorcha might have tried to decipher, but the nurse had fetched and loosely wrapped her baby. He was crying furiously, like he'd been at it awhile, making her very sorry he'd had to wait.

"Do you mind, Mr. Ferrante?" Hannah said, pirouetting a finger in the air.

He apologized and turned with the sort of male briskness that men showed when confronted with a woman's demand for modesty.

Sorcha couched a smile. He reminded her of Cesar. Not so much in looks, although they were both very dark and handsome, but in the way he emanated vitality and owned the room.

Cesar, she thought, and missed him all over again. She desperately wanted to be with her family when his wedding took place this weekend, not here in the hospital, nursing melancholy along with his baby.

Murmuring a tender greeting, she closed her arms around the delicious weight of the bundled infant. *Hers*, she thought. Not a Montero, just as she wasn't a Shelby. "Enrique," she added in a whisper. Cesar's middle name. She would call him Ricky—

Wait. Something wasn't right.

He was crying so earnestly the sound broke her heart. She instinctively wanted to do anything soothe him, but...

Distantly she heard Octavia say in a choked voice,

"That's—"

"Octavia," her husband interrupted with an undertone of warning.

Sorcha wasn't really tracking the other people in the room. She cocked her head, perplexed, as she tried to figure out why her feelings for this baby were protective, but not maternal.

"Just put him to the breast. He'll latch. They know what to do," Hannah urged.

"I don't think—" Sorcha couldn't even voice her thoughts, they were so bizarre. She found her gaze lifting and looked across to the baby Octavia was trying to soothe. Octavia rubbed his back and rocked him and for some weird reason, that boy's cries went through Sorcha's skin like rippling waves, moving things in her she couldn't even name.

As Octavia held Sorcha's stare in a kind of eerie transfixion, she lowered the baby so Sorcha could see his face.

Sorcha looked at the squalling infant. His brows were wrinkled in a way that she knew, like an imprint on a part of her that recognized its own kind. That frown of displeasure was all Cesar, and those miniature lips—they were a replica of the mouth she'd seen in the mirror all her life.

Horror washed over her in a clammy rush.

"What's wrong?" Hannah asked as the other nurse blurted out something, but Sorcha wasn't listening.

"How did you...?" she began, sharp suspicion rising. She cut herself off. It was beyond outlandish. People didn't steal babies. They certainly didn't sit across from you and taunt you with it. That was something from a psycho thriller film.

But her heart was pounding in terror. Confusion and certainty warred and she began to shake under the strain of it.

Baring the ankle of the baby she held, she turned the tag with a trembling hand. It read, Kelly.

But this wasn't her baby. *That* was her baby. That woman held her baby.

Beginning to panic, Sorcha flashed her gaze to Octa-via's, not sure what she expected. An evil grin?

Octavia's lower lip was trembling. "They wouldn't believe me," she said weakly.

"Believe what?" Hannah asked.

"My wife is confused," Alessandro said, and moved between Sorcha and her baby, trying to take the infant Octavia held.

"Don't," Sorcha blurted, and understood the kind of irrational yet powerful instinct that drove animals to overcome self-preservation, confront dangerous predators and protect their young with every last breath in their body. "Don't touch him."

The baby she held was screaming her ears off and part of her wanted to comfort him, but that was her baby over there. That one.

She struggled to her feet and came across to Octavia. The other woman had tears on her cheeks.

"No one would believe me," Octavia told her again. "I wanted to feed him, but he needs his own mama and they wouldn't give me mine..."

They clumsily exchanged babies and the dizzying panic that had nearly overwhelmed Sorcha began to subside. Her heart continued to race and adrenaline burned up her veins.

"I believe you," she said, smiling shakily now that her son's sweet scent filled her nostrils. She kissed his cheek and clasped him against her chest, knowing with unequivocal certainty that this was her son. Cesar's son. "Of course we know our own babies."

What the hell had just happened? *What the hell?*

As if reflecting the emotions Sorcha felt, Octavia nodded, eyes closing as she bent her head over the baby she obviously loved and had been aching to hold.

How long had she been sitting here holding Enrique, trying to convince them to give her the right baby? In the face of that torture, Octavia had still tried to soothe Sorcha's son.

A funny little bond formed between them even as Sorcha seated herself and brought Enrique to her breast. Silence descended as both boys finally received the meal they'd been begging for. Still very bewildered, Sorcha exchanged a teary smile with Octavia.

And became aware of profound silence.

"What are you *doing*?" Alessandro's gruff male voice was astounded.

"Can't you see they mixed them up? Look at him," Octavia said.

"It's impossible," Hannah said. "We have very strict protocols. They couldn't have been switched. You shouldn't be doing this," she warned, rolling the tag around on Enrique's ankle. It read, Ferrante—Boy. "You both have it wrong."

Now that she was seated and had her baby calmed, Sorcha was shifting from disbelief to outrage. How could the hospital mess up something this important?

"*You* have it wrong," Sorcha said firmly, brushing Hannah's hand from her son. If she thought they were going to switch back, they had another think coming. She was ready to draw blood. Only the fact she was holding a fragile newborn kept her seated and rational. "Test them. You'll see we're right."

Chaos ensued as the nurses tried to convince the mothers they'd made a mistake. Thankfully Octavia was as adamant as Sorcha.

Finally the surgeon, Dr. Reynolds, arrived. She was taken aback and involved the hospital administration at once, all the while assuring them the chance of a mix-up was highly unlikely. She wanted to run DNA tests, and would do a blood test now. "It won't be conclusive, but it could certainly determine if a baby is *not* with the right pair of parents."

A jumble of activity left Sorcha feeling like a dupe in a three-card shuffle, trying to follow what they were doing and maintain some control over the situation. While a technician took a blood sample from the baby she held, no one seemed to make note that she knew—*knew*—that Cesar's blood type was A. She had worked for him for three years! She knew everything about him.

Eventually everyone cleared out, the men going to look at security tapes while one nurse stayed behind to give her and Octavia slings to snuggle the babies while they dozed in their rockers. Neither of them was prepared to release the infant they each held.

Sorcha tried to relax, chatted briefly with Octavia, but her mind kept tracking back to the fact she'd put Cesar's name on her admittance form. It had been an emergency delivery. Her mother was registered as next of kin, but Sorcha had wanted Cesar identified as the baby's father if the worst had happened.

They wouldn't contact him without speaking to her first, would they?

Cesar Montero subtly pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting a dull headache and a desire to tell his fiancée that he didn't give a flying rat's behind about who sat where at their wedding reception. Social arrangements were his mother's bailiwick. If he'd still had Sorcha, she would have handled this, freeing him up for more important things.

Actually, he'd bet any money she would challenge him with "What's more important than your wedding?" She'd always been quick to push a family-first agenda, teasing him for being a scientist wired for logic. She'd known when she could give him a nudge and when to back off, though, along with how to plow through minutiae so he didn't get bored and lose patience. Most important, she had been able to make decisions on her own.

But Sorcha was gone, damn her. Without any notice or explanation. She'd left while he'd still been in the hospital, barely awake from his coma. According to his father, she'd discussed it with Cesar in the week that was missing from his memory. Given that he'd been unconscious in those first weeks after the accident, and his father had his own assistant, he could imagine she had felt redundant, but she must have known he'd be back to work eventually. His father could have found her a temporary position in the organization or simply offered her paid leave. She'd had enough vacation time stockpiled.

Jumping ship was unacceptable. If his father hadn't already written her a glowing reference, Cesar would have been reluctant to. He could have used her more than ever in these first months back at work, as he first went into the office on crutches at his own chemical engineering plant, and had more recently begun resuming the takeover from his father on the rest of the family enterprise.

She was just an employee, he reminded himself, irritated that he was letting her absence rile him. Yes, he missed her efficiency, but he wasn't a sentimental man. Being friendly with a colleague wasn't the same as being friends. For all the times she'd been more blunt than he appreciated, their relationship had been a professional one. He directed, she delivered. Sulking because she hadn't played cards with him in the hospital was not something he would stoop to.

At least she had understood simple instructions, he thought as he glanced at the watch that had started pulsing on his wrist. Diega noticed and looked at him as if he'd kicked her Siamese cat. His mother caught on and tsked a noise of disappointment at his rudeness.

"I asked not to be interrupted," he informed both women, making sure his new assistant heard his displeased tone as he touched the face of his smart watch.

He automatically adjusted the volume in his earpiece as his assistant said, "They claim it's an emergency. It's a hospital in London."

His thoughts leaped to Sorcha, even though there was no reason to expect she would be ill or injured, but he had tracked her on social media far enough to know she was working in that city. Still, if she needed medical attention, she wouldn't list him as a contact. She had family in Ireland. She was off the company benefits, working for someone else.

He almost refused the call, unable to think of another reason a hospital in London would want to speak to him. He had a vague thought about his siblings' whereabouts, but neither his brother nor sister was in that city. Hell, he would wind up returning this call later if he didn't take it now and he would go out of his skull if he didn't accomplish something constructive with his morning.

"*Un momento,*" he said, stepping away from the women. "Cesar Montero," he stated, accepting the call.

"Cesar Montero...y Rosales?" a female voice asked.

"*Si.*" He grew more alert at the use of his full name.

"Who's calling?"

She identified herself as an official for the hospital. "Did Ms. Kelly tell you to expect my call?"

"No." He frowned as he absorbed this *was* about Sorcha.

"Oh." She sounded confused. "This is the information she gave on her admittance form. Am I speaking to the correct person? Will you confirm a few details for me?"

"*Si,*" he said and gave her his birth date and residential address as requested. He rubbed where the ache in his brow intensified. "What is this about?"

"You haven't spoken to Ms. Kelly today?" She sounded surprised. The silence that followed struck him as a retreat. She was cautious now.

Instinct made him say carefully, "I've been tied up. She left a message, but I haven't listened to it yet."

"But you're aware she was admitted last night?"

"Yes," he lied, while his heart jolted painfully. They'd asked if he'd spoken to her, he reminded himself. That meant she was speaking. "I've been anxious for news," he added. He was a scientist at heart, but he'd studied conversational manipulations at his mother's knee. "What can you report?"

"Well, it's difficult news, I'm afraid. There is a very small possibility the babies have been switched." She paused, allowing him to react.

He didn't have a reaction. A chasm of confusion opened in him, one he didn't want to betray to the woman on the phone, or the two women behind him. He could hear their silence as they waited for him to wrap up this annoying interruption.

"Obviously we'll be running a DNA test, but we're hoping a blood test can offer some clarity. How soon could you get to a clinic? Our hospital will cover the charges, but we're anxious for the results."

Cesar choked out a laugh. "Are you...?"

He realized where he was. He jerked around to see both his fiancée and his mother staring at him. His mother waved an impatient hand at the seating plan spread across the dining room table. Diega's features sharpened with query.

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