



The Blackstone Heir (Billionaires and Babies)

By Dani Wade

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Dani Wade astonished her local librarians as a teenager when she carried home 10 books every week—and actually read them all. Now she writes her own characters who clamor for attention in the midst of the chaos that is her life. Residing in the southern U.S. with a husband, two kids, two dogs, and one grumpy cat, she stays busy until she can closet herself away with her characters once more.

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"Hello, beautiful."

KC Gatlin heard the bell of a store door as she walked past on the sidewalk, but it simply registered as background noise. That voice, on the other hand, landed like a grenade on her senses. She could still hear the same words, the same deep sigh as she opened her door to him for the first time. Only this time he sounded not just sexy, but surprised.

Turning slowly, she found herself face-to-face with a man she had hoped not to see for many long, long months. The expectation was unrealistic, she knew, considering she once again lived in the same town as his family. The town he came home to visit often. His appearance now marked the approach of sure disaster, even as it brought into sharp focus how much she'd craved a glimpse of his tall runner's build and the unique blend of blonds in his close-cropped hair.

"Jacob Blackstone," she said, stalling while her brain struggled to come up with the flirty, easy responses for which she was known. They made her great tips as a waitress and bartender. But now, when she needed flippancy the most, it remained scarce. "What're you doing here?"

Stupid. There was a very logical reason why he would be here: to check on his invalid mother, Lily Blackstone, now that his grandfather was dead and his brother Aiden had moved home. KC had just hoped to catch a few months' breather before facing her past. Facing her mistakes.

"I mean, what are you doing on this end of town?" At least that question made sense. After all, Blackstone Manor was on the other side of Black Hills. But her fears, along with the steady, sober gaze of her former lover, had her brains whisked around like scrambled eggs. She had to get a handle on the panic jangling along her nerves.

He held up a small shopping bag. "Bandages. I needed to pick some up on my way home from work."

"Are you hurt—wait, home from work?" She tilted her head back for a better view of Jacob's face. She'd loved his height when they were together; how it sheltered her, protected her. Too bad that feeling of security had been nothing but an illusion.

"Yes, from the mill." He didn't look away, his gorgeous amber eyes with their unusual swirl of dark chocolate boring into her. She wanted a break from his unrelenting stare...and paradoxically wished she could bask in his attention. While her reactions ricocheted inside her, he went on, "I guess you haven't been home long enough to hear the news?" His voice rose at the end in a question, along with his brow.

"I guess not. I just moved back this week." Her stomach slowly turned over. Once. Then again. Why had her

family not told her before she came home? The answer was obvious: they wanted her here, with them. She might never have returned if she'd known Jacob was now a permanent resident of Black Hills again.

She and Jacob had met on a plane to Black Hills—she'd been coming home from visiting her aunt in Seattle and had made a connecting flight in Philadelphia, where Jacob had been flying from to check on his mother. They'd seen each other every time he'd come to town since. Then reality had caught up with her in the threats of Jacob's grandfather and she'd gone to live with her aunt. A world away from this fascinating man and what they'd shared together.

She'd thought returning to her family would be safe now that James Blackstone was dead and gone. His threats to take away the livelihood of three single women unable to defend themselves—and a lifetime of proof that he'd do it—would finally be over. She'd known she would have to handle Jacob eventually, but had hoped to have more time. Much more.

She had a feeling he was about to burst her bubble.

"I've moved back to Black Hills to help Aiden run the mill. He has to split his time between here and New York, and with all the problems at the mill, we wanted a fulltime presence."

"Yes, I heard that there were some odd things happening over there," she murmured. *Full-time?* The Lord must be punishing her for the secrets she kept.

Speaking of secrets... She tilted her head to the side as unobtrusively as possible to get a glimpse of the sidewalk behind Jacob. Her mother and grandmother were due to come out of the general store any minute. While she knew she had to talk to Jacob soon, she would prefer not to do it on the sidewalk in front of Parson's Pharmacy with the whole town looking on.

At least she had one thing going for her: Main Street was lined with miniature Bradford pear trees that would keep any busybodies from getting a clear view from the surrounding stores. In late spring, they were packed with white blooms that afforded even more privacy. Maybe no one would see more than just two neighbors greeting each other.

If she caused a scene on the sidewalk, Jacob would probably have a conniption. Months of him not taking her anywhere in public in Black Hills had taught her that much.

In the year they'd dated, Jacob had never introduced her to his family, never taken her *out* on a date. They'd spent evenings at her house, cooking, watching movies and making love before he went home to Philadelphia. She'd gone to visit his apartment there once, hoping to learn more about the city he loved enough to leave his family behind. Maybe a little about his work as the head of a large manufacturing company. But they'd never made it out of the apartment. KC had craved a real love all her life, after being abandoned over and over again as a child. Jacob wasn't looking for love... Still, she'd wanted him, so she'd forced herself not to need more from him.

His actions had made it obvious he wasn't interested in a long-term relationship, so she'd ignored her secret yearning for more. She'd been too afraid of losing him to insist. Responsible, steady guys usually didn't look at her twice—after all, she worked in a bar. But it wasn't just his incredible looks, smart, confident attitude or how good he'd been at rocking her world. Until she'd disappeared, Jacob had been attentive, caring and sexy—everything she'd ever wanted. But never committed—which was the one thing she'd needed him to be.

"Waiting for someone?" Jacob asked, folding his arms across his chest.

Oh, how she remembered that stance. He mostly resorted to it when he was disapproving or uncertain and didn't want anyone to know it. She'd jokingly called it his Dom stance, though Jacob didn't need power games to keep the bedroom interesting. His tightened muscles and locked legs exuded a commanding aura that sent shivers down her spine. Jake had strength in spades, but she hadn't trusted him to use it *for* her, to keep her. Her childhood had taught her it wouldn't happen.

She must have gotten lost in her thoughts, because Jacob bent closer, looming over her. "A new man, perhaps?"

A man? She'd thought she could be happily done with the whole species for quite a while, until today. Jacob Blackstone had jump-started her tingling all over again. That intense gaze sent her heart racing and mouth watering. "Um, actually, my mom is on her way. Just checking for her, that's all."

Wow, this was so far from her usual easy conversations that she felt as if her secret was screaming from her guilty heart. Still, she could use his assumptions to her advantage.

"But yes, I do have a new man in my life." Jacob didn't need to know in what capacity after all. Anything to keep him at arm's length as long as possible.

"Is that why you changed your number...after refusing to answer your phone for weeks?"

Whoa. Not the direction she'd anticipated. But then, Jacob Blackstone had never failed to surprise her. There were whole areas of his life she knew absolutely nothing about.

"Look, Jacob, I'm really sorry. That was very bad of me." But she'd been carrying a heavy load with no idea what direction to go. A reason, not an excuse. She'd finally run far away, only returning once James Blackstone was dead. If she'd known Jacob would return, too—but no. Keeping secrets from him forever wasn't fair. She simply needed time. Time that was now draining away with the speed of sand in an hourglass.

"I just want to know why," he said, toned shoulder muscles flexing beneath his dress shirt. How did a CEO maintain such incredible physique...and stamina? She had to remind herself that it hadn't been enough, that she needed a man who would fight for her, no matter what anyone else thought.

"Did you think I couldn't handle the news that you wanted to break it off?" he asked.

"I... " Across the street, KC noticed a group of familiar women strolling down the sidewalk. Black Hills was a relatively small town. Everyone knew most everyone else.

Standing on Main Street talking with Jacob was the equivalent of standing on a stage. She needed to escape before someone started paying attention—

Or her mother and grandmother made an appearance.

"I just... Well, I didn't know how to tell you I wasn't interested anymore, actually." Clunky, but the truth. Knowing she'd chosen the cowardly way out, she still forced herself to sidestep him, then back away. "And you never seemed to want to deal with any deeper stuff, so...really, Jake, I'm just, well, sorry."

Then she turned and walked away, praying she could sidetrack her mother and grandmother before they proceeded to parade her baby down Main Street. She couldn't let Jacob learn about his son that way. Because he'd take one look and realize the main reason why she'd disappeared, if not the whole truth. As much as his arm's-length attitude had confused her, he didn't deserve that.

Which meant instead of the months she'd convinced herself she had to introduce Jacob to his son, she only had a matter of days. And she probably needed to figure out how to do that sooner rather than later.

Jacob Blackstone was too good at reading people not to realize when someone was lying. KC Gatlin showed all the signs.

This afternoon she'd shifted from side to side, avoided answering directly and refused to look him in the eye. Much to his deep disappointment.

He'd anticipated that moment when their eyes would meet more than anything. He was still thinking about it as he sat with his brothers in a booth directly opposite the bar at Lola's, sharing a platter of man food—wings and cheesy bacon-covered French fries—and alcohol. Jacob's drink of choice had always been wine. His brothers ragged him about his caviar tastes, but Jacob refused to apologize for having the most refined sensibilities of the family.

KC was far from refined. She'd been the burn of whiskey his body had been waiting for. That was why he'd ached for her to look at him this morning. He remembered well the sparks that would explode inside him just from sharing her gaze. His long-dormant body craved another taste, like a kid craved Pop Rocks.

He'd never forget their first meeting. From the moment she'd taken the plane seat next to him, he'd been enamored. That first conversation had revealed intelligence and humor in a beguiling mix. When they'd landed at the airport an hour away from Black Hills, he'd offered to share a ride. From that moment on, whenever he'd been in town, he'd spent as much time at her place as Blackstone Manor, until she'd stopped answering his phone calls months later. When he'd come home for his grandfather's funeral, she'd been nowhere to be found. The little house they'd spent so many enjoyable hours in had been sealed up tight.

He didn't want to, was shocked that he couldn't stop, but he'd hungered for her since that very first plane ride together. Time and distance hadn't changed that, much to his disgust. Nothing about his obsession made sense. They lived in two different worlds. They had two very different personalities and approaches to life. Still, he wasn't ready to let her go.

She'd been as wild as he'd expected, but she'd also led him to more genuine fun than he'd had his entire adult life. Quiet nights at home with a movie, cooking for two and sleeping in—oddities in his workaholic routine. No woman had interested him in any way beyond the physical. KC had interested him in every way.

She still did.

"Excuse me, guys."

Leaving his brothers staring after him, he made his way around tables to cross the room. They'd been in their corner for an hour while KC tended bar, and she hadn't looked directly at him a single time. Every second without that connection had itched below his skin until he couldn't even concentrate on the conversation. He'd deliberately kept their relationship out of the local headlines, but Jacob was desperate enough to risk a little limelight right now.

Oh, boy. His attitude made him very afraid he might step into stalker mode now that the possibility of seeing her around was very, very real. Some days, thoughts of KC had made him feel as if he was losing his mind.

He braced himself for her special brand of sarcasm. Something that had been noticeably lacking this morning.

"Jake. What brings you in tonight?"

You. Jacob ground his teeth together. Not because the shortening of his name bothered him, but because hearing it said in KC Gatlin's husky voice reminded him of evenings being soothed by her presence after an upsetting day with his mom. Reminded him of long nights between the sheets.

Far too distant memories.

"Do I need a reason? Can't I just enjoy the opportunity to watch a beautiful woman work the crowd?"

For the better part of a year, such a simple comment would have had her eyes sparkling, those full, naturally red lips tilting into a luscious smile, her mouth ready and willing to talk back. But not tonight.

"You never came to watch me before," she said, then dropped her gaze to the bar and started scrubbing, leaving him bereft once more. *So she wasn't gonna make this easy.*

He settled on a bar stool, watching that compact body displayed to advantage in a tight T-shirt and jeans. She acknowledged the move with a quick flick of her lashes, then studiously avoided looking at him again.

Just the way she'd ignored his phone calls. For seven months. He should have moved on by now, but his obsession had only grown. Now this successful, accomplished businessman found himself hunting the woman he craved in the local honky-tonk, because, well...because the cravings had become unbearable.

It no longer mattered that he couldn't figure out how she would fit into his life plan without wreaking havoc on it. She was the woman he shouldn't want, but the one woman he couldn't forget.

So he sucked up the little pride he had left and leaned closer. "You never did say where you'd been, KC."

She paused, then dropped the towel and met his gaze head-on. One of the things that had long enticed him was the very moment those turbulent hazel eyes turned his way, letting him see the woman inside and her mood, based on the dominant color of the day. Blue for calm and sunny. Green for sultry and sexy. Brown for angry or sad.

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