

The Weakness of the Family

By Leah Merone

Holly Jefferson does *not* wear Victoria's Secret underwear.

When she finds a pair of faded pink panties underneath her husband's pillow, the brand burns like acid in her eyes. She blinks repeatedly, as if a blink is all it'll take to erase these panties (and their implications) from the world. *I hate pink, they're not my size, and I don't wear Victoria's goddamn Secret.*

As much as she'd love to dismiss it as a mistake, or a clerical error, there is only one explanation. Zack Jefferson is cheating. Again.

Holly stays silent through breakfast, stabbing her deviled eggs with the ferocity of a murderer at work. She barely registers her two sons' high-pitched commotion as they fight over a handmade toy. Nor does she take notice when her nine-year-old stepdaughter shows off the perfect score she achieved on a recent geography quiz. All she can think about are Zack's hands on another woman's body, and cold anger burrows through her heart.

"Holly?" Zack strolls into the kitchen, his smile as casual as his suit. "What's wrong, honey? You don't seem like yourself."

Holly bites back growls of *what's wrong with you, why do you keep doing this, don't you know how much you mean to me* and shrugs. "It's been a rough morning."

He kisses her forehead. "There." He winks. "Feel better?"

Ten years ago, she'd burst into lovestruck giggles. Now, she merely grunts.

“Come on, Holly,” Zack whined, trying his best to pull her into his arms. “I love you.”

She snorted and dodged his embrace. “Sure,” she snickered, her hazel eyes dancing with a sort of sarcastic amusement. “As if the great Zack Jefferson could ever love anybody. You don’t think I’ve heard the stories?”

“Stories?” he asked innocently.

Holly nodded. “They say that there are twenty-seven reasons why Melanie divorced you.” The elevator clanged to a stop on the fourteenth floor of the office building, freeing her to take her bags and escape Zack’s lustful gaze. “And all of them had boobs,” she called over her shoulder as she left.

As the elevator door closed on Zack, his eyebrows furrowed, and his jaw solidified into a solid line of determination.

“Just leave him!” Gwen spits through bites of chicken salad. “He’s not worth it! He’s just going to keep hurting you if you stay.”

Holly’s eyes wander across the diner and land on a family of five. The man pulls out a chair for his wife, beaming at her as if she is the only star in his midsummer sky, while the children play several rounds of Tic-Tac-Toe with a crumpled-up napkin. “We’re married, Gwen,” Holly murmurs as she watches the happy scene play out before her. “I can’t just leave him. We have *kids*, for God’s sake.” Tears kiss the corners of her eyes.

“So what are you going to do?”

To have and to hold. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and health. Till death do us part.

The man across the way throws an arm around his wife’s shoulder. She laughs.

Holly frowns. "I have a few ideas."

She buys ten different security cameras from the local Walmart, and they look like an army of white sentinels in her gray shopping cart. The bearded cashier takes note of her arsenal, raises an eyebrow, and mutters something about overkill under his breath. Holly couldn't care less what he thinks. If overkill is necessary to save her marriage, she'll overkill everything and everyone in town.

Over the next week, while Zack is at work, she installs the cameras all over the house. The kitchen. The garage. The parlor. *Two* in the bedroom. All of them are hidden in spots where Zack would never find them. She even borrows her husband's car for an "evening with friends" and places a tiny camera inside the dashboard.

It isn't until she's setting up a camera in the upstairs bathroom that she's caught. By her own son, no less.

"Mom? What are you doing?"

It isn't Harold, thank the Lord. If it was, the seven-year-old's tech-savvy brain would ensure the downfall of Holly's beautiful plan. It is Aidan, age eight, who cares for nothing but sports and shows of strength, and so he does not catch on. Holly breathes a sigh of relief.

"Nothing, sweetheart," she says in a sugary voice, unable to look at her own child. "Just cleaning out the cabinets."

Aidan tilts his head, his eyes (the same shade of blue as his father's) swimming with confusion. "Okay," he says after a pause that almost lasts forever, and he leaves, pretending to dribble a basketball while humming a rock song to himself.

Holly returns her attention to the cabinets, running her fingers over their smooth wood as she tries to figure out the best place for her camera. Evidence. That's all she needs. Rock-solid evidence, captured on at least one of these store-fresh cameras. She'll confront Zack with the evidence, and she'll change him.

Zack won her on a Friday night, testing the boundaries with alcohol before using his hands to discover all the sensitive places on her body. As she giggled and moaned underneath him, she cursed herself for letting a known "ladies' man" steal his way into her heart.

She demanded commitment the next morning.

"Of course, babe," he promised, massaging her broad shoulders. "It's not like I have anyone else tying me down."

Every day for the next three weeks, while her husband is at work and the children are at school, Holly uses the time not spent on housewife activities to review the footage. At first, she finds nothing but her family engaging in their typical routines. Aidan plays hockey indoors. Harold tinkers with his latest "project." Adrianna sifts through the pages of a Charles Dickens novel. And Zack struts about the house, his slicked black hair standing at attention, as if he is a lion inspecting his domain. He looks *far* too proud of himself.

It isn't until the beginning of the fourth week that something pops up.

The woman is a petite redhead with a slim, alluring figure--the polar opposite of Holly's stringy brown hair and stocky frame. The only similarity between the two is the smattering of freckles that dot both of their faces.

Zack leads her into the car. “Christina,” he calls her. “Christina, we did it. I won the case for you. Aren’t you going to thank me?”

“I have,” says Christina. “Many times. You’ve been a big help.”

They drive away. They exchange some small talk about the weather and the news, all of which Holly listens to with rapt attention. Then, after seventeen minutes, Zack pulls over, and the tires squeal against the pavement.

“This isn’t my house,” says Christina.

“I love you,” Zack replies.

Holly’s jealousy tells her that Christina will smile, that she’ll say “I love you too” and lean in for a kiss. Instead, Christina looks at Zack as if he just poured acid all over himself and is now disintegrating before her eyes. “You love me?” She shakes her head. “Don’t be silly. I’ve known you for a week. And aren’t you married?”

Zack grabs her by her well-ironed collar and traps her in a kiss.

Holly’s had enough. She stops the tape, curls into a corner of her bed, and tries to burn the image of Zack kissing Christina out of her brain. *This is what our family means to him, growls her subconscious. He’ll throw it all away for a nice rack and a makeout session.*

Then, a more unsettling thought hits: *she didn’t look like she wanted it.*

“Mom! Dad!” screamed Adrianna. “Aidan stole my book, and he won’t give it back!”

Holly and Zack looked at each other, shrugged, and headed upstairs, where they found a crying Adrianna attempting to snatch her copy of The Indian in the Cupboard out of Aidan’s grasp. Aidan clutched it close to him, a youthful snarl on his face.

“Aidan!” Holly snapped.

“I wanted to read it!” Aidan complained. “She never lets me borrow anything!”

Zack pulled Aidan aside. “Now, son,” he told the frustrated boy, “you can’t take things from your sister without asking. Why don’t you and I go outside and play catch for a while? That should cheer you up.”

Aidan perked up at the prospect of playing catch with his father, and he unceremoniously dropped the book on the floor. He followed Zack out of the room, leaving Holly alone with Adrianna. The little girl picked up her book and resumes reading, apparently satisfied with this turn of events.

Holly bit her lip. She wasn’t entirely comfortable with Zack’s casual methods of discipline, but she certainly wasn’t about to bring it up now. Not when everyone seems so happy about how things turned out. “Are you okay?” she asked Adrianna.

Adrianna nodded, still engrossed in the book.

Harold chose that moment to enter the room. “Mom?” He held up a strange wooden gadget. “I can’t get this to work. Can you help me?”

Holly, despite her limited knowledge of mechanics, helped him out. She nearly got a splinter in the process, but the adoring look on Harold’s face made it all worth it.

Zack comes home from work that night, and he spends the evening regaling the family with tales of a lawsuit that has finally been won. The children ignore him in favor of texting their friends underneath the table. As for Holly, she sits in her typical rickety chair, hugging her yellow cardigan close to her chest, attempting to pluck up the courage to tell Zack what she saw.

Finally, she manages to squeak out, “Gwen told me you did a case for a girl...Christina, I think her name was?”

“Oh, her?” Zack makes a face. “Yeah. And now she’s trying to get me fired, the bitch. Claims I harassed her. I didn’t do a goddamn thing and we both know it.”

But you did, Holly wants to scream. You kissed her when she didn’t want to be kissed. I have it on tape. A horrifying vision of divorce lawyers and custody battles silences her.

“What’s harassed?” Harold wants to know.

“It’s when you bother someone,” is Adrianna’s childish explanation. “Like when Quentin Fletcher kept pulling my hair and I had to tell the teacher.”

Sure. Let’s go with that.

Zack comes to bed dressed only in his Superman boxers. He cuddles next to Holly, breathes in her dishwater scent, and attempts to kiss her neck. She squirms away.

“Babe?” He blinks. “Babe, what’s wrong?”

There’s so much she wants to say, but she settles for a good old-fashioned cold shoulder. He sighs, rolls over, and falls asleep within seconds.

Sleep does not come for Holly that night.

“Mom?”

Adrianna Jefferson is not Holly’s biological child. Her blonde hair, her string-bean figure, and her heart-shaped face bear no resemblance to Holly whatsoever. Yet, Holly answers

to “Mom” from her, just as she does from her sons, and she is unwilling to drop the charade just yet. “Yes, Adrianna?”

“I need help.” The girl’s bottom lip curls into a pout. “I’m doing a family tree project for school. You’ll be there, and Dad, and the boys, but…” She sighs. “I want my mom there, too. My *real* mom. But I don’t know enough about her. I don’t know when she was born, or where she lives, or anything. I can’t even remember the last time I saw her.”

“Have you asked your father?”

“Yeah. He wouldn’t tell me.”

Melanie Fields. She was once the wife of Zack Jefferson, and now, it’s as if she’s vanished into the abyss of post-marriage life. The Jeffersons have long since moved out of the town where she once lived. Even her own daughter has lost contact with her.

“I don’t know, sweetie,” says Holly, her voice shaking. “I don’t know.”

She cannot leave him.

She realizes this as she replays the footage, repressing the build-up of vomit in her throat. She does not love him, not like she used to, but if she leaves him, she will end up like Melanie Fields: abandoned, alone, forgotten. She cannot afford to be forgotten.

Nor can she approach him with the footage. She does not know what he’ll do if she calls him out on his lies. Her plan was doomed before she bought those cameras.

What *can* she do?

Her finger quivers over the delete button. She thinks of Harold and Aidan, her sons, who look at her with love in their childish eyes. She thinks of Adrianna, her stepdaughter, not hers,

but hers all the same. She thinks of Zack. She thinks of the family she built, and the wasteland her life would be without it.

Then, she thinks of the other woman. Christina. The way her skin turned pale. The way she tried to scoot away from Zack's suffocating embrace, the word "no" written like a warning on her lips.

Before Holly Jefferson realizes what she is doing, she saves the footage. She creates a new, anonymous email account, aptly titled godhelpme@gmail.com. She does a bit of digging and discovers Christina Peterson's email.

She cannot publicly support the woman who wants to expose Zack, but she can do enough to ease her own conscience.