



Claiming His Secret Son (The Billionaires of Black Castle)

By Olivia Gates

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Richard's mission of vengeance nearly cost Isabella her life. But she can't resist rekindling their dangerous passion. Can she protect her child from the man sworn to claim him—and herself from the desire she can no longer fight?

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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

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Richard Graves adjusted his electric recliner, sipped a mouthful of straight bourbon and hit Pause.

The image on the hundred-plus-inch TV screen stilled, eliminating the unsteadiness of the recording. Murdock, his second-in-command, had taken the footage while following his quarry on foot. The quality was expectedly unsatisfactory, but the frame he'd paused was clear enough to bring a smile to his lips.

The only time a smile touched his lips, or he experienced emotions of any sort, was when he looked at her. At that graceful figure and energetic step, that animated face and streaming raven hair. At least, he guessed they were emotions. He had no frame of reference. Not in the past quarter of a century.

What he remembered feeling in his youth was so distant, it was as if he'd heard about it from someone else. Which was accurate. The boy he'd been before he'd joined The Organization—the criminal cartel that abducted and imprisoned children and turned them into unstoppable mercenaries—though as tough as nails, still held no resemblance to the invulnerable bastard everyone believed him—rightfully so—to be.

From what he remembered before his metamorphosis, and even after it, the most he'd felt had been allegiance, protectiveness, responsibility. For his best-friend-turned-nemesis Numair, for his disciple-turned ally Rafael and to varying degrees for the Black Castle blokes—his reluctant partners in their globe-spanning business empire, Black Castle Enterprises—and their own. But that was where he drew the line in noble sentiments. What came naturally to him were dark, extreme, vicious ones. Power lust, vengeance, mercilessness.

So it never failed to stun him when beholding her provoked something he'd believed himself incapable of feeling. What he could only diagnose as...tenderness. He'd been feeling it regularly since he'd upgraded his daily ritual of reading surveillance reports on her to watching footage of what Murdock thought were relevant parts of her day.

Anyone, starting with her, would be horrified to learn he'd been keeping her under a microscope for years. And interfering in her life however he saw fit, undetectably changing the dynamics of the world she inhabited. He broke a dozen laws on a daily basis, from breach of privacy to coercion to...far worse, in his ongoing mission of being her guardian demon. Not that this was even a concern. The law existed for him to either break...or wield as a weapon.

But he *was* concerned she'd ever sense his surveillance or suspect his interference. Even if she never suspected it was him behind it all.

After all, she didn't even know he was alive.

As far as she knew he'd been lost since she was six. He doubted she even remembered him. Even if she did, it was best for her to continue thinking him gone, too.

Like the rest of their family.

So he only watched over her. As he had since she was born. At least, he'd tried to. There'd been years when he'd been powerless to protect her. But the moment he could, he'd given her a second chance for a safe and normal existence.

He sighed as he froze another image. He vividly remembered the day his parents had brought her home. Such a tiny, helpless creature. He'd been the one to give her her name. His little Rose.

She wasn't little now and certainly not helpless, but a surgeon, a wife, a mother and a social activist. He might help her here and there, but her achievements had all been ones of merit. He just made sure she got what she worked so hard for and abundantly deserved.

Now she had a successful career, a vocation and a husband who adored her—one he'd thoroughly vetted before letting him near her—and two children. Her family was picture-perfect, and not only on the outside.

Unfreezing the video, he huffed and tossed back the last of the bourbon. If only the Black Castle lads knew that he, aka Cobra, the most lethal operative The Organization had ever known and who was now responsible for their collective security, spent his evenings watching the sister they didn't know existed, who didn't know *he* existed, go about her very normal life. He'd never hear the end of it.

Suddenly he frowned, realizing something.

This footage didn't make sense. Rose was entering her and her husband's new private practice in Lower Manhattan. Murdock always only included new developments, emergencies or anything else that was out of the ordinary.

So watching Rose *was* his only source of enjoyment. But when he'd told Murdock to provide samples of Rose's normal activities, he'd stared emptily at him then continued to provide him only with what he considered worth seeing.

Had Murdock now decided to heed him and start giving him snippets of Rose walking down the street or shopping or picking her children up from school?

He snorted. That Vulcan would never do anything he didn't consider logical or pertinent. Even if he obeyed him blindly otherwise, Murdock wouldn't fulfill a demand he considered to be fueled by pointless sentiment and a waste of both their time.

This meant there was more to what he was watching than Rose entering her workplace.

What was he missing here?

Suddenly his heart seemed to hit Pause itself. Everything inside him followed suit, coming to a juddering standstill.

The person who entered the frame, the one Rose turned to talk to in such delight... Though the image was still from the back with only a hint of a profile apparent, he'd know that shape, that... Aeing...blindfolded in a crowd of a million.

Her.

Sitting up, exercising the same caution he'd approached armed bombs with, he reached to the side table, vaguely noting how the glass rattled as he set it down. It wasn't his hand that shook. It was his heart. The heart that never crossed sixty beats per minute even under extreme duress. It now exploded from its momentary cessation in thunderclaps, sending recoil jolting through every artery and nerve.

The once waist-length, golden hair was now a dark, shoulder-length curtain. The body once rife with dangerous curves was svelte and athletic in a prim skirt suit. But there wasn't the slightest doubt in his mind. That *was* her.

Isabella.

The woman he'd once craved with a force that had threatened the fulfillment of his lifelong obsession.

He'd long resolved it according to his meticulous plan. It was *her* issue that hadn't been concluded satisfactorily. Or at all. She'd been his one feebleness, remained his only failure. The only one who'd made him swerve from his course and at times forget all about it. She remained the only woman he'd been unable—*unwilling* to use. But he'd let her use him. After their incendiary fling, when a choice had had to be made, she'd told him he'd never been an option.

Not that the memory of his one lapse was what had set off this detonation of aggression.

It was who she was. *What* she was.

The wife of the man who'd been responsible for the deaths of his family and for orphaning Rose.

He'd gone after her almost nine years ago as her husband's only Achilles' heel. But nothing had gone according to plan.

Her impact had been unprecedented. And it had had nothing to do with her rare beauty. Beauty never turned a hair on his head. Desire was his weapon, never his weakness. He'd been the one The Organization sent when women were involved, to seduce, use, then discard with utmost coldness.

But she'd been an enigma. At once clearly reveling in being the wife of a brute forty years her senior, who doted on her and submerged her in luxuries, while studying to be a doctor and involving herself in many humanitarian activities.

Going in, he'd been convinced her benevolent facade had been designed to launder her husband's image, in which she'd been succeeding, spectacularly.

But after he'd been exposed to her, this twenty-four-year-old who seemed much older than her years, he'd no longer been sure of anything. Seducing her had also proved much harder than he'd anticipated.

Though he'd been certain she'd reciprocated his unstoppable desire, she wouldn't let him near. Thinking she'd

been only whetting his appetite until he was ready to do anything for a taste of her, as her husband had been, he'd intensified his pursuit. But it had only been after he'd followed her on a relief mission in Colombia—saving her and her companions during a guerilla attack—that her resistance had finally crumbled. The following four months had been the most delirious experience of his life.

He'd had to force himself to remember who she was to continue his mission. But it had been the hardest thing he'd ever done. When he'd had her in his arms, when he'd been inside her, he'd forgotten who he was.

But he'd finally extracted secrets only she'd known about her husband without her realizing it. Then he'd been ready to make his move. Not that it had been that easy.

Putting his plan into action had meant the end of his mission. The end of them. And he'd been unable to stomach walking away from her. He'd wanted more of her. Limitlessly more.

So he'd done what he'd never thought he'd do. He'd asked her to leave with him.

Though she'd claimed she couldn't think of life without him, her rejection had been instantaneous. And final. She'd never considered leaving her husband for him.

In his fever for a continuation of the affair, he'd convinced himself she'd refused because she feared her husband. So he'd pledged carte blanche of his protection.

But playing the distraught lover seamlessly, she'd still refused, adamant that there was no other way.

It had been only then that the red heat of coveting had hardened into the cold steel of cynicism. And he'd faced the truth.

She'd preferred her protection and luxury from the less-demanding man she'd married when she'd been twenty and had wrapped around her finger. Him, she'd only replace in her bed. There'd never been any reason she'd choose him over her decades-old ogre.

But he was certain she'd long regretted her choice when he'd shortly afterward destroyed her sugar daddy, protractedly, agonizingly, pulverizing her own life of excess with him.

Not that he'd cared what had happened to her. She'd made her bed of thorns thinking it was the lap of eternal luxury. It was only fitting she'd be torn apart lying in it.

But this searing vision from his past looked patently whole. Even in the video's inferior quality, he could sense her sangfroid. None of the hardships she must have suffered had come close to touching her.

Then it was over. The two women entered the building, and the video came to an abrupt end.

He stared at the black screen, questions an erupting geyser.

What was she doing at Rose's practice? This didn't seem to be a first-time meeting. So how had he missed the earlier ones leading to this level of familiarity? How had she come in touch with Rose at all?

This couldn't be a coincidence.

But what else could it be? There was no way she could know of his connection to Rose. His Richard Graves persona—the one he'd adopted after he'd left his Cobra days behind—had been meticulously manufactured. Not even The Organization with its limitless intelligence resources had found a shred of evidence tying him to their vanished agent.

Even if she'd somehow discovered the relationship between him and Rose, their affair had ended in unequivocal finality. No thanks to his own resolve. While he'd sworn he'd never check on her, he'd weakened on another front. He'd left the door ajar for a year afterward, in case she'd wanted to reestablish contact. Which she hadn't. If she'd wanted to do so now, she would have found a way to bring herself to his attention. It didn't make sense she'd target Rose to get to him. Or did it?

He exploded to his feet, snatched his phone out and punched Murdock's speed-dial number.

The moment the line opened, he barked, "Talk to me."

After a moment Murdock's deep voice was at once composed and surprised. "Sir?"

Impatience almost boiled his blood. "The woman with my sister. What was she doing with her?"

"It's all in the report, sir."

"Bloody hell, Murdock, I'm not reading your thirty-page report."

Silence greeted his snarl this time. Murdock must be stunned, since that was exactly what Richard had been doing for the past year. Murdock's documentation of Rose's every breath had been getting more extensive at his own demand. But right now he couldn't focus on a single paragraph.

"Everything I found out about Dr. Anderson's liaison with the woman in question is in the last two pages, sir."

"Did you sustain a serious head injury lately, Murdock? Am I not talking the Queen's English? I'm not reading two damned words. I want your verbal report. *Now!*"

At his barrage the man's chagrin almost crackled down the line, reminding him again that Owen Murdock was a relic of a bygone era.

Richard had always thought he'd be more at home in something like King Arthur's round table. He did treat Richard with the fervor of a knight in the service of his liege.

He'd been the first boy Richard had been given to train when he'd first joined The Organization as a handler...six years old to his own sixteen, making Murdock Rafael's age. He'd had him for six more years before Murdock had been taken from him and Rafael given to him instead.

Murdock had refused to accept anyone else's leadership, until Richard had been summoned to straighten him out. Richard had only told him to play along, that one day he'd get him out. Murdock had unquestioningly obeyed him. And believed him.

Richard had fulfilled his pledge, taking him away with him when he'd left, manufacturing a new identity for him, too. But instead of striking out on his own, Murdock had insisted on remaining in his service, claiming

his training hadn't been complete. He'd actually been on par with the rest of the Black Castle chaps from day one, could have become a mogul in his own right, too. But Murdock had only wished to repay what he considered his debt to Richard before he could move on. Knowing how vital that had been to him, Richard had let him.

Now, ten years later, Murdock showed no signs of moving on. He'd have to shove him off the ledge soon, no matter if it would be like losing his right arm for real.

Murdock's current silence made Richard regret his outburst more. His number two prided himself on always anticipating his needs and surpassing his expectations. The last thing he wanted was to abuse such loyalty.

Before he made a retraction, Murdock talked, his tone betraying no resentment or mortification.

"Very well. At first, that woman appeared to be just another colleague of Dr. Anderson's. I ran a check on her, as I always do, and found nothing of note. But a development made me dig deeper. I discovered she'd changed her name legally five years ago, just before she made her first entry into the United States after a six-year hiatus. Her name was."

"Isabella Burton."

Murdock digested the fact that Richard already knew her. He'd told neither him nor Rafael about the intensely personal mission he'd undertaken, or about her.

Murdock continued, "She's now Dr. Isabella Sandoval."

Sandoval. That wasn't either of her maiden names. Coming from Colombia, she'd had two. She must have been trying to become someone else when she'd adopted the new surname, after what had happened to her husband. That would also explain the changes in her appearance. And she *was* a doctor now.

Murdock went on, "But that wasn't what made me wary—what made me single out her meeting with Dr. Anderson to present to you. It's because I found a gaping thirteen-year hole in her history. From the age of twelve to the age of twenty-five, I couldn't find a shred of information on her."

Of course. She'd wiped clean the time she'd been Burton's wife, and for some reason only known to her, years before that. No doubt to hide more incriminating evidence that would prevent her from being accepted by any respectful society.

"The information trail starts when she was twenty-six, when she started a four-year surgical residency in Colombia, in affiliation with a pediatric surgery program in California. It was a special 'out of the match' residency arrangement with the chief of surgery of a major teaching hospital. She obtained her US credentials and board certification last year. Then a week ago, she arrived in the United States and signed a one-year lease on a six-bedroom house in the Forest Hills Gardens section of Queens. She is here at the behest of doctors Rose and Jeffrey Anderson to start working in their private practice as a full partner, major shareholder and board member."

After that, Richard didn't know when he ended the call.

He only knew he was replaying that video over and over, Murdock's words a revolving loop in his mind.

Isabella. She was going to be his sister's partner.

Swearing under his breath, he almost cracked the remote in two as he pressed the off button.

Like hell she was.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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