



Vowed To
CASSIUS

NELL ALEXANDER

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Vowed To Cassius

The Grant Brothers

Book One

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Cassius

The wad of twenty-pound notes feels thick in my hands as I count them. I know it's all there, but these things I like to check myself. I thrust it into the back of the safe along with the rest of the money from this week's take from the drugs, when my phone vibrates.

Tension tightens my shoulders. Being summoned to my father's office is never a good sign. As his eldest son, and next in line to run the family business, it feels as though I'm forever in his office, *learning*, when I want to be on the ground, *doing*.

We are one of the biggest British crime syndicates in the country and as usual, tensions are high. There are only so many drugs and weapons you can sell in a country as small as England, and I've been arguing with my dad to take things further afield for years.

After two sharp raps on the dark wood door, I enter my father's office expecting him to be seated behind his desk as usual. Instead, I'm surprised to see that he is standing against the large bay window, overlooking the gardens of his estate.

"Sit," he says, and I clench my jaw at the irritation that prickles the back of my neck. I've never liked the lack of respect he shows when speaking to me. Yet I have to take it, just like I take my orders.

He swills the amber fluid, *whiskey*, around the glass he is holding and watches as it settles again.

"You're going to Chicago," he finally says. He grins after parting with these words like it's the first time he has said them out loud, but I know that grin. That is a dangerous grin. It's the same grin he would wear before beating the living shit out of someone, and it didn't matter if that someone was one of his sons.

It takes real effort to school my features and keep my face flat, emotionless. But Chicago? What the fuck for? I can see the familiar element of spite in his lightly coloured eyes. They

seem greyer today than blue. Not that it matters. I got my eyes from my mother.

“What’s the job in Chicago?” I ask. Trying to ignore the chill in my spine that is telling me to *run*.

“You and your brothers,” he says, gesturing with the glass as though my brothers are standing right there beside me. There’s a darker-than-usual glint in his eyes that has me questioning his sanity, if not his sobriety. “Are getting married,” he finishes.

Married?

“We aren’t the fucking Mafia,” I growl as panic sets in. British crime bosses don’t need to be married to take the reins. If anything it’s better that we aren’t.

Besides, I can’t get married. I can’t imagine anything worse than dragging some poor, unsuspecting woman into my life.

Into this life.

My mind goes immediately to my own mother. So miserable was she, that she took her own life, leaving my crazy crime-boss father to raise five boys.

No wonder we are so fucked up.

“Just because we aren’t Italian doesn’t mean we don’t need to do things a certain way.” He shakes his head from side to side. “It’s business. Get married, get your brothers married and get your arses back here before a fucking war breaks out.”

Estella

“Dad, please!” I beg.

I’m not above begging. Truly, if it serves a purpose I’m all for it. And right now, I’d give my internal organs to not go through with this.

My mother flaps around me, fluffing up layers of tulle and complaining that I’m spoiling my make-up.

Like smudged eyeliner is the biggest issue here?

“This is a good match,” he says with no emotion whatsoever. “You must do what is right for our family.”

That wasn’t a statement, it was a warning. *Do this or die*. Maybe death is the better option here, but I want so much to live. I should have known it would come down to this though. Why would I have been immune to the workings of the Garduña? Where all women are good for is parting their legs and producing heirs.

“You are twenty now, Estella, plenty old enough,” my mother coos and I struggle to hold back my contempt.

“I’m nothing like you,” I spit. Just because she wanted the life she married into, doesn’t mean I do. I want to be free.

“Hush now, he is handsome and strong, he will take care of you.”

My mouth drops open at my mother’s words. I always knew she must have lost her mind to marry my father in the first place, but this is unreal. Insane.

The Grant reputation is terrifying at best, and lethal at worst. What woman would want her daughter to be *married* to one of them? The rumours alone should be enough to dissuade anyone. Rumours that they are all mad. Rumours that they are the epitome of dark and twisted. Hateful, vengeful. I heard that one of the brothers actually flayed a person. Who does that? It’s not the Middle-fucking-Ages any more.

“Why me?” I ask, but my dad only glares at me in response. The meaning is clear. *Do your fucking part.*

I envisioned marrying a man who was so far removed from this life and here I am, in an annexe room to the Cathedral in Syndicate Towers, waiting for the signal to walk down an actual aisle to music I didn't even choose. I was so against this from the moment I was told two days ago. I was already on the plane, expecting a trip to sightsee while my father and brothers did their business in the Towers...how stupid and naive I was. I want to scream in anger at myself, at my parents.

The tears finally breach my lash line and my mother mutters about mascara and the dress. The white fluffy contraption that I would never have picked for myself.

“What was the deal?” I ask my dad, knowing I won't be able to match it, but desperate times and all that.

“Our Families need to be connected with blood. For Business. You marry him, give him a son. Our business will spread and flourish...”

Like toxic vines.

“Everything must grow or stagnate, Estella. You're the price that has to be paid for that growth. The Garduña will no longer remain in the shadows.”

Panic rises in me, my breaths turning to short puffs as my vision closes in. How can I get out of this?

I can't get out of this.

“Which one?” I ask. Disgust at my father builds inside me. After being kept away from this side of his business for my entire life, all because I was born female, seeing him now is like staring at a stranger. A man who would sell out his daughter to grow his business. What kind of parent does that?

“The eldest.” My dad checks his watch, beginning to get impatient with the waiting. “Cassius.”

I rack my brain trying to think of anything I know specific to the man I'm about to marry but come up empty. Was he the

one who did that awful thing to the man in the docks?

Oh God.

“It’s time,” he says, but I can’t look at him. He presents the crook of his elbow, ready to walk me down the aisle as a father should, but I can’t bring myself to take it.

My mother tries to fix my mascara but it’s no use. At least the tears have stopped. She huffs her disdain before scurrying from the room, presumably to take her seat.

I turn to my father one last time. “Please?” I ask.

He doesn’t even look at me.

The doors are opened by two strangers who bow as I enter the space with my father beside me.

The Cathedral, they call it. A place looked over by whichever God you subscribe to and owned by the Ismailovs. Another terrifying family. I wonder if there is a God, and whether I was placed into this life for any reason other than to be a brood mare.

People I don’t know stand as organ music fills the air.

I turn to my father who is still extending his arm next to me, insisting I take it. Shaking my head no, I say, “Sit down.”

His face registers shock, his mouth dropping open at my tone.

I won’t give him the honour of giving me away, not like this. I quickly move past him as he makes to grab my arm. If he wants to give me away he will have to cause a scene, and even though I don’t give a shit about this wedding, I know he does.

In this world, perception is high on the list of priorities. My father will want the world to see his only daughter marry what is effectively equivalent to the underboss of one of the top British crime families. He won’t want them to see it’s a sham. Even though I’m almost positive most marriages made here are.

The music increases in volume, urging me on as though it knows I'm here against my will, and I begin the walk down the aisle, swallowing over the lump in my throat and praying that the man I'm marrying will be kind to me if nothing else. That he won't tear the flesh from my bones and throw what's left of me into the Thames.

Then my eyes fall on Cassius Grant, and I know that life as I know it is over.

Cassius

Jesus. How long does this shit take?

I glance at my brothers again, each looking as miserable as I know I must. The air in here should feel fresh and light, wisteria drips from the arched beams in the ceiling, and yet somehow the tie around my neck feels like it might strangle me before I finish spitting out my vows. How can such a beautiful space be used for such abominable actions?

The music starts. Awful organ-type wailing fills the space and everyone stands to welcome the bride.

I glance down the aisle to find a dark-haired bombshell wrapped in white frills making her way towards me. Her tear-streaked face, and the set of her jaw, all stir something inside me. For the first time, I consider the fact that she probably wants this even less than I do.

And she looks so young. Her plump cheeks are pink beneath the layer of foundation that she has rubbed away. The cuffs of her lace sleeves are already ruined with smears of make-up. She isn't wearing a veil. Her light brown eyes challenge me as much as intrigue me.

Does she think I want this?

As she nears I can feel something stir within me. This was set in motion by people who we can't contest. It was a blind match, neither of us knowing the other, and yet I feel like I've known this woman my entire life.

How?

The droll sound of the Vicar's voice snatches my attention as the beautiful woman finally reaches my side.

"We are gathered here today..." *blah blah fucking blah.*

"Cassius Grant, do you take Estella Castille to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Estella Castille.

“I do,” I say, looking straight into her defiant eyes.

“Estella Castille, do you take Cassius Grant to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“Yes,” she spits, glaring at me like this is all my fault. A grin spreads across my face.

With our vows complete, the vicar declares us husband and wife and states I can now kiss the bride. This is the moment that will seal her fate, though I’m unsure if she even knows it.

This is the moment she could become something with me, or languish without me. Rejected. Bringin shame upon her family’s name.

I stroke my hand up her arm and reach behind her neck, squeezing until a gasp is forced to part her rose-tinted lips. I crash my mouth against hers, taking what is now mine, even if she doesn’t want to accept it. The vows are for the people watching, but it is this kiss that binds us together. I sweep my tongue into her mouth and feel her body release a little of the tension as her tongue accepts mine in a dance that tastes of peaches and lemonade.

Reluctantly, I break the seal between us and stare down into her eyes, loving that there is no fear there. That means she is strong. She might survive this life. She might survive me. I know I’m not going to let her go. One way or another, it’s going to be me and her against the world from this day forward.

We move across to the ornately carved table and she scratches her name into the register. I can feel the confused contempt rolling from her, and catch all the little glances she throws my way.

“Am I to take your surname?” she asks through gritted teeth behind a false smile.

Part of me wants to tell her no, but a bigger part of me likes that I can make her take my name, and she looks like she is going to need breaking in.

I catch what I'm thinking and stop myself. What would my mother think of me? Truly I have no idea, she was dead by the time I was twelve. This isn't the kind of man I want to be to my wife. The only thing I'm certain of is that if I ever was to marry, I wanted a partnership with that person. Not to control her to the point of such despair that she feels the only way out is death.

It takes every ounce of compassion I have, but finally, I say, "I'd like you to, but it's your choice." Her lashes flutter as she blinks and takes a moment to think on what I said.

I release the breath I'd been holding as she signs *Estella Grant* with a slight flourish and hands the fountain pen to me.

Estella

That kiss.

I didn't expect anything so...potent as that kiss was. He stole my breath and became my life support all in the slowed-down moment of that *one kiss*.

Now I'm Estella Grant, wife of Cassius Grant, the most terrifying man I've ever come face to face with. Reluctantly I admit to myself that he is handsome in a way that is uniquely frightening. But it takes more than good looks to make a marriage work.

Once we've signed the register and the guests have moved away from the chapel and into the large reception room, he takes my hand and pulls me onto the dance floor.

"One dance is all we will have time for, then we need to go." His voice is low and authoritative as his breath puffs against the shell of my ear. My body responds to him while my brain screams at me, demanding to know what I'm doing. Why am I going along with this *willingly*?

He takes my hand and spins me beneath our arms to claps and cheers of the people seated at round tables dressed in pristine white tablecloths. I catch a glimpse of my father, who is silently stewing with rage that he didn't get his moment to publicly give me away, and a small feeling of victory dances in my chest. Cassius pulls me close to him and gently moves us around the dance floor.

I feel the world drop away, and for those few minutes, it is just us, slowly rocking and moving to the slow and seductive beat of music from a live band. I briefly wonder who organised all this, because they did a great job, even if it isn't completely to my taste.

Cassius stops moving, and I look up at him wondering if it's in these small moments of confusion that acceptance has begun to creep in.

I'm not fighting it. I'm not kicking and screaming like I thought I would be. I am still scared, but I'm sure as hell that I'll do my best never to show him my fear. Anger still simmers that these people see me as nothing more than a healthy uterus.

"We have to go now," he says. His face set in hard lines. Even when his features are hard and impassive. His eyes have specks of grey mixed in with the kind of gold you find in well-aged whiskey. His jaw is sharp and his lips are full. Inviting.

"Where to?"

He frowns at my question.

"England, I have to get back to business."

I look around us. People are eating and drinking. It seems strange to leave now, but then there hasn't been anything normal about today.

"What about your brothers?" I ask, gulping when his eyes narrow at me.

"They'll be back once they're also married." With that, he tugs my hand and I follow, before realising he is leading me towards my mother and father.

"Ignacio," Cassius says, extending his hand to shake my father's. The smile on my father's face makes me want to vomit, so I look away. "We'll be leaving for England shortly."

"Ah," my father says, "Of course. You take good care of my only daughter now."

Cassius hears the threat in my father's tone and raises an eyebrow. I'm surprised my father gives a shit. Then I remember he doesn't. It's all just a stupid power play.

Taking a deep breath, I straighten my shoulders and nod at my mother, the woman who brought me into this world, and who raised me...she is smiling like a fool. Like she completed her duties and now what?

She has dropped me right in the middle of a lion's den.

They raise their glasses but I know my father isn't toasting to my future happiness, he is toasting a deal in which he comes out richer and more powerful. I think quickly to Uncle Gustavo. Isn't he the one to make the deals? He is the head of our Family. But he hasn't even made the effort to turn up.

I pull Cassius away, breaking the toast. He looks at me, eyebrow cocked in question, and I will him to understand at this moment that I'm done here. I'm done with my supposed Family.

I'm a Grant now.

Those eyes of his, gems glinting in the darkness of his soul, narrow again before he nods, turns his back on my father and leaves with me.

Cassius

There's something there. Under the surface. I can see it bubbling away even as she tamps it down beneath a veneer of acceptance and stubbornness.

She thinks I can't see her. But I can.

And I'm liking what I see more and more.

Maybe being married won't be as bad as I'd made it out to be in my head. After all, having a wife means extending the family name to another generation.

She begins fidgeting with the dress as soon as we leave the reception room and enter the cool corridor that leads to the elevators.

"Get this off me," she growls as she reaches behind her head and pulls at the tiny buttons at the nape of her neck. "Get it off!" she screams, frantic now as she tugs the lace away from around her throat. Tears threaten to spill and I realise she is struggling to pull air into her lungs. I spin her around and tear apart the back of the dress as she tilts forwards for gravity to help pull the frilly mass of fabric from her body.

She reaches out to grasp at the wall, but I catch her hand and let her hold onto me instead as she sucks in the air.

Finally, she stands up straight, wearing only white satin underwear and steps from the pile of lace. She looks up at me, her eyes showing me more than she knows. We share no words, just a slight nod of my head to say *it's okay, I understand*. I remove my jacket and drop it over her shoulders before summoning the elevator.

The hotel here is everything you'd expect for high-end luxury. Syndicate Towers is run by men who are even more powerful than my father. That's why it pissed me off that I have to leave so soon. It only fuels my paranoia that something is going on. Something my father doesn't want me to know about.

All of his late nights and secret meetings with other bosses, other Dons, haven't gone unnoticed. If only I could figure out what was going on. I can't help but feel resentful. I am next in line and yet I'm still being kept out of the loop.

Why?

"There're sweatpants and a T-shirt in there," I gesture to the dresser where I unpacked my few clothes yesterday. I like to travel comfortably but I didn't expect I'd have to dress my new bride, so it looks like I'll be travelling home in my suit.

Great.

She shrugs off my jacket and I take in her curves, her tummy, ripe and ready to carry my babies. Her thighs are thick and strong beneath glorious hips that I want to take hold of. I would take hold of them without a second thought if she were anyone else. Yet, for some reason, as her husband, I feel as though it would be disrespectful to take what I want from her.

Jesus.

"You might as well get a good look," she says, her voice still laced with something like contempt. "You own me now, right?"

It's rhetorical. But her attitude grates on me a little.

I watch her until she grows uncomfortable and snatches the T-shirt and joggers, pulling them on in jerky movements. My body responds before my brain can shut it down.

Why the fuck is this so sexy?

She bends to pick up her heels and my cock throbs its gratitude and the palms of my hands itch to grab her arse and squeeze. *Hard.*

Next thing I know her heels are being launched across the room and land with a thunk in the bin beside the dresser.

"Let's get going then." She strokes her palms over the sweatpants, looking over her attire and shaking her head. She hasn't noticed me closing the distance between us and surprise

registers in her eyes when she looks up to find me standing over her.

She stumbles back a step, but I catch her with one arm, taking her chin and pressing my thumb over her pillowy lips.

“You are mine.”

I drop my head and replace my thumb with my mouth. Pressing my lips hard against hers.

“And I am yours.” It may not be what either of us wanted, but here we are anyway.

“I didn’t have a choice here either. So, we make our choices now. Stand beside me as my wife and the mother of our future children and I will commit to you, and only you.” I stroke my thumb over her lips again, her mouth has me captivated and constantly wanting more.

“Or I end up in the river, right?” Her smart mouth is going to land her in trouble.

I spin her around and push her onto the bed, her eyes growing wide. Grabbing the elasticated waistband of the sweatpants, I pull them down with one firm yank, taking her white silk panties with them. I expect her to scramble away from me, to cover her intimate apex with her hands. To my absolute astonishment, she lifts her knees, resting her heels against the edge of the bed and cocks an eyebrow in challenge.

I drop to my knees and bury my face in the dark tuft between her thighs, licking my tongue against her slit, coaxing it apart to reveal her sensitive nub. She moves her legs, resting them over my shoulders, pulling my face ever closer with her heels pressed into my back. The release of her sweet nectar encourages me as I devour her, nuzzling her clit and sucking her delicate folds. Her pelvis begins a steady rock as she tries to keep up with my tongue. Mewls of pleasure make their way from her mouth. I glance up and find she is still propped on her elbows, watching me with lust and desire and all the things I never thought I’d see on her pretty face. Our eyes meet as I suck her swollen bundle of nerves and she comes apart for me,

thrusting her hand into my hair as her thighs clamp my head in place while she rides out her orgasm on my face.

Once the aftershocks of her orgasm wear away and her thighs shudder as she releases my head, I stand, licking her juices from my lips.

“Not the river,” I say.

Estella

He picks up my panties and his sweatpants from the floor, lifts the satin scrap of fabric to his nose, and inhales deeply.

I was shocked initially when he pushed me down and removed my clothes. I thought if I faked being confident he would lose interest, especially as I'd heard men don't like doing *that*. But then his face was between my legs and it was the best orgasm I've ever experienced.

"I'll be keeping these," he says and my clit throbs almost painfully as he thrusts my panties into his pocket. His hair is mussed from my fingers and his lips still glisten with my arousal. "Get dressed, the plane leaves in thirty."

The drive to the airstrip is quiet, and we board a private plane quickly. In the space of the last two days, I've found out I was going to marry a stranger, married the stranger, and had a mind-blowing orgasm induced by the stranger, and now I'm on a flight to England with said stranger.

I know what is expected of me from now on. Truly, I want to give it my best shot and be the best wife and mother, I just didn't expect I'd be doing it at the age of twenty.

With a stranger.

Trying to rationalise this in my head feels like an impossible task, so instead, I work on accepting it.

Cassius opens his laptop and begins working while I look out of the window and watch Chicago disappear beneath the white, fluffy clouds.

"I'll be safe with you, right?" I ask.

Cassius lifts his eyes from the laptop and looks at me in a way that is silently powerful. Reassuring.

"Yes."

Before he drops his eyes away from mine I shoot out another question, "Are the rumours true?" The words came out

strangled, so I sit up a little straighter.

“Which ones?” he grins and goes back to work.

I slump back, resigned to the fact that I won't be finding anything out about this man. He hears my sigh and matches it with his own, closing his laptop.

“Ask your questions,” he says, signalling for a drink. An air steward appears with a crystal tumbler and a bottle of golden liquid.

“How old were you when...” I trail off.

He swallows down a mouthful of whiskey, never taking his eyes away from mine. His gaze heats me from the inside.

“Don't beat around the bush. Ask your questions and be certain you want the answers.”

I gulp, but I'm in this now so I might as well take the opportunity. “How old were you when you first killed someone.”

“Twelve,” comes his answer without any hesitation.

“Is it true your mother was mad and killed herself?”

He puffs out a snort. “She killed herself but she wasn't mad.”

I wait, expecting more. What exactly, I don't know. When it's clear he isn't going to say any more on the subject I decide to move on.

“Will you ever love me? Truly love me?” *Where the fuck did that question come from?*

This time his answer isn't immediate. Instead, he tilts his head and looks at me like he is trying to see something that just isn't there.

“If you want this to remain business, I can do that,” I add, casting my eyes downward relinquishing myself to a life without being loved. Not by my father, mother or husband. But surely any children I have will love me. I'll endeavour to

be the best mother and try to prepare them for the life they're born into.

He finishes the last of his whiskey and stands, holding out his hand for me to join him. He pulls me to the back of the plane where there is a small, plush bedroom.

"You're a virgin," he states, and embarrassment creeps over my skin leaving a prickly flush in its wake. I wonder if this embarrassing fact disappoints him. That he has married an inexperienced loser in the bedroom department. In some families, being a virgin for your husband is vital. It matters less to the British. I suppose they have fewer double standards.

His hands sweep over my shoulders, and down my arms as we stand against the foot of the bed.

"I can love you, Estella, but you need to relinquish yourself to being mine, you need to accept me as yours. Our life together is going to be about trust, and knowing that above all else we have each other. There will be dark days, and amazing days and you have to want me by your side for both."

He takes my hands in his and brings each up to his mouth, kissing my knuckles, and then my fingertips.

"This isn't about whether I can love you, it's about whether you can let go of how we came to be together and accept me as your partner in life."

His words melt the anger I'd been harbouring. Anger that can only, truly, be directed at my father. Cassius was as much a pawn here as I was. I stand on my tiptoes to kiss him, linking my fingers behind his head as his hands drop to find my hips and squeeze.

"Give yourself to me, Estella and I'll give you the world."

I begin unbuttoning his shirt, suddenly desperate to see what's beneath. I pull it down over his broad shoulders and I'm not surprised to see ink covering his chest. Running my fingers over the intricate design, I raise my eyes to his.

“It’s a rook. We all have one.” I presume he means his brothers as I continue stroking my fingertips down his abdomen, to the waistband of his trousers where I open his belt and lower his zipper.

I can already feel that he is hard. Waiting. Wanting.

His pants drop to the floor, the belt clattering and leaving his muscular legs bare. I pull the elastic of his boxer briefs and dip my hand in, finding the warmth of his thick shaft and squeezing. His jaw clenches against the pleasure but I hear the breath pass through his vocal cords before puffing from his nose.

I sit on the edge of the bed, keeping his heavy cock in my hand as I sweep my thumb over the tip, causing him to shudder.

“Was that bad?” I asked, worried I might be doing something wrong.

He shakes his head from side to side. “No, Estella. It’s perfect.”

I do it again and he groans as a small drop of moisture beads at the tip. Dropping my head, I sweep my tongue around the bulb of his cock and his hand comes to my shoulders, holding tight.

Popping the head of his cock in and out of my mouth a few times, the musky taste waking up my own arousal, I finally try to take his full length in my mouth, and quickly realise it’s not possible.

“Estella,” Cassius pants, “that will come with time, you don’t have to be experienced for me to enjoy you, us, together, in this moment.”

I nod my head, and he smiles, bending to catch the hem of the T-shirt I’m wearing and lifting it over my head. He runs his calloused fingers over the satin cups of my bra, damaging the silk fabric.

This man relishes in leaving destruction in his wake.

His cock bobs as he pulls the cups down, revealing my large breasts and pebbled nipples.

“Lie back,” he says.

I do as he commands, the hunger in his eyes fierce as he takes me in. I shuffle out of the sweatpants and lie before him, naked and wanting. My hand reaches down to my already wet slit, my fingers parting my folds.

“Don’t touch,” he growls. “That belongs to me now.” He replaces my fingers with his own, gently inserting one and stroking my internal walls.

“Will it hurt?” I ask as he stokes the embers of my desire to life. What woman hasn’t heard horror stories of how much their friend’s first times hurt?

“A little, but it will ease quickly.”

I nod my head, understanding that he will take care of me.

He presses a thumb against my clit and pleasure trickles down my spine, waking all the nerve endings in my body. When his mouth covers my nipple, my body arches into him, and a low moan parts my lips.

“You’re so wet, Estella,” he says, pulling his finger from inside me and taking my other nipple in his mouth as he lines up his steel rod with my entrance. The feel of his hot cock rubbing up and down my folds amps up my need to have him inside me. I rock my pelvis, trying to encourage him in, but he breaks away from me with a teasing smile.

“Patience,” he says, dropping his mouth to mine. Our tongues dance in a passionate war, wanting the taste of each other more than we want our next breath.

Then he enters me.

My eyes open to the flash of pain and he pauses briefly, allowing me time to get accustomed to the stretch.

“Breathe,” he says, before dotting kisses over my neck and chest, and lifting a hand to tease my nipple between his thumb

and index finger.

He inches ever more into me, and just when I think I can't take any more, he releases my nipple and moves his hand between us, pressing his fingers against my clit. I feel my walls tighten around him in response, the pain a distant memory as pleasure begins to sweep through me from somewhere deep inside.

He draws out slowly, thrusting back in to the hilt, before drawing out again. Just when I think I can't take any more, his mouth comes back to my nipple and my entire being blasts apart into a million tiny pieces. My walls tighten, and the only thing I can feel is his cock buried deep inside and his warm tongue flickering over my nipple. I know I'm moving, my body taking over in a desperate attempt to milk him dry, when suddenly his back arches, and his head is thrown back as he pumps through his own orgasm.

Now I understand what he meant about me being his and him being mine. He opened the door for a partnership and then dragged us through it. That's more than I could have hoped for this morning when my own father was trading me business. Cassius seems so different to what I was expecting, and the relief is a weight lifted from my chest.

Cassius

She rode my cock until it was dry. When she finally makes her way back down from her orgasm and opens her eyes, she blushes.

“Not what you were expecting?” I ask.

She shakes her head and begins to cover her body.

“You don’t get to cover up what’s mine,” I growl. “I could look at your body all day.” I trace my fingers over the soft rise and fall of her stomach, the little roll between there and her breasts. Her curves are definitely one of her best physical features. But it’s her strength of will I find the most attractive. That’s how I know she will be the best wife for me.

The best partner in what is going to be a rocky period for our Family.

I tug the duvet from beneath our spent bodies and cover us, pulling her into me, and stroking her soft skin as she drifts off to sleep.

Things could be worse. I could have been matched with someone I felt no connection to. Though I didn’t expect to connect on an intellectual level, I can see that Estella is going to challenge me in that domain every day. This woman has taken her fear of me and turned me into her lap dog. I just hope no one ever catches on to the power she now holds over me.

I trail my hand down to her stomach, imagining her carrying my baby. I vow I’ll be the father that mine never was. I’ll protect Estella and our children against every threat.

A light knock on the door rouses me from a light sleep.

“Yes?” I ask.

A throat clears on the other side of the door. “We are landing in twenty minutes,” comes the air steward’s voice.

“We’ll be right out.”

I kiss the back of Estella's head, her hair smells like strawberries and hairspray. I smirk at the image of her getting ready for a wedding she didn't know she was a part of, then realise how awful that must have been for her.

"Estella," I nudge her gently, her thick lashes flutter apart as she opens her eyes. "We'll be landing shortly, we need to get dressed."

She wriggles her gorgeous round arse against my hard cock and I growl.

"Don't start something you can't finish, Estella." I kiss her deeply, hoping that her feelings somehow match mine, but knowing deep down that no one can fall in love this fast. Lust maybe...but love?

Shaking away my thoughts, I dress quickly, passing her her clothes as she sleepily yawns and stretches herself awake.

"I'm starving," she declares and I laugh.

"We missed the meal because we were busy taking part in other activities."

I pull her to standing and we leave the bedroom, taking our places in the plush leather seats and fastening the seatbelts.

"Where will we live?" She asks, looking out of the window. The green of the countryside is bright and clear as we come into Heathrow and I wonder whether she has ever lived anywhere other than a city. Her face is relaxed and the anger that simmered there all day has finally vanished, replaced with a wonder that I find endearing.

"I have a place in the countryside. I hope you'll like it. You can visit the city whenever you like."

I realise she won't have any friends here, no other women to chat with until my brothers come home with their new wives. Even then we are spread throughout London and Kent. I find myself hoping that she will approve of my house in Maidstone, hope that she will be able to turn it into a beautiful home for our family.

That's when it hits me.
I can fall in love with her.
Because it's already begun.

Estella

I didn't expect to connect with Cassius on any level whatsoever, and yet as I walk through the front door of his house I know I'm done for. The gardens are lavish and colourful, the house itself is grand, but light and airy and nothing as I expected of Cassius.

"I think all along I wanted a family, I just never let myself think too hard on that point, not after losing Mum," he says. His admission makes my heart crack. Thinking of how a twelve-year-old boy with four younger brothers dealt with the loss is almost too much to bear. Especially with how his father absorbed them into the business. The day their mother died was the day they had no choice but to become adults.

"Security use the gatehouse, and there is a housekeeper. The fridge should be fully stocked."

He takes me up the gorgeous stairs and guides me down a corridor.

"This will be our bedroom." He opens the door to a large room filled with light and views of the garden. There's an ensuite and walk-in closet. Which has me casting my eyes down over my current attire.

"I'll get Helena, the housekeeper, to bring you a few bits and pieces and then you can go shopping when you're ready. There are some boutiques in town, or I can have Henry take you into London if I'm not here."

"Where will you be?" I ask, realising how stupid my question is as soon as it leaves my mouth.

He'll be working. Obviously.

"I need to meet with my dad, let him know we are married and get things set up for us, for you."

He takes my hand and kisses my fingertips again, sending little shocks of happiness straight to the centre of my being.

"Whatever you want, Estella, you only need to ask."

“I want in,” I say, knowing he will know what I mean.

He nods his head before saying, “That is something we will discuss when I’m back. I promise.”

I watch as he strips off what’s left of his suit and showers. Watching the soapy water run over his body is an experience in itself. I would join him if the ache between my legs wasn’t so fresh. Towelling himself dry, I continue to watch as he dresses in a fresh suit, this time keeping the top button of his black shirt undone.

He drops a kiss on the top of my head and my senses are assaulted by his scent. Fresh, clean and threatening.

“I’ll only be gone for tonight,” he says, and suddenly I feel so alone and isolated. Is this what the rest of my life is going to be?

Cassius

She looked so lost as I left her there sitting on the edge of our bed, and I hate that I'll be gone overnight. But this is the nature of the job. I've completed the latest task given to me by my father, and now I need to know what the next play is.

I find him sitting in his office, smoke curling from the cigar between his fingers and a glass of whiskey in his hand. Naturally.

I can't remember the last time I saw him drink anything other than the amber liquid and know if his enemies don't get to him soon, his liver will.

"Ah, son! Wedded at last," he stands, somewhat unsteadily, and signals for me to sit. "Now you are a real man."

"That's funny, I thought I was a real man the day I made my first kill."

The dismissive wrinkle in my dad's nose tells me he isn't playing with my attitude today.

"Now it's time to let you in on my game plan," he says, and the familiar prickle of dread worms at the base of my skull.

My dad has run this family since he was thirty, taking over from his dad who was killed in a robbery gone wrong.

This world is so full of revenge and hatred, yet in my grandfather's day, it was about taking from the rich and giving to the poor.

Real-life Robin Hoods.

When did it change? When did money and revenge become our lifeblood?

"You have to take what you want in this world," he goes on. A speech I've heard a million times if not more. "You," he points his cigar at me, "Have to keep the family name going strong."

I fidget in my seat, wanting him to hurry the hell up and get to the point.

“I made a deal with Cordez.” His grin is wicked and my gut churns.

Something isn’t right.

“And your marriage to the Castille girl opens a new channel for us.” Smoke begins to fill the room, making the air cloying and difficult to inhale without tasting the woodyness of the cigar.

I narrow my eyes while I weigh the full scope of his words. He likes to do this, dance around with insinuations without actually giving away any information.

“What’s the deal with Cordez?” I ask, standing to get myself a drink from the small bar situated against the left wall to stop myself from asking what that has to do with my *wife*. The cut glass feels heavy in my hand as I pull it from the shelf before filling it with a finger of whiskey.

“You’ll find out soon enough, Cass.” He is the only person who gets away with calling me Cass. It makes my skin crawl.

I take a mouth full of whiskey and let it burn around my mouth before slowly swallowing it down.

“When?” I ask, getting sick of playing these stupid games.

He slams his glass down on the desk, and ice clinks against the sides. “When it’s time,” he grits out. “In the meantime, go back to your pretty little wife and make me some grandsons.”

His laugh is cold and cruel and I decide not to follow up with any more questions. He’ll come to me when he is ready for action to be taken. I just hope my idiot brothers don’t fuck up this marriage shit. It seems to be the only way to convince my father we are fit to step into his ill fitting shoes.

“The Grant name is going to live forever,” he says, his laugh turning into a wheeze, which he controls with another swallow of whiskey.

It's no wonder the world thinks we're mad.

Estella

The kitchen is well stocked and I've found solace in preparing a dinner for myself. Naturally, I've made enough to feed the five thousand and wonder if I should plate a portion up for the security guys in the gatehouse, but decide against it.

Just as I'm about to wrap the leftovers and put them in the fridge, Cassius walks into the kitchen.

The look in his eye tells me he has missed me, even though it was only there for a split second.

I'm glad.

Because I missed him too.

I close the distance between us, my bare feet making padding sounds on the cold tiled floor as I rush to him, stopping short of throwing my arms around his neck. Twenty-four hours ago we were strangers.

His smile is tight. Forced. My heart sinks to my stomach.

"What's wrong?" I ask, dreading the answer. Could he be bored with me already?

"Just stuff with my dad." He lifts his hand to the back of his neck and rubs.

"Is he selling you to a stranger in a bid to further his career?" I mean it as a joke, but perhaps it's too soon.

Cassius frowns.

"Is that why you had to marry me?" I can see his mind whirling around, connecting invisible dots that I couldn't possibly follow.

"What does it matter?" I ask. "It's all done now, you're stuck with me." My second attempt at lightening the mood seems to work, as Cassius's forehead smooths and he looks at me, his mouth cocked in one corner with a half smile.

He takes me in his arms and drops a soft kiss to my forehead, the gesture warm and somewhat loving.

“Mrs. Grant,” he says then his brow furrows. “Why did you take my name?” he asks and I pull from his embrace to plate up some food for him.

I blush. “I wanted to sever all connections with my father.” I felt like taking Cassius’s last name was probably the quickest and easiest way of doing that. “But now I kind of feel like it fits me.”

“It definitely fits you,” he says, giving my arse a squeeze as he walks past. “You can cook?”

“Why do you look surprised?” I laugh, shaking my head from side to side. “Looking back I think my mother was secretly preparing me for this life all along.” I place the plate of food in front of him and he thanks me.

“What other life is there?” he asks, genuinely perplexed as to how I could possibly want to live any other way.

I laugh, placing two glasses of wine on the island counter between us.

“You mean the kind where I can live my life before choosing to settle down with a man I fall in love with before the wedding ceremony?”

“Oh,” he says, before biting into a piece of broccoli. “Yeah, me and my brothers were surprised we had to get married. It’s never really been a *thing* here.”

I can’t help the cogs that begin to turn in my mind. “Who are your brother’s marrying?”

He raises an eyebrow. “I don’t know. None of us knows. We were told to show up.”

I push what’s left of my dinner around my plate. I’m not stupid, I can see there’s more to this, more than I think even he has had the opportunity to contemplate. “How much do you know of my father?” I ask.

He shrugs as he swallows his food. “I know Gustavo Castille runs the Garduña, or what’s left of it. Ignacio is his brother. I assumed he would be like I am to my father. You know, second in command.” He continues pushing his fork around, takes another mouthful of food.

I shake my head from side to side, and he looks at me. Pushing his plate away as realisation dawns on him that there is more to this after all.

“Tell me,” he says.

My father’s threats ring in my head as I think back to my mother stuffing me into a wedding dress.

“I think my father is up to something that Uncle Gustavo isn’t aware of,” I can’t prove anything, but I saw a side of my father this morning that had everything in my head slotting together in an ugly pattern of greed and power.

“And our marriage was a promise between my father and yours, to what? Work together on some unknown business venture?” He shakes his head. “It doesn’t make a lot of sense Estella.”

“I never said it would make sense,” I bark back, my cheeks heating with anger. “But my brothers were brought to Chicago too. That could only be for business, and I think whatever it is, it’s bigger than just our families.”

Cassius

“What makes you think I’m not a part of it?” I ask. I could be just as entwined in whatever business it is.

“Because you didn’t recognise me. You didn’t know who you were marrying until the vicar said my name.”

I look at her. Her fear and confusion are clear as she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth and chews.

“I have believed for a while that my father is keeping certain aspects of the business away from me.” The words sound strangled as they leave me, because as much as I have pondered over the possibility of this being the case, I’ve never admitted it out loud. Not even to my brothers.

“What do you think it could be?” Estella asks quietly, holding her glass of wine, but not drinking from it.

“There’s only one thing it can be,” my chest tightens at the thought as disgust curls in my stomach.

Estella nods, sadness casting shadows beneath her eyes as she understands my train of thought.

“Let’s go to bed,” she says as she stands and rinses her glass in the sink before taking mine and doing the same. “We can talk further in the morning, when we are not so tired.”

The amber liquid swirls around the glass, glowing in the light from the fire. Estella is sleeping, tonight is the first and only night I’ve ever felt so connected to a woman intimately. Don’t get me wrong, sex is sex and I’ve never had a problem with it. Estella though, she brings out a different side to me, in and outside of the bedroom.

She groans lightly, reaching over the empty sheets next to her.

“Cassius,” her voice is husky from sleep, her face flush with warmth. When I don’t answer her straight away she begins to

sit up in bed.

“It’s okay, Estella, I’m here.” I stand from the sofa near the fireplace and join her. Her body is all the comfort I need. It’s become a sanctuary of sorts, a place I can lose my mind and regain clarity, all in the soft curve of her hips, her soft eyes and pillowy lips. I know I struck out on the luck factor. I could have been paired with anyone and the odds of it being with someone I could fall in love with were slim to none.

Yet, it all worked out.

I can only hope for the same stroke of luck for my brothers. They will all be returning to England at the end of this week, and I’m hoping by then I have a plan in place. A plan I can convince them to be a part of.

A plan that will finally see me take over the Grant empire and put a stop to the brutalities committed by my father.

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