

The Wrong Sister

by Alison Reid



Elena Dutton sat across from Cole Blackwell in the glass-and-steel aerie of his Manhattan office, framed by floor-to-ceiling windows and a skyline that glittered with power. The city stretched endlessly behind her—steel, glass, ambition—and she wore it like a second skin. New York suited her. It always had. As though everything it represented—capital, control, inevitability—already belonged to her.

She crossed one elegant leg over the other, the movement precise and unhurried, practised to the point of instinct. Nothing about Elena Dutton was accidental. Not the immaculate fall of her cream suit, not the understated diamonds at her throat, not the calm, appraising gaze she fixed on him as though he were the one being assessed.

On the table between them lay a slim leather folder—Blackwell Capital embossed discreetly on the cover. Inside were documents that had already shifted the ground beneath one of the oldest private companies in the country.

“This arrangement makes sense,” Elena said evenly. “You’re not a man who would marry for love.”

Cole studied her over the rim of his coffee cup. Most women hesitated before saying something like that—softened it, dressed it up, followed it with a smile meant to reassure. Elena delivered it as a statement of fact. Clean. Unvarnished. Efficient.

She held his gaze without blinking.

“Blackwell Capital already holds two proxy seats,” she continued smoothly, as if reciting figures everyone in the room already understood. “Your people are embedded in the advisory committee. The preliminary agreements are signed. The succession contingencies are drafted.”

She gestured lightly toward the folder.

“This”—her lips curved, cool and assured— “is simply the final piece.”

There it was.

No coyness. No illusion that this meeting was about romance. This was about formalising what was already in motion. About optics. About permanence.

Cole set his cup down slowly, the porcelain clicking softly against the glass surface of his desk. “You’re very direct.”

“I prefer efficient,” she replied without apology. “Sentiment complicates things. Neither of us benefits from complication.”

He leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled, watching her carefully.

“And you’re confident you can deliver controlling interest.”

“I’m my father’s heir,” Elena said without hesitation. “Publicly. Legally. And in every way that matters.” She paused just long enough to let the statement settle. “When William Dutton steps down, the board will need continuity. Stability. Someone the markets trust.”

“And you believe that person is you.”

“I know it is,” she corrected coolly.

Cole's gaze sharpened—not at her confidence, but at the ease with which she wore it. She didn't posture. She didn't oversell. She believed it. Entirely.

“What about your sister?” he asked casually. “Will Lauren retain any position once succession is finalised?”

Elena didn't blink. She gave a faint, dismissive shrug, as though the question barely deserved oxygen.

“No. I'll retain controlling interest. Lauren isn't suited to leadership at that level.” Her tone was neutral, almost bored. “She's irrelevant to the structure.”

The word landed between them with quiet finality.

Cole absorbed it without comment.

Elena Dutton was beautiful—undeniably so. Tall and willowy, her bearing spoke of generations of privilege and careful grooming. Old money. Impeccable education. A woman raised for boardrooms, charity galas, and influence exercised behind polished smiles rather than force.

She understood leverage instinctively. Timing. Optics. She knew when to speak and when to let silence do the work. And she never once questioned her place at the top.

That certainty—absolute, unexamined—was precisely what made her convincing.

And precisely what made this deal viable.

“My father's health is declining,” she continued after a moment, her voice steady despite the weight of the admission. “When he's gone, the board will fracture unless there's a clear line of succession. You provide that. Strength. Certainty. A name investors trust.”

“And you,” Cole said evenly, “gain mine.”

She inclined her head. “Status. Security. Consolidation. I'm under no illusions, Cole. This would be a partnership—not a fairy tale.”

Good, he thought. Fairy tales were expensive. Partnerships were profitable.

He glanced briefly at the city below—traffic pulsing like arteries carrying capital and momentum—then returned his attention to her.

“There would be expectations,” he said.

“Of course,” Elena replied smoothly. “Public appearances. A united front. Strategic alignment.”

“I would expect an heir.”

“I have no objection,” she said without pause. “Once that obligation is met, we can live separate lives.”

He studied her for a long moment. “And emotionally?”

“I don’t require love,” Elena said calmly. “I require respect. And discretion.”

Cole nodded once.

At the time, it had seemed... sufficient.

The arrangement settled something inside him. Not relief exactly—more a sense of order restored. Variables contained. Outcomes projected.

“I have the Dubai trip,” he said. “Soon.”

“I know.” Elena’s eyes sharpened with interest. “Your investors value stability. An engaged man reads differently than a single one.”

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. She really was exceptionally well informed.

“Then we should use that trip to see how well we fit,” he said. “Publicly, at least.”

“That would be sensible,” she agreed. “And efficient.”

He nodded once. “My legal team will draft a marriage contract. A comprehensive one. Prenuptial terms, asset protections, succession clauses.”

“Of course,” Elena said smoothly. “I’d expect nothing less. My lawyers will want to review it, but I don’t foresee any complications. We’re aligned.”

That sealed it.

Cole rose, extending his hand across the desk. “Then I think we understand each other.”

Elena stood as well, placing her hand in his. Her grip was firm, her gaze unwavering, her expression already calibrated for whatever public narrative they would soon present.

“We do,” she said. “This will work very well—for both of us.”

“I agree.”

“I’ll organise a dinner with my father in the next couple of days,” she added. “We can begin laying the groundwork.”

As she released his hand and turned toward the door, Cole felt the familiar satisfaction of a deal neatly struck.

No risk. No uncertainty. No unnecessary emotion.

Just power aligning with power—clean, controlled, and entirely devoid of sentiment.

Exactly the way he preferred it.

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