THE WRONG SISTER

EXCLUSIVE BONUS *Epilogue*

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by Alison Reid

Twenty-Three Years Later…

Christmas Eve at Blackwell House had always been excessive. Not in the loud, gaudy way the tabloids once expected from billionaires, but in the quiet, deliberate elegance Lauren preferred.

The enormous tree in the grand sitting room glowed softly beneath thousands of warm white lights, silver ribbons woven carefully through the branches beside delicate glass ornaments collected over two decades of marriage, travel, and family traditions. Snow drifted steadily beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows while fireplaces crackled throughout the house, warming every room with the scent of pine, cinnamon, and cedar.

For once, everyone was home.

Lauren stood near the fireplace with a glass of red wine in hand, quietly watching the chaos unfold around her with familiar affection.

Rachel sat sprawled across the rug beside Rebecca while Dominic loudly accused both girls of cheating at cards.

"We are not cheating," Rebecca said flatly.

"You absolutely are," Dominic argued.

Rachel grinned. "You're just losing."

"That's because you changed the rules halfway through."

Nearby, Gregory sat elegantly draped across one of the armchairs, looking perfectly at home despite the fact he'd arrived two hours earlier and immediately criticised the Christmas playlist.

"It lacks sophistication," he informed Rachel.

"It's Christmas music," Rachel replied.

"Exactly my point."

Hugo, seated beside him with an amused smile, reached over and stole one of the chocolates Gregory had been hoarding all evening.

Gregory gasped in betrayal. "I saw that."

"You've eaten twelve already."

"I'm hosting emotionally," Gregory replied gravely.

Hugo kissed his temple absently before returning to his drink.

Across the room, Troy laughed loudly at something Dominic had said while Elena rolled her eyes with long-suffering affection beside him.

"Honestly," Elena muttered, "having twins was punishment for my personality."

"It absolutely was," Troy agreed.

Elena smacked his arm while everyone laughed.

Twenty years ago, Lauren never would have imagined this version of her sister. Softer now. Happier. Still dramatic. Still sharp-tongued when she wanted to be. But time had worn down the bitterness that once lived between them.

Not perfect.

But real.

Near the piano, William leaned quietly against the wall with a tumbler of bourbon in his hand, pretending to pay attention to the conversation around him.

Pretending being the important word.

At twenty-two, he looked painfully like Cole. Tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, controlled. But he had Lauren's eyes. Lauren's steadiness. And unfortunately, tonight, he also had Cole's old habit of brooding in silence.

Gregory noticed first, naturally.

"Oh no," he announced dramatically, studying William over the rim of his wineglass. "That boy has heartbreak face."

William groaned. "Please don't call it heartbreak face."

Gregory ignored him completely. "Lauren, he has your tragic emotional repression and Cole's brooding. The combination is devastating."

"It's one breakup," William muttered.

"A Christmas breakup," Gregory corrected. "Emotionally, that's worth at least three regular breakups."

Hugo laughed quietly into his drink.

Cole emerged from his study carrying another bottle of wine and crossed the room toward Lauren automatically, his attention finding her with the same instinctive certainty it always had. Even after twenty-three years of marriage, every room seemed to reorganise itself around where she stood.

His hand settled against her waist as he leaned down to kiss her temple.

"You're staring," he murmured.

"I'm observing."

"Dangerous."

"Usually."

Cole followed her gaze toward William and immediately understood.

"He still upset?"

"Yes," Lauren said softly. "I think Heidi breaking up with him hit harder than he expected."

Earlier that afternoon William had arrived home from college quieter than usual. Rachel had eventually dragged the truth out of him during dinner preparations.

Two-year relationship.

Ended three days before Christmas.

Brutal timing.

Lauren glanced back at Cole. "You should talk to him."

Cole looked unimpressed by the suggestion. "About heartbreak."

"Yes."

"I'm uniquely unqualified."

Gregory nearly choked on his wine. "Oh, please. You're basically a romance novel now."

Cole looked deeply offended by the statement.

Lauren laughed softly and reached up to straighten the collar of his sweater. "You're his father."

"That hardly improves my qualifications."

"It does when he worships you."

William groaned into his drink. "Can everyone stop discussing me like I'm not here?"

"No," Rachel said immediately.

Cole looked down at Lauren for a long moment before leaning in and kissing her slowly, entirely unconcerned by the audience around them.

When he pulled back, his eyes lingered on hers.

"You're still the smartest woman I know."

Lauren arched a brow. "You're biased."

"Absolutely."

Rachel made a horrified noise. "Can you two not flirt in front of us for five minutes?"

"No," Cole replied calmly.

Troy burst out laughing.

Gregory sighed dramatically. "Honestly, after twenty-three years they're somehow worse."

"They're actually better," Hugo corrected mildly.

"That's deeply upsetting."

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A little while later, Cole found William alone in the study staring out at the snow-covered grounds with another drink in his hand.

The room was quieter than the rest of the house, the sound of laughter and Christmas music muffled beyond the closed door.

Cole poured himself a whiskey before moving to stand beside his son.

For several moments, neither spoke.

"You loved her?" Cole finally asked.

William gave a humourless laugh. "Yeah." He stared down into his glass. "I thought she was the one."

Cole nodded once, unsurprised.

At twenty-two, heartbreak felt permanent.

"You're still young," Cole said evenly. "You have no idea what's waiting for you yet."

William leaned back against the desk. "Easy for you to say. You met Mum."

A faint smile touched Cole's mouth.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I did."

Silence settled again before William frowned slightly. "How did you know?"

Cole swirled the amber liquid slowly in his glass.

"I didn't."

William looked at him properly then. Cole's gaze remained fixed on the snow outside.

"In fact," he said calmly, "I was going to marry your Aunt Elena before I fell in love with your mother."

William nearly choked on his drink.

"What?"

Cole glanced sideways at him, entirely composed. "That was more or less your mother's reaction too."

William shook his head slowly. "Mum knows this story, right?"

"Oh, she lived it."

That startled a laugh out of him despite himself. Cole took another slow sip of whiskey before continuing.

"The truth is… when I met your mother, I didn't understand her at all." His expression shifted slightly, something quieter entering his voice now. "She challenged me immediately. Didn't care about my money. Wasn't impressed by me. Thought my entire approach to relationships was emotionally bankrupt."

William smirked faintly. "Sounds like Mum."

"It was deeply irritating."

"And yet you married her."

Cole's mouth curved slightly. "Turns out I was already in trouble long before I realised it."

He took another slow sip of whiskey before adding dryly, "The first time I met your mother, I thought she was plain."

William nearly choked on his drink.

"Excuse me?" He stared at his father in open disbelief. "Dad. Do you have eyes? She's one of the most beautiful women in New York."

A genuine laugh escaped Cole then, low and amused. "Yes, I know." He shook his head once, clearly aware of his own stupidity in hindsight. "You see how much of an idiot I was."

William laughed under his breath, still looking horrified.

"But," Cole continued, lifting a finger slightly, "in my defence, your mother downplayed her appearance on purpose."

"Why?"

Cole leaned back lightly against the desk, his expression softening.

"Because your grandfather was ill, and he wanted her to eventually take over the Dutton Group." His tone turned quieter, more thoughtful. "And unfortunately, people make assumptions about beautiful women in business. Your mother understood that very early."

William frowned slightly, listening carefully now.

"She wore plain clothes. Pulled her hair back. Never drew attention to herself unless she absolutely had to." A faint smile touched Cole's mouth. "Meanwhile, every person in the room underestimated her."

"Big mistake."

"The biggest," Cole agreed calmly.

He stared into his whiskey for a moment before continuing.

"Your mother was already running half that company before anyone realised it. Your grandfather trusted her completely." Pride settled visibly into his expression now, quiet but unmistakable. "She was smarter than everyone around her, including me."

William smiled faintly at that.

“Mum’s one of the most powerful women in New York now.”

Cole looked toward the fire, the corner of his mouth lifting again.

“I know.”

There was something deeply satisfying in the way he said it. Not arrogance. Not ownership. Pride. The kind earned over decades of watching the woman you love become everything you always knew she could be.

William studied his father carefully then, suddenly understanding something he never fully had before. His father didn’t just love Lauren Blackwell. He admired her.

Just outside the study down the hall, faint laughter echoed through the house while snow continued falling beyond the windows.cAnd for the first time since coming home, William found himself smiling.

“So how did you win her?”

Cole exhaled slowly and leaned back against the desk, rolling the whiskey glass once between his fingers before answering.

“I had contracts and prenups arranged to marry your Aunt Elena,” he said evenly. “At the time, I wanted a foothold inside the Dutton Group. Elena wanted status, power, my name. Everyone thought Elena would inherit the majority share in the Dutton group. It made sense on paper.”

William stared at him. “That sounds unbelievably cold.”

“It was.”

Cole didn’t defend it. Didn’t soften it. He simply stated it like fact.

“At thirty-five, I believed love was a liability. I thought marriage was a business arrangement.” A faintly self-aware expression crossed his face. “Your mother strongly disagreed.”

William huffed a quiet laugh. Cole’s gaze drifted briefly toward the closed study doors, toward the warmth and noise beyond them.

"I met Lauren at a family dinner." His voice lowered slightly, memory settling into it now. "She looked at me across the table like I was an idiot."

William grinned. "Definitely sounds like Mum."

"She challenged every assumption I had." Cole took another sip of whiskey. "Told me she would rather be alone forever than marry a man who didn't love her properly."

William's brows lifted slightly.

"And the annoying part," Cole continued dryly, "was that she meant it. Completely."

The corner of William's mouth tugged upward. "So when did you realise you loved her?"

Cole went quiet for a moment. Long enough that William looked at him properly.

"She made absolutely no attempt to impress me," Cole said finally. "Every woman I'd ever known wanted something from me. Money. Influence. Access." His jaw tightened slightly. "Your mother didn't care about any of it. She cared about integrity. Loyalty. Respect."

He looked down at the amber liquid in his glass.

"And she saw straight through me."

The room fell quiet again.

Then William frowned slightly. "Wait… so how did she end up here then?"

That earned the faintest real smile from Cole.

"Your Aunt Elena had a car accident right before an important Dubai trip. The investors expected me to arrive with my fiancée." He paused. "So your grandfather suggested Lauren take Elena's place."

William blinked. "You're kidding."

"I wish I was."

"And Mum agreed to this?"

"She wanted access to the consortium meetings." Cole's expression turned knowing. "Your mother has always been ambitious. Just quieter about it than everyone else."

William laughed under his breath, shaking his head slowly. "This is insane."

"Yes," Cole agreed calmly. "It was."

"But you fell for her during the trip?"

Cole looked toward the fire burning low in the study hearth.

"No," he said quietly. "If I'm honest… I think I was already falling for her before we ever got on the plane."

William went still at that. Cole rarely spoke emotionally. Rarely admitted weakness of any kind. But there was something unguarded in his expression now. Something older. Wiser.

"She challenged me," Cole said softly. "She fascinated me. And for the first time in my life, I started questioning the kind of man I was."

A slow smile touched his mouth then, quieter than before.

"By the time I realised how badly I wanted her… it was already too late for me to walk away."

He exhaled softly, shaking his head at the memory.

"I still remember the first time I saw your mother without that frumpy disguise she used to wear." His mouth twitched faintly. "I nearly swallowed my tongue."

William burst out laughing.

"Oh my God."

"It's true."

"You called Mum plain and then almost died because she was hot?"

Cole gave him a flat look over the rim of his whiskey glass. "I'm trying to have a meaningful conversation with you."

"That is a meaningful conversation."

Despite himself, Cole laughed quietly.

"The first night of the Dubai trip she came out of her room dressed for dinner wearing a form-fitting dress for once, her hair down…" He shook his head once at the memory. "I remember staring at her like a complete idiot while she looked entirely too pleased with herself."

William grinned. "Did she know?"

"Your mother notices everything." A knowing look crossed his face. "She absolutely knew."

"And she enjoyed it."

"Oh, immensely."

William laughed again, the sound lighter now. Easier. Cole's gaze drifted toward the door, toward the noise and warmth downstairs where Lauren was undoubtedly managing the chaos of Christmas with calm efficiency.

"When I first met her," he admitted quietly, "I thought I was the one in control."

William studied him carefully. "And you weren't?"

Cole smiled slowly into his whiskey.

"Not even close."

He took another sip before adding dryly, "The entire trip a prince was basically chasing her. I spent half my time trying to get rid of him."

William blinked. "A prince?"

"Prince Ahmed."

William stared at him. "You're serious?"

"Unfortunately."

A laugh escaped William before he could stop it. "Dad, Mum was supposed to be your fake fiancée."

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Cole replied flatly. "Prince Ahmed did not care."

The image clearly amused him now, though traces of old irritation still lingered beneath it.

"He attached himself to every event she attended. Dinners. Meetings. Charity galas." Cole's mouth tightened faintly. "At one point he took her out onto the terrace one evening and tried to seduce her."

William laughed harder. "What did Mum do?"

"She rejected him politely."

"That's it?"

Cole gave him a look. "Your mother is terrifyingly polite when rejecting people."

William nearly choked laughing.

"But Ahmed was persistent," Cole continued. "The man made it plainly clear Lauren deserved someone like him."

William nearly laughed into his drink. "That's brutal."

"It was irritating."

"And you didn't kill him?"

"I considered it briefly."

That earned another laugh. Cole shook his head once, remembering it with the kind of reluctant amusement only time could soften.

"Ahmed was charming, intelligent, obscenely wealthy, and completely fearless." His mouth flattened slightly. "A terrible combination."

William grinned. "Sounds like he really liked Mum."

“Oh, he adored her.” Cole took another sip of whiskey. “Frankly, most people did once they actually paid attention to her for longer than five minutes.”

There was unmistakable pride in the statement.

“But Ahmed,” Cole continued dryly, “was the first man who openly pursued her in front of me.”

William winced. “Ouch.”

“Yes.”

“What did Mum do?”

“She thought it was funny.”

William burst out laughing again. “Of course she did.”

Cole gave him a long-suffering look. “Your mother enjoyed watching me suffer far more than was reasonable.”

“And were you jealous?”

For the first time all evening, Cole actually looked offended by the question.

“Violently.”

William laughed so hard he nearly spilled his drink.

“Dad!”

“I had absolutely no experience with jealousy before your mother.” Cole sounded faintly disgusted by the memory. “It was extremely inconvenient.”

William was still laughing when Cole continued.

“The problem was that Ahmed represented everything I wasn’t back then.” His tone quieted slightly now, becoming more thoughtful. “Openly affectionate. Emotionally expressive.” A faint smirk touched his mouth. “Romantic.”

That earned another laugh. Cole shook his head slowly, still faintly incredulous even twenty years later.

"The worst part was that your mother found the entire situation amusing." His eyes narrowed slightly at the memory. "I could tell she enjoyed watching me lose my patience."

"She probably did."

"She absolutely did."

Cole leaned one hip against the desk now, more relaxed than before.

"When we returned to New York, I assumed it was over." A dry laugh escaped him. "Then Ahmed appeared at a charity gala a couple of weeks later."

William blinked. "No."

"Yes."

"You're joking."

"I wish I was." Cole took another sip of whiskey. "He came to New York specifically to persuade your mother to leave me."

William stared at him in complete disbelief before dissolving into laughter again.

"What did Mum do?"

A slow smile spread across Cole's face then. Softer this time. Certain.

"I overheard her telling Ahmed she was in love with her fiancé and would never betray me."

William blinked. "But you weren't actually engaged."

"I know." Cole let out a quiet breath, still faintly amazed by it even now. "Thankfully, your mother fell for me anyway."

There was no arrogance in the statement. If anything, the opposite. Like even after twenty-three years, some part of him still couldn't entirely believe she had chosen him. The room went quiet for a moment after that. Because even now, after decades of marriage, Cole still looked affected by the memory. William noticed it immediately.

"You loved her already too, didn't you?"

Cole looked toward the fire again, expression thoughtful.

"Yes," he admitted quietly. "I just hadn't said it out loud yet."

His fingers tightened slightly around the whiskey glass before relaxing again.

"At that point I was already finished." A faint smile touched his mouth. "I just didn't fully understand it."

William stayed quiet, listening. Cole rarely spoke this openly about anything emotional. When he did, people paid attention.

"I remember hearing her defend me to Ahmed," Cole continued softly. "And all I could think was…" He shook his head once. "No one had ever chosen me like that before."

William frowned slightly. "What do you mean?"

Cole leaned back against the desk, gaze distant now.

"Most people wanted something from me. Business opportunities. Access. Money. Status." His expression remained calm, but there was old weariness beneath it. "Even relationships felt transactional back then."

"But Mum loved you before you deserved it," William said quietly.

Cole looked at him then. For a second, genuine surprise crossed his face, as though he hadn't expected his son to understand something that precisely.

"Yes," he said finally. "She did."

The fire crackled softly between them while distant laughter echoed upstairs. Cole's expression softened further.

"Your mother saw every ugly part of me back then. The arrogance. The control issues. The emotional constipation." His mouth twitched faintly. "And somehow she loved me anyway."

William laughed under his breath.

"That's actually kind of terrifying."

"It absolutely was."

Another silence settled, easier this time. Then Cole glanced toward the door again, toward the warmth waiting just outside the study.

"And the truly dangerous part," he said dryly, "was that once Lauren Blackwell decides she loves you, there's absolutely no escape."

William smiled into his drink. Somehow, heartbreak didn't seem quite as hopeless anymore. Cole was quiet for a moment longer, staring into the fire before finally speaking again.

"The point I'm trying to make, William…" His voice was calmer now. Steadier. "Is that you think your life is heading in one direction, then suddenly something happens and everything changes."

William listened quietly.

"I thought I knew exactly what my future would look like. I had contracts arranged. A plan. A version of my life that made sense on paper." A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Then your mother walked into it and destroyed every assumption I had."

William huffed a quiet laugh.

Cole glanced toward him. "At the time, I thought losing Elena as a strategic match would've been a disaster." He shook his head slowly. "Instead, it was the best thing that ever happened to me."

The fire crackled softly in the silence that followed.

"You're heartbroken right now," Cole continued. "And I know it feels permanent. At your age, I probably would've thought the same thing." His expression softened slightly. "But life has a habit of blindsiding you when you least expect it."

William leaned back against the desk, listening carefully now.

"One day," Cole said quietly, "you'll meet someone who changes everything you thought you wanted." A knowing look crossed his face. "And if you're lucky… she'll challenge you. Make you better. Refuse to let you get away with your own nonsense."

William smirked faintly. "Like Mum."

"Exactly like your mother."

Cole took the last sip of his whiskey before setting the glass aside.

"I thought I was building an empire back then," he admitted. "Turns out I was building a life. I just didn't realise the difference until Lauren."

The words settled heavily in the room. Not dramatic. Just true. And somehow that made them hit harder.

* * * * * * * *

When they finally left the study, the warmth and noise of the house wrapped around them immediately.

Christmas music drifted softly through the living room while snow continued falling outside the enormous windows. The fire crackled steadily, casting golden light across the room and the people gathered inside it.

Rachel and Rebecca were still arguing over cards. Dominic was now attempting to convince Troy to help him cheat. Gregory sat dramatically sprawled across the sofa complaining that Hugo had stolen the last champagne truffle.

"I took one," Hugo corrected calmly.

"It was emotionally my truffle."

"No one knows what that means," Elena informed him.

William found himself smiling before he even realised it. The heaviness in his chest had eased somewhere during the conversation in the study. Not disappeared completely. But loosened.

Cole stepped fully into the room beside him, and almost immediately his attention shifted toward Lauren. It happened so naturally William wasn't even sure his father realised he was doing it.

Lauren stood near the Christmas tree helping Rachel untangle something from the branches, laughing softly at whatever Rebecca was saying. The warm lights caught in her pale blonde hair, now worn loose over one shoulder instead of pulled into the severe styles she used to hide behind years ago. And just like that, Cole's entire expression changed. Subtly. But completely. Softer around the eyes.

Warmer. Focused.

Like every instinct he possessed still oriented toward her after all this time. William noticed Lauren glance up the moment Cole entered the room. Her face lit immediately. Not dramatically. Not performatively. Just instinctively happy to see him.

Cole crossed the room without hesitation and slid one arm around her waist from behind, pulling her lightly against him while pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

"How did the rescue mission go?" Lauren asked, leaning back into him automatically.

Cole's gaze flicked briefly toward William. "He'll survive."

Lauren smiled softly at that before reaching up and absentmindedly straightening the collar of Cole's sweater, the gesture intimate from repetition rather than thought.

William suddenly understood something important. Love wasn't just grand declarations. Sometimes it was this. Twenty-three years of instinctive touches. Private smiles. Reaching for each other without thinking. Still wanting to stand close after decades together.

Cole murmured something quietly into Lauren's ear that made her laugh under her breath. Gregory noticed immediately.

"Oh God," he sighed dramatically. "They're flirting again."

"They never stop," Rachel informed Hugo.

"It's honestly unsettling," Elena added dryly.

Troy took another sip of whiskey. "I think it's kind of nice."

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

"What?" he defended. "I'm capable of emotional depth occasionally."

Lauren laughed again while Cole's hand remained settled securely at her waist. And standing there watching his parents together, William realised something that made the ache of heartbreak feel smaller somehow.

Love like this existed. Real. Steady. Enduring.

And maybe losing the wrong person simply meant life was still making room for the right one.

— The End —

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