

ACQUIRED By My RIVAL CEO

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS, FORCED
PROXIMITY ROMANCE

RL DANE

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CONTENTS

1. Chapter 1	1
2. Chapter 2	11
3. Chapter 3	27
4. Chapter 4	39
5. Chapter 5	48
6. Chapter 6	58
7. Chapter 7	75
8. Chapter 8	86
9. Chapter 9	95
10. Chapter 10	113
11. Chapter 11	126
12. Chapter 12	138
13. Chapter 13	148
14. Chapter 14	159
15. Chapter 15	178

16. Chapter 16	189
One Night With The Forbidden Billionaire	200

CHAPTER ONE

Emma

"Sorry, Emma. Can't go up against Cross Industries. You understand."

I slam the phone down hard enough to rattle my coffee cup. Cold. Again. That makes—what?—ally number twelve who's suddenly too busy to help save my family's firm?

I'm rearranging the Cross Industries documents by date when Mac walks in.

"You look like death warmed over, honey."

"Thanks. That's exactly what every woman wants to hear on a Friday."

He picks up my empty cup and sniffs. "This smells like it could strip paint."

"It's fuel." I snatch it back and immediately knock over my pen holder. Pens scatter across forty-seven pages of corporate legal speak that basically translates to "we own you now."

Mac watches me scramble to collect them. "When did you last go home?"

"I am home. This office—"

"Is not a bedroom, despite what you seem to think." He deliberately moves my perfectly stacked files. "Jesus, Emma. You've color-coded the hostile takeover documents."

"Organization helps me think."

"Obsession helps you avoid thinking." He crosses his arms. "The cabin. This weekend. Non-negotiable."

I reach for my phone to check messages, but he grabs it first.

"I have work—"

"You have a nervous breakdown brewing." He holds my phone above his head, taunting me. "The work will be here Monday."

I jump for it and miss. Pathetic. "Give me my phone, Mac."

"Cabin. Now. Or I'm calling your grandfather."

That stops me cold. Grandpa's been fragile since his stroke. "That's a low blow."

"I'm feeling mean today." He tosses my phone back. "Pack your bags, workaholic."

I start shoving documents into my briefcase, including the Cross Industries proposal. Liam Cross's signature stares up at me from the cover letter. Bold, confident strokes that probably cost my family everything.

"Fine. But I'm bringing work."

Mac grins. "I'd expect nothing less."

As I stuff the last file into my bag, I catch myself wondering what Liam Cross does on weekends. Probably counts his money. Definitely not obsessing over legal documents in a mountain cabin.



Two weeks earlier

"Gentlemen. Ms. Sinclair."

Liam Cross walks into my conference room like he owns it. Which, given his reputation, he probably will by next week.

I stand, extending my hand across the mahogany table my grandfather imported from Ireland. "Mr. Cross. Welcome to Sinclair and Associates."

His grip is firm. Warm. He holds on a beat longer than necessary, gray eyes never leaving mine. "Thank you for agreeing to meet."

"I don't recall having much choice."

His mouth quirks up at one corner. "There's always a choice, Ms. Sinclair."

He's taller than he looked in the financial magazines. Broader through the shoulders. The tailored suit can't hide the fact that he didn't grow up in boardrooms. There's detail about his hands that suggests he's done actual work with them.

"Shall we?" I gesture to the chairs.

His team arranges themselves with military precision. Mine wear the grim look of the condemned. Which isn't far from the truth.

Cross slides a leather portfolio across the table. "I think you'll find our offer more than fair."

I flip through forty-seven pages without reading a word. "Generous, even."

"I'm glad you think so."

"I think you'll find that generous and adequate are two very different things." I close the portfolio and slide it back. "This is a family firm, Mr. Cross. Four generations of Sinclairs have practiced law in this building."

"Sentiment is expensive in today's market."

"Some things are worth the cost."

He leans forward, and I catch his cologne. Clean and masculine and completely distracting in a hostile takeover.

"Is pride worth your employees' jobs, Ms. Sinclair?"

Heat flashes through me. "Excuse me?"

"Your firm is hemorrhaging clients. How long before you can't make payroll?"

I stand so fast my chair rolls backward. "This meeting is over."

"Sit down."

The command in his voice stops me cold. We stare at each other across the table. Tension snaps between us, raw and electric. It has nothing to do with business and everything to do with the way his eyes drop to my mouth for half a second before snapping back up.

"Please," he adds, softer.

I sit. Not because he told me to, but because my knees feel unreliable.

"I'm not the enemy here," he says.

"No? Then what are you?"

"Someone who sees potential in what you've built."

"Potential to strip for parts?"

"Potential to thrive." He pulls out his phone and slides it across the table. Financial projections fill the screen. "Your grandfather built a remarkable firm. You've maintained it against impossible odds. But maintenance isn't growth."

I study the numbers despite myself. They're good. Better than good.

"Why do you care?"

"Maybe I don't like seeing good things destroyed by bad management."

"Are you calling me a bad manager?"

"I'm calling you overwhelmed."

The truth of it slams into me, harder than any insult. I push his phone back. "We're not for sale, Mr. Cross."

"Everything's for sale. It's just a matter of finding the right price."

"Some things can't be bought."

"Such as?"

"Loyalty. Legacy. Love."

He studies me for a long moment. "You might be surprised what money can protect, Ms. Sinclair."

There's an edge in his voice. One that doesn't match the corporate raider reputation. But before I can analyze it, he's standing.

"Think about our offer. You have until the end of the month."

"That's not very long."

"It's longer than most people get."

His team files out with the same precision they entered with. Cross pauses at the door.

"For what it's worth, I hope you prove me wrong about the sentiment thing."

Then he's gone, leaving behind the faint scent of his cologne and a business card on the table.

I don't touch the card for twenty minutes. When I finally pick it up, it's still warm.



Mac's voice jerks me back to my office. "Earth to Emma. You're staring at that proposal like it personally insulted your mother."

I slam the briefcase shut. "Let's go. Before I change my mind about this cabin thing."

As we head for the elevator, I can't shake the feeling that Cross's parting words meant more than business.



The mountain road winds up through pine trees, their branches heavy with fresh snow. My Honda wasn't built for this kind of terrain, but it's managing. Barely.

I haven't been to the cabin since Grandpa's stroke. Two years of avoiding the place where my parents used to take

me every summer. Where we'd sit by the fire and Dad would read legal briefs while Mom rolled her eyes and made s'mores.

The GPS tells me I've arrived, but that can't be right. There are lights on in the windows. Smoke rising from the chimney.

I park next to a black Range Rover and sit in my car for a full minute. Someone's broken into my family's cabin. Perfect. Because this day couldn't get any worse.

I grab my phone to call the police, but there's no signal. Of course there isn't.

The front door opens, and a man steps onto the porch. A very familiar man.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Liam Cross sets down an armload of firewood and stares at me. He's wearing jeans. Actual jeans. And a flannel shirt that does things to his shoulders that his expensive suits only hinted at.

"I could ask you the same question." He walks down the porch steps. "This is my rental."

"*Your* rental?" I climb out of my car and immediately regret wearing heels. "This is my family's cabin!"

"Well, according to Mountain Retreats dot com, it's mine for the weekend."

I march up to him, which is a mistake because now I can smell that same clean cologne from the boardroom. "Mountain Retreats dot what?"

"The rental website. I booked this place three weeks ago."

"You can't book this place. It's not for rent."

He pulls out his phone and shows me a confirmation email. The address matches. The photos match. Even the stupid wind chime my grandmother hung on the porch is in the listing.

"There's been a mistake," I say.

"Clearly." He's looking at me with the same intensity he had in the boardroom, but without the corporate armor, it feels different. Personal. "You're going to have to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere. This is my cabin."

"Do you have a rental confirmation?"

"I don't need one. I have a key."

I stomp up the porch steps and jam my key into the lock. It turns. The door opens.

"See?"

"Congratulations. So does mine." He holds up a keypad entry code on his phone.

We stand there staring at each other. The wind picks up, cutting through my blazer, and I realize how much colder it is up here than in the city.

"Look," he says, and his voice is different too. Less corporate shark, more human being. "I'm sure we can figure this out. Why don't you come inside before you freeze to death?"

"I'm not freezing."

"Your lips are turning blue."

I touch my mouth reflexively, and his eyes follow the movement. A current arcs between us, sharp and undeniable, just like in the boardroom, but without the conference table to hide behind.

"Fine. But only until I can call Mountain Retreats and sort this out."

I follow him inside, and my heart does a complicated flip. The cabin looks exactly the same. My grandmother's quilts on the couch. My grandfather's law books on the shelves. The stone fireplace where my parents used to sit and argue about cases.

Liam's expensive luggage sits next to the couch, an unwelcome occupation.

"You've made yourself at home." My voice is tight.

"I paid for the weekend."

"Well, so did I. Sort of." I set my briefcase down with more force than necessary. "This is ridiculous. One of us has to leave."

"Agreed. Have a safe drive back to the city."

"I'm not the one leaving."

"Neither am I."

We glare at each other across my grandmother's coffee table. Outside, the wind rattles the windows, and I notice fat, heavy flakes that weren't in the forecast.

"Is it supposed to snow?"

Liam looks out the window, frowning. "Not according to the weather app."

My phone buzzes with an emergency alert. **WINTER STORM WARNING. TRAVEL ADVISORY IN EFFECT.**

His phone buzzes at the same time.

"Well," he says. "This is interesting."

We're both staring at our phones when the power flickers and the lights go out.



The backup generator kicks in, flooding the cabin with dim light.

"That won't last long," Liam says, checking his phone. "Maybe six hours if we're lucky."

I'm already pulling up weather apps, but they're all saying the same thing. Storm intensifying. Roads closing. Temperature dropping fast.

"There has to be another way down the mountain."

"In a blizzard?" He moves to the window and peers out at the swirling snow. "You'd die before you reached the main road."

"So what do you suggest?"

"We survive," he says. "We'll have to do it together."

The word "together" hangs in the air between us. I set my phone down and really look at him for the first time since I arrived. Without the corporate setting, without his team of lawyers, he's just a man. A very attractive man who's currently standing in my childhood sanctuary.

"The generator won't heat the whole cabin," he says. "We'll need to keep the fire going."

"Fine. You handle that. I'll figure out the sleeping arrangements."

"There's only one bed."

Of course there is. "The couch folds out."

"It's twenty degrees outside and dropping. The sitting room will be freezing without power."

I walk to the bedroom and flip the light switch. Nothing. The backup generator doesn't reach this far. I can already feel the cold seeping through the windows.

"We're adults," I call back to him. "We can share a bed without..."

"Without what?"

I return to the living room where he's building up the fire. The flames cast shadows across his face, making him look less like a corporate raider and more a figure of raw, captivating power.

"You know what."

"Do I?"

The way he's looking at me makes my stomach flip. "This doesn't change anything between us professionally."

"Of course not."

"I still think you're trying to destroy my family's legacy."

"Noted."

"And you still think I'm an overprotective control freak."

"I never said control freak."

I grab my suitcase. "I'm going to change into warmer clothes."

"Emma."

I stop at the bedroom door. "What?"

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry about this. The mix-up. The storm. All of it."

There's a hint of vulnerability in his voice I haven't heard before, .

"Yeah, well. Not exactly how I planned to spend my weekend either."

I close the bedroom door and lean against it. Through the wood, I can hear him moving around, banking the fire, checking supplies. Taking care of things.

When I emerge in flannel pajamas and thick socks, he's made coffee and laid out extra blankets.

"We should probably talk about ground rules," he says.

CHAPTER TWO

Liam

Ground rules. Because apparently I need a strategy for spending forty-eight hours with a woman who makes me want to forget every professional boundary I have ever had.

Emma curls into the corner of the couch, knees to her chest. The flannel pajamas are a size too big, yet somehow they highlight the length of her legs. Firelight catches the auburn in her hair.

This is a problem.

"Rule one," I say, settling into the chair across from her. Distance. I need distance. "We split chores. I'm not your maid service."

"I never asked you to be."

"You also never offered to help with the fire or coffee."

She bristles. I almost smile. Emma Sinclair in lawyer mode is formidable. Emma Sinclair in pajamas, getting defensive, is disarming.

"Fine. What else?"

"We stay out of each other's way as much as possible."

"Agreed." She sips the coffee. I try not to watch her lips on the rim. "Anything else?"

"Work talk is off limits."

She nearly chokes. "Excuse me?"

"No discussions about the takeover, your firm, my firm, any of it. We're stuck here, but that doesn't mean we have to torture each other."

It's a lie. Talking about work would be easier than dealing with whatever this tension is between us. But I also know if we start discussing business, we will end up fighting. If we fight, I might say too much about my real plans.

"That's ridiculous. It's the only thing we have in common."

"Is it?"

The question comes out more loaded than I intended. Emma's eyes widen slightly. I see her pulse flutter at her throat.

"What else could we possibly talk about?"

"I don't know. Normal things. Weather. Books." I gesture toward the shelves. "You must have read some of those."

"Those are law books."

"All of them?"

She follows my gaze. I watch her face soften as she notices what I spotted earlier. Mixed in with the legal texts are novels, poetry, even some old classics that look well-read.

"Some of them," she admits.

"See? Common ground."

Her phone buzzes. She checks it. The way her expression changes tells me it's her assistant. The one who does not trust me.

She glances at me. I pretend to focus on the fire. I can feel her eyes on my back as I move. The awareness makes me hyperconscious of every movement.

Her phone starts ringing.

"Is that your assistant?" My gaze flicks to her phone.

"Best friend. Excuse me."

She steps into the kitchen. The cabin is small enough that I catch pieces of the conversation anyway.

"What the hell do you mean he's there?"

"Rental mix-up. We're both stuck here until the storm clears."

I should feel guilty about eavesdropping. I need to know if she feels safe with me.

"It's not like I had a choice. The roads are impassable."

"He has not."

There's a longer pause. Then Emma's voice drops to a whisper. I catch fragments about getting laid and when she last had sex. I have to grip the poker harder to keep from turning around.

This is torture.

"Survive the weekend without killing him?"

Well. At least I know where I stand.

When she returns, I am staring into the flames, trying to get my body under control.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Mac thinks I should jump your bones."

The words struck me, a punch to the gut. I look up at her. She's bright red.

"That's direct."

"I didn't mean to say that out loud."

"Your friend has interesting advice."

And now I am thinking about her jumping my bones. Exactly what I do not need to be thinking about.

"My friend has no filter and too many opinions."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I'm trying to survive the weekend without killing you."

I laughed. Better than groaning. "Fair enough. Though for the record, if anyone's doing the killing, it'll probably be you. You've got that lawyer thing going on."

"What lawyer thing?"

"Arguing people to death."

"I do not argue people to death."

"You're doing it right now."

She opens her mouth, then snaps it shut. Point to me.

Silence settled. I focused on the storm. Anything but the firelight on her skin. The way she relaxed, truly relaxed, outside of corporate mode.

"So," I say. "Ground rules established?"

"I want to add one more."

"Which is?"

"No walking around shirtless."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Planning on it, were you?"

"I'm just saying. For both our sakes."

Interesting. So she's as aware of the attraction as I am.

"Deal. Same goes for you."

"I wasn't planning on walking around topless."

"Good to know."

The words come out rougher than I intended. I see her breath hitch. We are talking about being naked. We both know it.

"I should check the weather," she says, jumping up.

"Already did. Storm's supposed to last through Sunday."

"Sunday? That's two more days."

"Forty-eight hours. We can manage forty-eight hours."

I'm not sure I can manage forty-eight minutes if she keeps looking at me like that.



Emma

I need a shower. Desperately. "I'm going to take a shower," I announce, mostly to myself.

"Emma." His voice stops me.

"What?"

"Hot water won't last long on generator power. Maybe ten minutes."

Right. Of course. Practical. "Thanks."

I am almost to the bathroom when he calls out again.

"There are extra towels in the linen closet."

"Thanks." I mutter, *Why is he being so... helpful?* It's unsettling.

The shower is blessedly hot, even if I have to rush. Ten minutes. Enough to wash away some of the tension, not nearly enough to wash away the confusion Liam Cross stirs in me. *Relaxing before he destroys my life.* His words from the boardroom echo. Is that what this is? Some strange form of corporate torture?

I count the minutes. Eight. That should be fine.

I towel off quickly, pulling on jeans and a cream sweater. Anything to feel less exposed than I did in pajamas. My hair's still damp, but I feel marginally more human. More like Emma Sinclair, attorney at law, and less like a woman trapped with her nemesis.

He's staring into the fire when I walk back out. He turns.

"Feel better?" he asks. His gaze lingers for a moment.

"Much. Thanks for the hot water warning."

"No problem."

I need to do something. Something normal. I head for the kitchen, opening cabinets. "What do we have for food?"

"I brought supplies for the weekend. Pasta, some vegetables, coffee, the basics."

He brought supplies. Of course he did. Always prepared. "You cook?" The question surprises me.

"I eat. Sometimes that requires cooking." A non-answer.

I pull out a can of tomatoes. San Marzano. "This is actually good quality."

"You sound surprised."

"I had you pegged as a takeout-and-protein-bars guy." Mr. Corporate Raider, living on convenience.

He just smirks. "I like to eat well. Life's too short for bad food."

"That's surprisingly philosophical for someone planning a hostile takeover," I say. The words are out before I can stop them.

He tenses. "I thought we agreed on no work talk."

"Sorry. Habit." I set the can down, looking around the small kitchen. I need to contribute. "So what can I do to help?"

He looks surprised. "You want to help cook?"

"I want to earn my keep. Rule one, remember? We split chores." Plus, I need a distraction.

His expression is unreadable. "Can you chop vegetables?"

"I can chop vegetables." I am not completely useless in a kitchen.

He pulls out an onion, garlic, a bell pepper. Hands me a knife. "Have at it."

I take the onion. It feels foreign in my hand, not like a pen or a legal document. "How small do you want the pieces?"

"However you want them."

Typical man. No specifics. "That's not helpful. I need specifications."

He almost smiles. "About a quarter inch."

"That I can work with." I focus on the task, making each cut precise. Uniform. It's calming, the repetitive motion.

"You know," he says, pulling out a pot, "most people just eyeball it."

"I don't eyeball things. I'm precise."

"I've noticed."

I glance up. "Is that a criticism?"

"It's an observation."

We work in a silence that's not entirely uncomfortable. He fills the pot with water, sets it on the stove. The domes-

ticity of it is jarring. This man, Liam Cross, the corporate shark, making pasta. In my family's cabin.

"Can I ask you something?" I say, needing to break the quiet.

"Shoot."

"Why this cabin? Of all the places you could have rented, why here?" It has been nagging at me.

His face gives nothing away. "It looked peaceful. Good reviews online."

"And you didn't know it was mine?"

"I had no idea."

I nod slowly, my lawyer brain kicking in. It feels too coincidental. "What were you planning to do up here? Besides relax."

"Read. Think. Maybe do some hiking if the weather held."

"Think about what?"

He meets my gaze. "Business mostly. Strategy."

Strategy. His kind of strategy means my firm's destruction. My knife stills. "Strategy for what?"

"Emma." A warning.

"Right. No work talk." I resume chopping, maybe with a little too much force. "It's just hard to turn off, you know? When someone's trying to buy your life's work." The frustration bubbles up, sharp and bitter.

"I know," he says, his voice quiet.

"Do you? Have you ever had someone try to take everything you've built?" The words are a challenge.

He hesitates. "Not exactly."

"Then you don't know." How could he? He's the one doing the taking.

He takes the onions from my cutting board and adds them to a pan on the stove. The aroma of sautéing garlic and onion starts to fill the small space.

"You're angry," he says, not looking at me.

"Of course I'm angry. You're trying to destroy my family."

He turns then, his grey eyes intense. "What if I'm not?"

My breath catches. "What's that supposed to mean?" Is this another tactic? Some psychological game?

He looks away. "Nothing. Forget I said it."

But I can't forget it. I stare at him, trying to piece together the man in front of me with the corporate raider from the news. They don't quite fit.

"You're not what I expected," I say, the words softer than I intend.

He meets my gaze again. "What did you expect?"

"Someone colder. More calculating. Less..." I search for the word.

"Less what?"

"Human."

The word hangs between us. He looks away, a muscle working in his jaw. What is he thinking?

"Appearances can be deceiving," he says, his voice rough.

"Yeah. They can." And I am not sure which appearance is the deception.

The water starts to boil. Liam adds the pasta. I finish chopping the bell pepper and move to the sink to wash my hands. As I reach for the towel, my fingers brush his.

A jolt, sharp and unexpected, races up my arm. I freeze. My heart hammers. He must have felt it too.

"Emma." His voice is low.

I turn. He's close. I can smell the faint, clean scent of his soap mixed with the distinct, warmer scent of his skin.

My gaze flicks to his mouth, then back to his eyes. This is dangerous territory.

"This is a bad idea," I whisper, though I'm not sure what "this" even is. This proximity. This awareness. This... feeling.

"What is?"

"Whatever this is." This strange pull between us.

He looks like he wants to kiss me. And the terrifying part? I think I want him to.

This is your enemy, Emma. The man trying to destroy your legacy.

He steps back. "Yeah. Bad idea."

The moment shatters. I turn back to the sink, my hands shaking. I catch my reflection in the window. My eyes are wide, my cheeks flushed. I look shaken. Because I am.

Forty-six hours. How am I going to survive forty-six hours of this?



Liam

After dinner, Emma insists on helping with the firewood.

"I can handle it," I tell her, pulling on my jacket.

"Rule one. We split chores."

"It's twenty degrees outside."

"I have a coat."

She does have a coat. A designer wool thing that looks expensive and useless against mountain cold.

"That's not going to keep you warm."

"It's fine."

Stubborn. "At least wear this." I pull a spare fleece from the closet. Toss it to her.

She catches it and frowns. "This is huge."

"It'll keep you from freezing to death."

She pulls it on over her coat. The fleece dwarfs her small frame, sleeves falling past her fingertips. It should look ridiculous. Instead... Ridiculous how appealing she looks.

Outside, the snow has stopped but left everything covered in white. The air is sharp and clean. My breath comes out in puffs.

"Wow," Emma says, stopping on the porch. "It's beautiful."

She's right. The cabin, snow-draped, pine trees stark against white drifts, was picturesque. But I am watching her face instead of the scenery. She's smiling, really smiling, for the first time since I have known her.

"Come on," I say. "Let's get this done before we both freeze."

I show her how to stack the wood, biggest pieces on bottom, smaller on top. She nods seriously, like I'm explaining contract law instead of basic construction.

"Got it?"

"I think so."

We work in comfortable silence. Emma is methodical, checking each piece before adding it to the pile. She's slower than me but thorough.

"You don't have to make it perfect," I tell her.

"I like things done right."

"I've noticed."

She is reaching for a particularly awkward piece when it happens. The log shifts. A splinter catches her palm as it slides through her grip.

"Shit!"

She jerks her hand back. I see blood on her palm.

"Let me see."

"It's fine."

"Emma. Let me see."

She holds out her hand reluctantly. There's a decent-sized splinter embedded in her palm, surrounded by a thin line of blood.

"We need to get that out."

"I can handle it."

"Inside. Now."

For once, she doesn't argue. Maybe it's the cold. Maybe it's the blood. She follows me into the cabin without protest.

In the bathroom, I flip on the light and guide her to sit on the edge of the tub. My shoulder brushes the doorframe as I enter fully. To examine her hand, I stand directly before her, our knees nearly touching.

"This might hurt," I warn, pulling tweezers from the medicine cabinet.

"I'm tougher than I look."

"I know."

She's tough. Tougher than someone who grew up with money and privilege should be. There's steel underneath all that polish.

I take her hand in mine. Her skin is soft and cold. She has small hands, fine-boned, with perfectly manicured nails. Lawyer hands. But there are tiny calluses on her fingertips that surprise me.

"What are those from?" I ask, running my thumb over the small rough spots.

"Guitar."

"You play?"

"Used to. Haven't had time lately."

When's the last time you had time for anything?

I focus on the splinter, gripping it carefully with the tweezers. "On three. One, two—"

I pull it out on two. She hisses but does not jerk away.

"Bastard," she mutters.

"Me or the splinter?"

"Both."

I clean the wound with alcohol. She winces. "Sorry."

"It's fine."

But she isn't fine. Her gaze fixed on our joined hands, her brow furrowed. I'm holding her palm up to the light,

dabbing at the cut with a cotton ball. The intimacy of it is making my chest tight.

"You're good at this," she says quietly.

"Construction sites. You learn basic first aid."

"Right. You mentioned that."

Did I? When?

I apply antibiotic ointment. Reach for a bandage. Her hand is steady in mine. I can feel her pulse fluttering at her wrist.

"There." I smooth the bandage over the cut. "Good as new."

I should let go of her hand. The first aid is done. But her skin is warming under my touch. She's looking at me with those green eyes. I can't seem to make myself move.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"You're welcome."

We are sitting close enough that I can see the flecks of gold in her eyes. Close enough to count her freckles. Close enough to kiss her if I wanted to.

And I do want to.

She must see it in my face because her lips part slightly. Her free hand comes up to rest on my chest, right over my heart.

"Liam."

The way she says my name, soft and uncertain, nearly breaks me.

This is wrong. You're lying to her. She thinks you're her enemy.

But she's leaning closer. Her hand is warm on my chest. I can smell that floral shampoo again.

"Emma."

"What?"

Tell her the truth. Tell her everything.

"We should probably get some sleep."

The moment shatters. Emma blinks. Pulls her hand back, color flooding her cheeks.

"Right. Of course." She stands quickly, bumping into the towel rack. "Thank you. For the first aid."

"Anytime."

She hurries out of the bathroom, leaving me alone with the scent of her shampoo and the memory of her pulse under my fingers.

I lean against the sink. Stare at myself in the mirror. Forty-four hours. You can make it forty-four hours without doing anything stupid.

When I walk back to the living room, Emma has already arranged pillows and blankets on her side of the bed. Tonight is going to be a special kind of torture.

The bedroom feels smaller than it did this morning.

Emma's standing at the foot of the bed, staring at it like it's going to bite her. She has changed into flannel pajamas again. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail that makes her look younger.

"So," she says. "Ground rules for this?"

"Straightforward. Stay on your side."

"Right. Your side, my side."

She gestures vaguely at the bed. I can see the exact moment she realizes how ridiculous this is. It's a king-size bed, but after what happened in the bathroom, it might as well be a twin.

"I can take the floor," I offer.

"Don't be ridiculous. It's freezing."

She's right. The bedroom is cold enough that our breath comes out in puffs. Even with the fire going in the main room, the heat doesn't reach back here.

"We're adults," she continues, more to herself than to me. "We can share a bed without..."

"Without what?"

She shoots me a look. "You know what."

Yeah, I know what. The question is whether we want to.

I pull back the covers on my side and get in, keeping my thermal shirt on but losing the jeans. The mattress dips under my weight.

"Are you getting in, or are you going to stand there all night?"

"I'm getting in."

But she doesn't move.

"Emma."

"What?"

"It's just sleeping. And it's too cold for modesty."

Keep telling yourself that.

She nods and gets in, staying in her flannel pajamas. The mattress shifts as she settles. Suddenly she's three feet away instead of across the room. Even through the layers of fabric, I can feel the warmth radiating from her body.

Three feet feels like three inches.

"Good night," she says, turning away from me.

"Good night."

I stare at the ceiling. Listen to her breathing. She's trying to be quiet. I can tell she isn't asleep. Her breathing is too controlled, too careful.

This is torture.

The wind rattles the windows. Emma shifts slightly. The movement sends her scent across the small space between us.

"Liam?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For today. The first aid, making dinner. All of it."

Don't thank me. If you knew why I'm really here, you'd hate me even more than you already do.

"You don't have to thank me."

"Yes, I do. I know this isn't how you wanted to spend your weekend."

Actually, this is exactly how I want to spend my weekend. That's the problem.

"It's not so bad," I say.

She laughs softly. "Liar."

"What makes you think I'm lying?"

"You're stuck in a cabin with someone who's spent weeks trying to block your business deal. Most people would find that stressful."

You have no idea how stressful this is. But not for the reasons you think.

"Maybe I like a challenge."

"Is that what I am? A challenge?"

The question hangs in the air between us. I turn my head to look at her. She has turned toward me too. Moonlight, a pale wash from the window, illuminated her face.

"What do you think?"

"I think you're not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"Someone who wouldn't care that I got hurt. Someone who wouldn't make sure I had enough blankets or warn me about the hot water."

Someone who wouldn't lie awake thinking about kissing you.

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you think."

"Maybe I don't."

We're looking at each other across the pillow divide.

"This is complicated," she whispers.

"Yeah."

"We shouldn't..."

"No. We shouldn't."

But neither of us looks away.

Tell her. Tell her everything. Tell her why you're really here, what you're really doing, how you feel about her.

"Emma."

"What?"

I'm not your enemy. I'm trying to save you. And somewhere along the way, I started falling for you.

"Nothing. Get some sleep."

She nods. Turns away again. I can tell she's as wide awake as I am.

I lie there listening to the storm outside and the sound of her breathing. I know that forty-two more hours of this might actually kill me.

The last thing I hear before finally drifting off is her whispered voice in the darkness.

"Good night, Liam."

And the way she says my name makes my chest tight all over again.

CHAPTER THREE

Emma

I wake to the smell of coffee. Rich. Dark. And something else. Pancakes?

For a disorienting moment, I forget. The blizzard. The cabin. Liam.

The man who wants to buy my family's company. The man who held my hand last night, his touch sending a jolt through me that had nothing to do with first aid and everything to do with an awareness that sizzled just beneath the surface.

The man who slept three feet away and made me forget, for a few hours, why I'm supposed to hate him.

Complicated doesn't even scratch the surface.

A soft clinking sound comes from the kitchen. I debate staying in bed, feigning sleep until he's done. But my stomach rumbles a loud protest. Whatever he's making smells too good to ignore.

I pull on the robe I found in the closet, the thick terry cloth a welcome barrier against the morning chill, and pad into the main room. Liam stands at the stove, his back to me. Hair mussed from sleep, a dark navy thermal clinging to his shoulders, jeans riding low on his hips. He's flipping pancakes. From scratch, by the looks of the batter bowl on the counter.

"Morning." He doesn't turn. How does he always know when I'm there?

"Morning. You didn't get up at dawn to make pancakes, did you?" My voice is rough with sleep.

"Only if eight-thirty counts as dawn."

I glance at my phone on the nightstand. Nine-fifteen. My internal alarm clock shattered. When did I last sleep past seven? College, maybe.

"I haven't slept this late in years."

"Mountain air." He plates a stack of golden-brown pancakes. "Relaxing."

"Right." My tone is dry. "That's definitely what it was."

He glances over his shoulder then, a quick, assessing look. Heat climbs my neck.

"Coffee's ready." Mercifully, he changes the subject.

I pour myself a mug, the ceramic warm in my hands, and lean against the counter. He moves with an easy confidence, flipping pancakes like he's done it a thousand times.

Where did a corporate raider learn to cook like this?

"Where did you learn?" I ask, cradling the mug.

"Trial and error." He slides a plate piled high in front of me. "You can only eat so much takeout before you crave real food."

That's not an answer, not really. But the pancakes smell incredible. Light, fluffy, a hint of vanilla. I take a bite. Better than they smell. Restaurant quality.

"Okay, seriously. Where did you learn this?"

"I told you." He sits across from me with his own plate. "Trial and error."

"Nobody makes pancakes this good through trial and error."

He takes a bite, chews thoughtfully. "Maybe I'm just naturally gifted."

"At pancakes?"

“Among other things.” The way he says it, that half-smile playing on his lips, makes my stomach flutter.

I focus on my breakfast, the warmth spreading through me. “So, what’s the plan for today?”

“Stay warm. Keep the fire going. Wait for the roads to clear.”

“That’s it?”

“What else did you have in mind?” His gaze is steady.

A dozen things I shouldn’t be thinking about. “I don’t know. Read? Work?”

“I thought we agreed. No work talk.”

“I wasn’t going to talk about it. Just... do it.” My briefcase sits by the door, a silent accusation.

“Emma.” His voice is soft, but firm.

“What?”

“When’s the last time you took a real day off?”

“I take days off.” The denial is automatic.

“Name one.”

I open my mouth. Close it. Christmas? No, I worked that morning, reviewing last-minute filings. Thanksgiving? Grandpa was still recovering, and I spent the day going over contracts at his bedside.

“That’s what I thought,” he says, not unkindly.

“Some of us don’t have the luxury of taking vacations whenever we want.” The defensiveness in my voice is sharp.

“And some of us work ourselves to death trying to prove we’re good enough.”

The words sting. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” He looks at me with those gray eyes, and a shiver traces my spine. He sees straight through me. Through the professional armor to the scared young woman terrified of letting her family down.

How does he do that?

"I'm good enough," I say, my voice barely a whisper.

"I know you are."

My head snaps up. "Do you?"

"Emma, you've kept your grandfather's firm afloat for two years against impossible odds. You've outmaneuvered lawyers with twice your experience and half your integrity. You're brilliant."

My chest does a fluttery thing. He thinks I'm brilliant.

"Then why are you trying to take it away from me?" The question hangs between us, raw and accusatory.

Liam's face shutters. The warmth vanishes, replaced by the cool assessment I saw in the boardroom. "Work talk."

"Right. Sorry." I'm not sorry. I want to know. I need to understand why he looks at me like I matter, then reminds me he's the enemy.

My phone buzzes on the counter. Mac.

Status report. Are you still alive?

I type back quickly. **Barely.**

Define barely.

I glance at Liam. He's clearing dishes, his movements efficient, precise. **He made me pancakes.**

Oh honey. You're in trouble.

What's that supposed to mean?

When a man makes you breakfast, he's either trying to get in your pants or he's already thinking about keeping you.

My cheeks flame. **It's just pancakes, Mac.**

Famous last words. Send pics.

Of the pancakes?

Of whatever you want to send pics of. I'm not picky.

I roll my eyes and put my phone away. Liam's watching me when I look up, an amused quirk to his lips.

"Let me guess. Your friend has opinions about the pancakes?"

“Mac has opinions about everything.”

“What’s his verdict?”

“He thinks you’re trying to seduce me with breakfast food.” The words are out before I can stop them.

“Smart friend.”

Wait. What? “Are you? Trying to seduce me?” My voice is a little breathless.

Smooth, Emma. Very professional. Asking your business nemesis if he’s trying to get you into bed.

He goes very still, his gaze intensifying. “Would it work?”

My mouth goes dry. “I don’t know.”

“That’s not a no.”

“It’s not a yes either.”

“No.” His voice is rough. “It’s not.”

It feels dangerous. Am I really ready for this?

I feel the pull, the undeniable chemistry that’s been simmering between us.

“I should shower,” I say, needing to escape the sudden intensity.

“Emma.”

“What?”

“The hot water.”

“Right.” I remember his warning from last night. “Ten minutes.”

I practically flee to the bathroom, my heart hammering. In the small, steamy mirror, my cheeks are flushed, my eyes too bright. *Get it together. He’s the enemy. He wants to destroy your family’s legacy.*

But he also makes perfect pancakes. And the way he looks at me, that unwavering focus, it’s enough to make my breath catch. He sees too much, and a part of me, the part that’s not supposed to care, finds it dangerously attractive.

Mac’s right. I’m in trouble.

After my shower, a quick, bracing eight minutes, I find Liam outside, splitting firewood. The rhythmic thwack of the axe is a surprisingly domestic sound. Through the kitchen window, I watch him swing with practiced ease, his breath misting in the cold air. Definitely not a board-room skill. This man is a collection of contradictions.

I'm drying my hair with a towel when I notice it. His laptop, open on the coffee table. Papers scattered around it.

I shouldn't look. It's none of my business what he's working on.

Except, if it involves my company, it *is* my business.

I walk closer, telling myself I'm just tidying up. The letterhead on the top document stops me cold.

Sinclair & Associates.

What the hell?

My hands start to shake as I pick up the first page. It's a detailed financial analysis of my firm. Employee records. Client lists. Revenue projections going back five years.

He's been spying on us. Investigating us.

Anger, sharp and hot, surges through me. I flip through more pages. Our weaknesses laid out in charts and graphs. Our vulnerabilities highlighted. Our—

I stop. My breath catches. I read the page again, then again.

Employee Retention Strategy.

Preservation of Company Culture.

Maintaining Family Legacy While Ensuring Growth.

These aren't destruction plans. They're... preservation plans? My mind struggles to reconcile this with the corporate raider image, with the man who sat across from me and coolly outlined his takeover.

"Find anything interesting?"

I spin around, papers clutched in my hand. Liam stands in the doorway, snow dusting the shoulders of his jacket,

his expression unreadable. He's shed the flannel from yesterday, back in a dark henley that emphasizes the breadth of his chest.

"You've been investigating my company." My voice is tight.

"Yes." No hesitation.

"For how long?"

"Six months."

Six months. My mind races. "That's before you made your first offer."

"Yes."

"Why?"

He closes the door, hangs his jacket on a peg. The small cabin suddenly feels even smaller. "That's complicated."

"Try me." I wave the papers at him, the evidence of his duplicity. "No. You don't get to 'Emma' me. You've been researching my family, my employees, my clients for six months, and I want to know why."

He runs a hand through his hair, a gesture I'm starting to recognize as a sign of internal debate. "I needed to understand what I was dealing with."

"A hostile takeover?"

"A rescue."

The word hangs in the air between us. A rescue? I stare at him, trying to process it. "A rescue from what?"

"Sit down."

"I don't want to sit down. I want answers." My voice trembles slightly.

"Sit down, Emma, and I'll give you answers." His tone is quiet.

I perch on the edge of the couch, the papers a heavy weight in my lap. Liam sits in the armchair across from me, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, his gaze direct.

"Have you ever heard of Blackstone Capital?"

The name means nothing to me. "Should I have?"

"They're a private equity firm. They specialize in hostile takeovers, asset stripping, and corporate dismantling."

A chill snakes down my spine. "Okay. What does that have to do with my firm?"

"They've had Sinclair & Associates on their target list for nine months."

My stomach clenched. The impact of his words stole my breath. "What?"

"They're planning a hostile takeover. Not to grow your company or preserve your legacy. To strip it for parts and sell off the pieces."

Nausea churned in my stomach. "How do you know that?"

"Because they destroyed my father's company twelve years ago."

The pain in his voice is raw, unguarded. I set the papers down, really look at him. His jaw is tight, his hands clenched into fists in his lap.

This isn't a tactic. This is real.

"What happened?" I ask, my anger momentarily forgotten, replaced by a dawning, horrified understanding.

"Cross Manufacturing. Small automotive parts company in Detroit. My father built it from nothing, employed three hundred people, most of them neighbors and friends." He pauses, staring at his hands, then continues, his voice flat. "Blackstone bought us out through a shell company. We thought we were being acquired by a larger manufacturer who wanted to expand."

"But they weren't." My voice is barely a whisper.

"They gutted the company in six months. Sold the equipment, fired everyone, liquidated the inventory. My father..." His voice breaks. "He never got over it."

"I'm sorry." The words feel inadequate.

"He had a heart attack two years later. Stress, the doctors said." Liam's eyes meet mine, filled with a grief so profound it takes my breath away. "But I know better."

Oh God. "Liam."

"I built Cross Industries specifically to prevent other families from going through what we did."

I stare at him, my whole world shifting on its axis.

"You're not trying to destroy my company."

"I'm trying to save it."

"By taking it over?" The question is automatic, born of weeks of suspicion.

"By getting there first. Blackstone moves fast, but they're not subtle. I've been tracking their acquisition patterns for years. When I saw Sinclair & Associates on their list, I knew I had to act."

"So you made an offer." My offer. The one I'd been fighting.

"A legitimate offer that would keep your company intact, your employees hired, and your family legacy preserved."

I think back to our first meeting. His strange comment about money protecting things. The way he looked when I talked about loyalty and love. It all clicks into place.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would you have believed me?" He raises an eyebrow.

Probably not. I was too entrenched in my fear, too determined to see him as the enemy. "You could have tried."

"I'm trying now."

I look down at the papers in my lap. Employee retention strategies. Client relationship preservation. Plans to maintain the Sinclair name on the building.

"These really are rescue plans." It's a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"And if I refuse your offer?"

"Blackstone will make their move within the month."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know how they operate. They're patient, but not indefinitely. Your firm is profitable but vulnerable. Exactly their type of target."

My chest tightened. I couldn't draw a full breath. "What aren't you telling me?"

He hesitates, and I know there's more. This isn't the whole story.

"Liam. What aren't you telling me?"

"They have someone inside your firm feeding them information."

Ice water sluiced through me. "What?"

"Someone's been passing them client lists, financial records, internal communications. That's how they know you're vulnerable."

A spy. In my own company. Someone I trust. Someone I work with every day.

"Who?" My voice is barely audible.

"I don't know yet. But whoever it is, they've been at it for months."

I stand up, a sudden surge of adrenaline making me pace the small space. Someone I trust. Someone with access. Someone who's been smiling at me, sharing coffee, while systematically selling out my family, my legacy.

"This is insane."

"Emma."

"No, this is actually insane." My voice rises. "You're telling me that some evil corporate entity has been planning to destroy my company, and my salvation is accepting a takeover from you?" The irony is bitter.

"That's exactly what I'm telling you." His voice is calm, steady, a rock in my swirling chaos.

“How do I know you’re not lying?” The question is a last defense, a desperate attempt to cling to my old certainties.

“What would be the point?”

“I don’t know.” My hands clench. “Maybe this is some elaborate psychological warfare. Make me think you’re the good guy so I’ll just hand over my company.”

He stands, walks to his laptop. A few keystrokes, and he turns the screen toward me. “These are Blackstone’s quarterly reports for the last three years. Notice a pattern?”

I scan the acquisitions list. Small to medium-sized firms. Family businesses. Law offices, medical practices, consulting companies. All bought, stripped, and dissolved within months. A trail of destruction.

“They destroy everything they touch,” I whisper, the reality sinking in.

“Everything.”

“And you really think they’re coming for us?”

“I know they are.”

I sit back down, my legs suddenly weak. Everything I thought I knew about Liam Cross, about this takeover, has been turned upside down in the span of ten minutes. He’s not the villain. He’s... something else.

“Why?” I ask, the question small in the suddenly quiet room. “Why do you care what happens to my family’s firm?”

“Because I know what it’s like to lose everything your family built.” His gaze is intense, unwavering.

“That’s not a good enough reason to risk your own company, your own reputation, on a fight like this.”

He’s quiet for a long moment, the only sound the crackle of the fire. When he speaks, his voice is softer, laced with an emotion I can’t quite name.

“Maybe it’s not just about the company.”

I look up at him, my heart thudding. "What's that supposed to mean?"

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "You figure it out."

CHAPTER FOUR

Liam

“You figure it out.”

The words hang between us. I watch Emma. Her expression shifts, a kaleidoscope of shock, doubt, then a flicker I almost don’t catch. Understanding? She’s piecing together the fragments I’ve given her. Blackstone. My father. The reason I’m here, in her cabin, in her life.

It’s because of her.

The thought is a punch to the gut. Raw. Unexpected. True.

I want to tell her. Everything. That the magazine article wasn’t just a footnote in my research. That her picture, her words about legacy and loyalty, planted in my mind and refused to leave. That this whole damn thing, this intricate dance of corporate warfare, shifted its axis the moment I met her. It stopped being about my father’s ghost. It started being about her.

But the words catch in my throat. Too much. Too soon. She needs to get there on her own. Trust needs to be earned, not forced by a confession sprung in a snowbound cabin.

My gaze drops to the worn floorboards.

Control. I need control.

“I should check the windows, make sure the weather stripping is holding.” A practical task. Something to focus

on. Something other than the way her green eyes are dissecting me.

Emma nods slowly, her gaze still fixed on me. Still processing. "I'll help."



She hands me another length of gray weather stripping. Her fingers brush mine. A spark, quick and sharp, arcs between us. This time, she doesn't snatch her hand away. Her eyes meet mine for a breath, a silent question in their depths, before she looks down.

Progress. Definitely progress.

"So Blackstone," her voice carefully neutral as I press the sticky foam against the window frame. "How many companies have they destroyed?"

The question is a test. She's watching me, gauging my reaction.

"In the last five years? Forty-three that I know of." I run a thumb along the seal, ensuring it's tight. "That's just the ones that made the business papers. There are probably more."

"Jesus." The word is a soft exhale.

I move to the next window. The simple, repetitive task of sealing out the cold is a welcome distraction. Or it would be, if she wasn't so close, her scent, clean and faintly floral, tugging at my senses.

She studies me, her brow furrowed. I can almost see the gears whirring in her head as she tries to fit this new image of me with the old one. The corporate raider versus the reluctant savior. I'm not sure which one I am anymore.

"How do you know so much about them?" she asks.

"I make it my business to know." My voice is flat. Twelve years of making it my business. Twelve years of tracking

Victoria Blackstone's every move. "Hand me that caulk gun."

She passes it. Again, that brief, electric touch. This time, a corner of her mouth quirks up. A tiny, almost imperceptible shift. But I see it.

"Have you stopped other takeovers before?"

"A few." Understatement.

"How many is 'a few'?" She's not letting it go. The lawyer in her, always pushing for specifics.

I smooth a bead of caulk along the window edge. "Twelve."

The caulk tube trembles in her hand. "Twelve companies?"

"Small ones, mostly. Family businesses. Local firms. Nothing as big as Sinclair and Associates."

Nothing that mattered this much.

"Why mine?" Her voice is quiet.

The caulk gun stills in my hand. The real question. The one I've been asking myself.

Because I saw your picture in a legal magazine two years ago and couldn't forget your face. Because you talked about your employees like they were family, and it reminded me of everything I lost, everything I'm still fighting for. Because I've been half in love with you since before we ever met.

The truth is a dangerous, untamed thing.

"You really want to know?" I meet her gaze.

"Yes." Her eyes are wide, searching.

"I saw your picture. Michigan Lawyer Magazine. The article about young partners making a difference."

A faint blush creeps up her neck. Interesting. "That was two years ago."

"I know."

Her eyes widen further. "You've been watching my firm for two years?"

"I've been watching you." The admission is out. No taking it back. I turn back to the window, focusing on the task, not trusting myself to see her reaction.

"Why?" The question is barely a whisper.

Because you're everything I thought was gone from the world. Because you fight for people who can't fight for themselves. Because you make me believe that not everyone with power uses it to destroy.

"You reminded me of my father." The words are rough. "The way you talked about your employees, your clients. Like they were family."

"They are family," she says, her voice fierce.

"I know." I glance at her. "That's why I had to help."

We move to the next window. The silence stretches, but it's different now. Not heavy with suspicion, but with a fragile, dawning understanding. She holds the weather stripping steady while I measure and cut. Each time she passes me a tool, our hands touch. Brief contacts that shouldn't mean anything. But they do.

"The spy," she says, breaking the quiet. Her voice is tight. "Do you have any idea who it is?"

Morton. James Morton. Senior associate, passed over for partner three times. Family in financial trouble, gambling debts he thinks no one knows about. The perfect target for Blackstone's recruitment.

But I can't tell her that. Not yet. It would reveal too much about how deep my investigation went.

"Someone with access," I say carefully. "Financial records, client information. Someone who's been with the firm long enough to understand its vulnerabilities."

I see the impact of my words in her face. Her stomach must be churning. "That's half my staff."

"I know."

“How am I supposed to go back to work? Look at my colleagues, wondering which one is selling us out?” Her voice is laced with a betrayal that echoes my own past.

I stop working. Turn to face her. Really look at her. She’s trying to be strong, the formidable lawyer. But underneath, I see the fear. The hurt. She trusted someone, and they’re destroying her family’s legacy for money.

Just like what happened to my father.

“The same way I looked at potential business partners for twelve years,” I say, my voice harsher than I intend. “Wondering if they were working for Blackstone.”

“You don’t trust anyone.” It’s a statement, not a question.

I didn’t. For so long, I didn’t. “I didn’t. Until recently.”

She catches the past tense. Her gaze sharpens. “What changed?”

You did. You changed everything.

“You did.”

We’re standing close again. The forgotten weather stripping a flimsy barrier between us. Afternoon light, muted by the snow-heavy sky, catches the gold flecks in her green eyes.

“I don’t understand.” Her voice is a breath.

Because you’re nothing like what I expected. Stronger. Braver. More beautiful than any photograph could capture. Because you make me want to trust again. Because you make me want to be a man worthy of that trust.

“You’re the first person in a long time,” I say, the words coming slow, measured, “who made me want to tell the truth.”

“Even though you thought I was your enemy?”

“Especially then.”

She’s processing this. Her mind, always working, always analyzing, trying to fit these new pieces into the puzzle of Liam Cross.

"The files on your laptop," she says. "The rescue plans. How long have you been working on them?"

"Three months." Every strategy for saving her firm. Every contingency for keeping her people employed. Every possible way to shield her from the fallout. "I've been planning this rescue longer than I've planned most acquisitions."

Because it's not just business. Because I needed to make sure I could save everything you care about. Because losing you, losing what you've built, to Blackstone? It isn't an option.

"Why put so much effort into one company?" Her voice is laced with a confusion that mirrors my own internal turmoil.

Because it's your company. Because everything you've built, everything you stand for, matters to me. Because somewhere along the way, I stopped trying to save your firm and started trying to save you.

I reach up, my fingers tracing the soft curve of her cheek, tucking a stray strand of auburn hair behind her ear. She doesn't pull away. If anything, she leans into the touch, a small, unconscious movement that makes my chest ache.

"You figure it out," I repeat, my voice softer this time.

There it is again. The challenge. The invitation. To see what's really happening here. To understand the truth I can't yet bring myself to say aloud.

"Liam." Her whisper is my name, a question, an answer, all at once.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you." Her eyes are shining. "For caring about people you've never met. For protecting a legacy that isn't even yours."

It's yours. That makes it mine.

"It matters to you." The words are out before I can stop them. Too honest. Too revealing. But I don't regret them. "That makes it matter to me."

She's looking at me now, really looking. Like she's seeing me for the first time. Not Liam Cross, corporate raider. Not the man who wants to buy her company. Just me. Liam.

This is dangerous territory. She's starting to understand, and once she does, everything changes. The game, the pretense, the carefully constructed walls I've lived behind for years.

I should step back. Put some distance between us. Remind us both that we still have business to resolve. Blackstone to deal with. A dozen reasons why this, whatever *this* is, is complicated. Impossible.

Instead, I move closer.

"Emma."

"What?" Her breath hitches.

I'm falling for you. I've been falling for you since before I knew your name. And if we get out of this cabin without me kissing you, it'll be a miracle.

My gaze drops to her mouth. Her lips part slightly.

Control. I need control.

"We should probably get back to the windows." Coward. The word screams in my head.

She nods, but she doesn't move either. We're suspended in the afternoon light, close enough to touch, the air crackling with unspoken words, with a tension that has nothing to do with weather stripping and everything to do with the storm brewing between us.

She knows. Maybe not everything. But she knows enough.

"Right," she says finally, her voice soft, distracted. Her mind is clearly somewhere else entirely. "The windows."

Probably trying to figure out when her enemy became something else. Something more.

Something she might even want.



We finish the rest of the windows. The silence between us is no longer strained but filled with a different kind of tension. An awareness. We work with an ease that belies the mere hours we've spent in each other's company, a rhythm usually found in long-standing partnerships. She anticipates what I need before I ask. I adjust my pace to match hers.

This is what partnership feels like. Not the corporate kind, all leverage and negotiation. Something else. Something real.

When we're done, the cabin is sealed tight against the encroaching cold. Warm. Secure. Isolated from the world outside.

Just like I want to keep her. Safe. Protected. Mine.

The thought blindsides me. *Mine*.

Emma runs her hand along the windowsill, checking our work. Her brow is furrowed in concentration. "Think it'll hold?"

I hope not. I hope this storm lasts forever. I hope we never have to leave this place, never have to watch you walk back into a world where I might lose you.

"It'll hold," I say, my voice rougher than I intend.

She nods, then starts gathering the tools, putting things back where they belong. I watch her move around the small cabin, her movements efficient, graceful. She fits here. In this space that echoes with generations of her family, surrounded by their memories, their love.

She belongs here.

And maybe, if I'm very lucky, if I'm very careful, I might belong here with her.

"Liam?" Her voice pulls me from my thoughts.

"Yeah?"

"What happens now?"

Now I try not to fall completely, irrevocably in love with you before we figure out how to save your company and survive whatever comes next.

"Now we wait," I say. "For the storm to pass."

"And then?" Her green eyes search mine.

Then we go back to the real world. Where you're Emma Sinclair, managing partner of Sinclair and Associates, and I'm Liam Cross, CEO of Cross Industries. And we have to figure out if what's happening between us, this fragile, undeniable connection, can survive outside these four walls.

"Then," I say, meeting her gaze, holding it. "We save your company."

A smile touches her lips. A real smile. Not guarded, not professional, not polite. A genuine, breathtaking smile that reaches her eyes and makes my chest ache.

God, she's beautiful when she smiles.

And I realize, with a certainty that settles deep in my bones, that I'll do whatever it takes to keep her smiling. Whatever it takes to save her company.

Whatever it takes to make her mine.

This isn't just about my father anymore. This isn't just about Blackstone.

This is about Emma.

It's always been about Emma.

CHAPTER FIVE

Emma

The storm outside intensifies as evening settles, the wind a mournful howl against the cabin walls. Snow pelts the windows with a relentless rhythm.

We clean up after another pasta dinner, a comfortable silence between us. This time, I actually contribute, chopping vegetables with a surprising lack of disaster, Liam directing me with an amused patience that's far from the corporate shark I first met.

"You're quiet." His voice a low rumble as he rinses the last of the suds from a plate.

"Processing," I admit. My mind is a whirl of new information, new feelings. Him. His past. The threat of Blackstone. Us.

"Understandable." He stacks the plate, his movements economical and precise.

I dry the final dish, the familiar pattern of my grandmother's china a small comfort in this surreal situation. I place it carefully in the cabinet. "Can I ask you something?"

He turns from the sink, wiping his hands on a towel, his grey eyes meeting mine. "Shoot."

"Your father's company. What was it like? Before... everything."

Liam stills, his hands pausing mid-motion. For a beat, the only sounds are the crackling fire and the wind's assault. I think he might not answer, that I've pushed too far into a private sorrow.

Then, his voice, softer than I've heard it, fills the small kitchen. "It was everything. Small, but solid. Dad knew every employee by name, knew their kids, their problems. He told me once about the annual company picnic, how he'd remember which kid wanted the extra hot dog, which one was scared of the three-legged race." A faint smile touches his lips, then vanishes. "It wasn't just a job for people. It was community."

A pang of recognition goes through me. "Sounds like my grandfather's firm."

"Yeah." His gaze is distant. "It was." He pulls the plug, and we watch the soapy water swirl down the drain, a small, mundane action that feels weighted with unspoken loss. "Dad used to take me to work on Saturdays when I was a kid. Let me 'help' with inventory, gave me my own clipboard. I thought I was so important."

"You wanted to take over the business?" It seems a natural assumption.

He shakes his head, a wry twist to his lips. "God, no. I was going to be a lawyer."

I nearly drop the dish towel. "Seriously?"

"Michigan Law School. Full scholarship." He leans back against the counter, arms crossed. "I was going to be the first Cross to wear a suit to work every day."

"What happened?" The question is almost a whisper.

"Blackstone happened." The name is a curse on his tongue. "Dad needed help fighting the takeover, so I took a leave of absence to come home. Thought it would be temporary."

"But it wasn't." My heart aches for the young man he must have been, his dreams derailed.

“By the time it was over, there was nothing left to go back to.” His voice is flat, devoid of emotion, yet the pain is a palpable thing in the small kitchen. “No money for law school, no family business to inherit. Just debt and my father’s broken spirit.”

That’s why he knows so much about corporate law, I realize with a jolt. *He was almost one of us*. The knowledge re-frames everything I thought I knew about him.

“I’m sorry,” I say, the words feeling utterly inadequate.

“Don’t be.” His gaze meets mine, hard and direct. “It made me who I am.”

“A billionaire?” The word tastes cynical on my tongue.

“A protector.” His voice is quiet, but the conviction in it is absolute. A protector. It resonates with a truth I’m only just beginning to understand.

We move to the living room. The fire crackles, a warm, inviting heart in the storm-lashed cabin. My grandfather’s wine collection, usually reserved for special occasions, seems to call out. Liam, sensing my thought, retrieves a bottle of rich Cabernet and pours two glasses. We settle on opposite ends of the couch, a careful distance still between us, yet the space feels charged with the weight of his confession.

“Your turn,” he says, his eyes finding mine over the rim of his glass.

“For what?”

“Truth. Why does saving your grandfather’s firm matter so much to you?”

I take a large sip of wine, the alcohol a welcome warmth. Courage. I need courage for this. “My parents died when I was nineteen.”

His expression softens. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Car accident.” I stare into the flames, the memory a familiar ache. “Black ice. They were coming home from a client dinner.” The scene flashes in my mind: the late-night

call, the police officer's grave face, the world tilting on its axis. "One minute I'm a normal college student worried about finals, the next I'm an orphan with a grieving grandfather and a law firm that needs leadership."

"That's a lot for anyone to handle." His voice is gentle.

"I wasn't ready." The admission feels raw, even now. "I thought I had years to prepare, to learn the business gradually. Instead, I got thrown into the deep end with sharks circling."

"But you survived."

"Barely." I manage a humorless laugh. "The first year was a nightmare. Clients testing me, partners questioning every decision, competitors trying to poach our accounts. I made mistakes. Big ones." My voice trembles slightly at the memory of those early, terrifying days.

"Such as?"

"I trusted the wrong people. Gave second chances to partners who didn't deserve them." I take another sip of wine, staring fixedly into the fire to avoid his gaze as the most painful memory surfaces. "Nearly lost our biggest client because I was too proud to ask for help."

Liam shifts on the couch, the movement drawing my attention. He's closer now, his presence a steady warmth in the room. "What changed?"

"Grandpa had his stroke." The words are heavy. "Suddenly, I wasn't just trying to prove myself anymore. I was the only thing standing between our family's legacy and total collapse."

"No pressure," he says, a hint of irony in his tone.

"Right?" My laugh is brittle. "Everyone kept telling me I was too young, too inexperienced, too emotional. That I should sell while I still could."

"But you didn't."

My hand tightens around the wine glass, the stem cool against my palm. "I couldn't. This firm is everything my

grandfather worked for, everything my father was proud of.”

“And if you lost it?” His question is quiet, but it lands with force.

I stare into the mesmerizing dance of the flames. “I’d be the Sinclair who destroyed four generations of work.”

“Emma.” His voice is soft, insistent.

“What?”

“You know that’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” My voice cracks. The fear, always simmering beneath the surface, threatens to break free. “If Blackstone takes us over, whose fault is that?”

“Theirs. Not yours.”

“I should have seen it coming. Should have been stronger—”

“You should have been psychic?” he interjects, a touch of firmness in his tone.

“I should have been better.” The words are broken, a confession of my deepest inadequacy. I press my hand to my mouth, fighting back the tears that sting my eyes. *Don’t cry. Don’t you dare cry in front of him.*

“Hey.” Liam’s voice is a gentle command. “Look at me.”

Reluctantly, I lift my gaze. He’s moved closer still, his knee almost brushing mine. I can see the flecks of blue in his gray eyes, the concern etched around his mouth.

“You’ve kept that firm alive for two years against impossible odds,” he says, his voice a low, steady anchor. “You’ve protected every job, maintained every client relationship, honored every commitment. That’s not failure. That’s a miracle.”

“It doesn’t feel like a miracle.” It feels like a constant, exhausting battle.

“The best ones never do.”

Why does he always know exactly what to say? How does he see the cracks in my armor so clearly?

"I'm scared," I admit, the words a raw whisper.

"Of what?"

"Of losing everything. Of proving everyone right who said I wasn't good enough. Of failing my family." The fears tumble out, exposed and vulnerable.

"Emma."

"What?"

"You're not failing anyone."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I've been where you are." His eyes hold mine, a deep, unwavering understanding in their depths. "I know what it looks like when someone gives up, and I know what it looks like when someone fights. You're a fighter."

The firelight flickers across his face, casting shifting shadows that highlight the strong lines of his jaw. A current, potent and unspoken, pulsed in the space between us. My skin prickled with the intensity of it.

"You saved me," I whisper, the realization hitting me with sudden clarity.

"What?"

"If you hadn't found out about Blackstone, if you hadn't made your offer, I would have lost everything without even knowing why."

"You would have figured it out." His confidence in me is a startling comfort.

"Maybe. Maybe not."

We're close now. So close. I can smell the clean, masculine scent of his soap, see the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw, the way a stray lock of dark hair falls across his forehead. I could count his eyelashes if I wanted to.

And I do want to. Among other things.

"Emma." His voice is a low murmur.

"Yeah?"

"We should probably go to bed."

That's not what I want him to say. "Probably."

But neither of us moves. We're caught in the fragile web of this newfound honesty, this dangerous intimacy that has nothing to do with business and everything to do with the way he's looking at me.

The bedroom feels different tonight. Colder, yet charged with a new, sharper tension. It's not just the physical awareness of sharing a small space anymore. It's the emotional intimacy we just shared by the fire, the truths laid bare. He's not my enemy. He's been trying to save me. And the way he looked at me... like I was worth protecting, worth fighting for.

We go through the familiar, awkward dance of negotiating space, but the undercurrent is different. More honest.

"Ground rules still apply," I say, my voice a little too bright as I pull back the covers on my side of the bed.

"Right." His lips quirk. "Your side, my side."

"No crossing the invisible line."

"Understood."

But when I slide into bed, Liam's already there, propped against the pillows. He's wearing only his thermal shirt and boxers, and the invisible line feels more like a flimsy suggestion than an unbreakable rule. My pulse quickens.

"Emma."

"What?"

"Thank you." His voice is low, serious. "For listening today. For believing me about Blackstone."

"Thank you for telling me the truth."

"I should have told you sooner."

"You told me when you were ready."

He turns towards me, his body shifting on the mattress. Moonlight, a pale wash from the window, illuminates his features, stripping away the boardroom mask. "I wanted to tell you from the beginning."

"What stopped you?"

"Fear." The admission is stark in the quiet room.

"Of what?"

"That you'd think I was lying." His gaze is intense. "That you'd refuse my help. That I'd lose any chance of..." He hesitates, his voice dropping.

"Of what?" I whisper, my heart thudding.

"Of knowing you."

Of knowing you. Not protecting my company. Not saving my firm. Knowing *me*.

"Liam."

"Yeah?"

"You know me now."

"Do I?" A faint smile touches his lips.

"What do you want to know?" The question is a bold invitation, a leap of faith in the charged darkness.

"Everything," he says quietly.

My breath catches. "That's a lot."

"I have time."

Do we? Do we have time for this, whatever this is becoming, with the storm raging outside and Blackstone looming?

"Ask me something," I say, needing to break the intensity, to ground myself in something concrete.

"What's your middle name?"

It's not what I expected. So simple. So... normal. "Rose. Emma Rose Sinclair. After my grandmother."

"The one who collected books?"

"Poetry, mostly." A fond smile touches my lips. "She used to read to me when I was little. Dickinson, Frost, Maya Angelou."

"Is that why you have calluses from guitar? She taught you music too?"

"No, that was my dad." The memory brings a familiar pang. "He said every lawyer should have something that wasn't about winning or losing."

"Smart man."

“He was.”

A comfortable silence settles between us, broken only by the sigh of the wind. The cabin, once a symbol of my isolation, now feels like a sanctuary.

“Your turn,” Liam says, his voice a low rumble.

“What?”

“Ask me something.”

Where do I even start? *What’s your favorite color? What do you dream about? Why do you look at me like that, like I’m the only thing in the world that matters?*

“What would you have done?” I finally ask, the question forming slowly. “If you’d become a lawyer instead of a billionaire?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Public interest law. Legal aid, probably. Help people who couldn’t afford to fight the system.”

Of course. It fits the “protector” he named himself. “You’d have been good at that.”

“Maybe.” A note of wistfulness I haven’t heard before. “I’ll never know.”

“You could still go back to school.”

He chuckles, a low, soft sound. “At thirty-four?”

“It’s not that old.”

“Says the woman who had her life figured out at nineteen.”

“I didn’t have my life figured out,” I correct, a touch of old defensiveness creeping in. “I had my life forced on me.”

“Fair point.”

Another silence stretches, longer this time. I can hear Liam’s breathing, slow and steady beside me. I wonder if he’s falling asleep, if the emotional toll of the day has finally caught up to him.

“Emma?” His voice is soft, pulling me back from the edge of my own thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“What scares you most?”

CHAPTER SIX

Liam

The generator coughs. Sputters. Dies.

Silence slams the cabin. The hum vanishes, replaced by the wind's raw howl. Cold seeps through the floorboards, a predatory chill.

Shit.

Emma stirs beside me. "What was that?"

"Generator's out." I throw back the covers. My breath plumes; the temperature drop is alarming. "Stay here. I'll check it."

"Like hell."

She's up, fumbling for her robe, following me to the main room. The fire is low, embers glowing faintly. Without the generator, this room will soon be as cold as the bedroom.

I flip the light switch. Nothing. Only the fireplace's faint, angry glow.

Emma shivers. "How long will it take to get cold?"

"At this temperature?" The wind shrieks outside. "An hour, maybe, before it's dangerous."

I find a flashlight. Its beam cuts the gloom. "I need to check the generator. Keep the fire going."

She nods, already moving to the woodpile. Smart.

Outside, wind rips at me, stinging with ice. The generator under its cover is a dead, silent lump. I wrestle the cover

off, fingers stiffening. Fuel gauge: empty. Of course. Two days of constant running drained it.

Spare fuel cans are in the shed, buried under three feet of snow, with more piling up. Even if I could dig them out and wrestle one back, the generator wouldn't restart in this extreme cold and moisture. A lost cause.

We're on our own until morning. At least.

Back inside, Emma has coaxed the fire back to life. Flames climb, casting dancing shadows. She looks small, huddled near its warmth.

"Well?" Her voice is tight.

"Generator's dead until the storm passes." I stamp snow from my boots. "Out of fuel, too cold to restart."

I watch her process this, eyes wide in the firelight. "So we have no heat except the fire."

"Right."

"And it only heats this room."

"Right."

Her gaze flicks to the couch, then to me. Calculating. The couch bed isn't large. "So we can't sleep in the bedroom."

Right. The couch. Or the floor.

The unspoken hangs heavy.

"We'll stay in here tonight, close to the fire."

Emma looks at the couch, then me, her expression a mix of resignation and something unreadable. "Ground rules?" A faint tremor in her voice.

No ground rules will make this easy, not with the current thrumming between us.

"Body heat." The word stark. "Survival, Emma. Not seduction." A necessary lie. For us both.

"Right." A whisper. "Survival."

But her look, her caught breath, says she knows the line is about to blur.

I pull cushions off the couch. "Help me set this up."

We work in tense silence, converting the couch into a makeshift bed, piling on every blanket and quilt. The fire crackles, a counterpoint to the wind's assault. I feel the deeper cold seeping in from unheated corners.

"This is insane," Emma says, at the foot of our bed, arms wrapped tightly around herself.

"It's temporary." I don't feel reassured.

"Right. Temporary."

She looks at me, an echo in her eyes of our earlier conversation. *What scares you most?* The truth I couldn't voice.

You, Emma. You scare me more than Blackstone, more than failure. With you, I have everything to lose.

"Emma."

"What?"

"We're going to have to get close." Stark. Necessary. "Skin contact, shared body heat. Only way to stay warm."

"I know." Her voice is small.

"And if we do this, we do it right. No half measures."

She nods quickly. I see her pulse, a frantic bird, at her throat. "Okay."

This is going to kill me.

"Okay."

We're both being ridiculous, trying to maintain an impossible distance. Emma's in thermals under her flannels. I'm in boxer briefs and a thermal shirt. We arrange ourselves under the mountain of blankets with careful, awkward precision, pretending this is purely practical.

It's not working. The air crackles.

"You're shivering," I point out. Her teeth chatter softly.

"I'm fine." A lie.

"Emma." Firm. "You're three feet away and shivering. This defeats the purpose."

"I'm just... adjusting."

She's scared. Not of me, I think. But of this. Of what it means. Of how much she wants this to be more than survival.

"Come here."

"I am here." Muffled by blankets.

"You're barely on the bed. Come here."

I reach for her. She flinches, then stills. Slowly, she lets me pull her closer. Her body is tense, then gradually softens, molds against my side. Warm. She fits against me perfectly, as if this space was carved out just for her.

"Better?" My voice is rough.

"Much." Her breath ghosts across my neck, a little shaky.

I look down. She's looking up, her face illuminated by firelight. Her eyes, wide and luminous, hold unspoken questions, unacknowledged desires.

This isn't just about staying warm. It never was.

"Emma." A low growl.

"What?"

I should tell her about my father. Not just Blackstone, but the man. Show her the photograph. Give her the truth she deserves.

Instead, my fingers find her hair, stroking the soft strands. It's like silk, cool beneath my touch. "Your hair's soft."

Brilliant, Cross.

A tiny smile. "Is it?"

"Yeah."

She shifts, closer. Her hand rests on my chest, over my heart. Can she feel its frantic rhythm?

"Liam?" A breath.

"Yeah?"

"Are we still pretending this is just about staying warm?"

No. We stopped pretending when I pulled her against me.

“What do you think?” Hoarse.

“I think,” she says, her gaze unwavering, “we’re in trouble.”

“Yeah.” A rough chuckle. “We are.”

Her hand moves, fingers tracing my jaw, a feather-light touch that ignites my skin.

“What kind of trouble?” she whispers.

*The kind where I forget every reason this is complicated.
The kind where all I want is her.*

“The kind,” I say, my voice thick, “where I stop thinking about tomorrow and start thinking about right now.”

“What about right now?” Her breath hitches.

Right now, I want to kiss you until you forget your own name. Right now, I want to make you mine.

“Right now,” I say, my gaze dropping to her lips, “I want to kiss you.”

Her eyes widen. Her lips part. An invitation. “Then why aren’t you?”

Because this changes everything. Because you deserve better than a man tangled in lies.

But she’s looking at me, luminous with want and trust. Warm, willing, intoxicating.

Screw it.

I lean down and kiss her.

It’s supposed to be gentle. Instead, it’s fire. A desperate, hungry claiming. An answer to every unspoken word, every stolen glance.

She makes a soft sound against my mouth, kisses me back with matching ferocity, fingers tangling in my hair. I deepen the kiss, tasting her, learning her.

This is what I’ve wanted. This raw connection.

We break apart, breathless, chests heaving.

“That was...” she starts, husky.

"Yeah." My voice, unrecognizable.

"We should stop." No conviction.

"Probably." My body screams otherwise.

Neither of us moves. She's closer, leg tangled with mine, body soft against me.

"Emma."

"What?"

"I need you to know something."

"What?" Her eyes search mine.

This isn't just physical. You've burrowed under my skin. Saving your company stopped being about my father when I truly saw you.

I reach for my wallet, pull out the worn photograph. Hand it to her. "That's my father."

She takes it, studies it in the firelight. Him at the factory, arm around my shoulders, both grinning. I was seventeen, still dreaming of law school.

"You look like him," she says softly.

"He was a good man." A familiar ache. "Honest. Took care of people."

"Tell me about him." Gentle, inviting.

So I do. Saturday mornings at the factory. The smell of grease and metal. Teaching me tools. Knowing every employee's birthday. The day Blackstone's offer came. The hope. Then the slow, agonizing betrayal. Despair.

"He died believing he'd failed everyone," I finish, my voice raw.

Emma is quiet, thumb tracing the photo's edge.

"Is that why you're saving my company?" she asks, barely a whisper. "For him?"

It started that way. Atonement. Justice. But somewhere, it became about her.

"It started that way."

"And now?" Her eyes lift, vulnerable.

Now it's because I'm falling for you. I can't bear watching you lose everything.

I take the photo, set it aside. Look at her.

"Now," I say, my voice thick, "it's because I can't stand watching you go through what he did."

Her breath catches. "Liam."

"What?"

"Kiss me again." A plea, an acceptance.

Yes.

This time, the kiss is reverent. Like she's something infinitely precious, something I'm terrified of breaking. But she's not fragile. She kisses me back with a fierceness that steals my breath.

Her hands slip under my thermal shirt. Cool fingers brand my skin. A groan rumbles in my chest. Her touch, curious then bolder, drives me to the edge.

We should stop. Too fast. Too far.

But when I try to pull back, she follows, her mouth hot against my throat.

"Emma." A ragged gasp.

"Don't stop," she whispers. "Please don't stop."

I'm not strong enough. Not when she's touching me like that.

"Are you sure?" A formality.

"I'm sure." Her green eyes, dark with desire, meet mine.

I'm lost. Utterly lost in her.

We move like we're learning a new language, written in touch and breath. Her hands explore my chest as I trace her waist, her hip, memorizing her.

God, she's beautiful.

"You're thinking too hard," she whispers against my ear.

"Am I?" A low rasp.

"Gears turning."

I'm trying not to rush this. I want this right for her. She deserves everything.

"Can't help it." Weak humor. "Occupational hazard."

She pulls back, her hair cascading, veiling us. "What are you thinking about?"

How I never expected this. How you're nothing I thought I wanted. How scared I am this is just the storm, just proximity. How much I want it to be more.

"How this changes everything," I say, raw truth.

"Does it have to?" Soft, hopeful.

Yes. I can't go back. Can't pretend I don't care. You're too important.

"Yeah," I say. "It does."

"Good," she says, a slow smile. She kisses me again.

No hesitation. Pure heat, raw need, the desperate hunger building since I first saw her.



Emma

He doesn't answer immediately. Instead, he shifts closer, his hand brushing against mine. The contact sends a jolt through me, a spark that ignites something I've been trying to ignore since we got snowed in. Since we've been forced to share this space, this silence, this unspoken tension.

"I'm saying," he begins, his voice rough, *"that we should stop pretending this isn't happening."*

My breath catches. *"What isn't happening?"*

He looks at me then, his gaze intense, piercing. *"This."* His hand moves deliberately, sliding up my arm, his thumb grazing the bare skin where my sleeve has ridden up. *"The way you look at me. The way I can't stop thinking about you."*

I hold his gaze, my pulse racing. *"Liam—"*

"Shh." His finger presses against my lips, silencing me.

"Don't. Just... let me."

I nod, barely able to breathe. His touch is electric, his presence overwhelming. I've tried to deny it, to push it away, but it's here, between us, undeniable.

He leans in, his lips brushing mine, a whisper of a kiss that leaves me trembling. "*Emma*," he murmurs, my name a prayer on his lips. "*Tell me to stop. Now. Before I can't.*"

I want to. I should. But the words won't come. Instead, I reach for him, my hand tangling in his hair, pulling him closer. His kiss deepens, hungry and desperate, like he's been starving for this, for me.

The thermal shirt he's wearing is rough against my skin, but I don't care. I tug at it, pulling it over his head, revealing the lean, muscular frame beneath. His chest is warm, his skin flushed from the cold and the heat building between us. My flannel pajamas follow, discarded on the floor, leaving me in nothing but my thin cotton bra and panties.

Liam's hands are everywhere, his touch both gentle and urgent. He cups my face, his thumbs brushing my cheeks, his gaze searching mine. "*Emma*," he whispers, his voice thick with emotion. "*Are you sure?*"

I nod, my breath shaky. "*Yes. I can't go back. Can't pretend I don't care. You're too important.*"

"*Yeah*," he says, his voice hoarse. "*It does.*"

"*Good*," I reply, a slow smile spreading across my lips. I kiss him again, pouring all the pent-up longing, the unspoken words, the fear of what this might mean, into the touch of our lips.

There's no hesitation now, only pure heat, raw need. The hunger that's been building since the first time I saw him, since the first time our eyes met and held, is finally being acknowledged. His hands move down my back, pulling me closer, his body hard and insistent against mine.

I break the kiss, resting my forehead against his, our breaths mingling. "*Liam*," I whisper, his name a lifeline in the storm of emotions swirling inside me.

"*What?*" he asks, his voice a rasp.

"*Nothing*," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "*Just... Liam.*"

He smiles, soft and real, a smile that makes my heart ache. I could fall in love with that smile, with the way he looks at me like I'm worth something, like he trusts me enough for this.

"*Might be?*" he teases, his lips brushing mine again. "*You're already there.*"

I laugh, a shaky sound, and kiss him back, my hands roaming over his shoulders, his chest, memorizing the feel of him. His hands are just as eager, sliding down my back, over the curve of my hips, pulling me tighter against him.

The fire crackles in the background, casting flickering shadows on the walls. The cold outside seems distant now, irrelevant. There's only Liam, his warmth, his touch, the way he makes me feel alive.

He breaks the kiss, trailing his lips along my jawline, down my neck, his breath hot against my skin. "*Emma*," he murmurs, his voice a vibration against my throat. "*You have no idea what you do to me.*"

I shiver, not from the cold, but from the way his words send a rush of heat through me. "*Show me*," I whisper, my voice daring, needy.

He looks up, his eyes dark with desire. "*You sure?*"

"*Yes*," I say, my hands gripping his shoulders. "*I'm sure.*"

He doesn't need to be told twice. His mouth returns to mine, but this time, there's an urgency, a desperation that wasn't there before. His hands move lower, slipping beneath the waistband of my panties, his fingers brushing against my core. I gasp, my hips instinctively pressing into his touch.

"*You're so wet,*" he murmurs against my lips, his voice a low growl. "*So ready for me.*"

I bite my lip, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment and desire. "*Liam—*"

"*Shh,*" he says, his fingers sliding deeper, teasing the entrance to my body. "*Let me feel you.*"

I moan, my head falling back as his touch sends waves of pleasure through me. His other hand moves to my breast, cupping it gently, his thumb brushing the tight peak. I arch into his touch, my breath coming in short gasps.

"*Liam,*" I whisper, my voice pleading. "*Please.*"

He chuckles, a low, rumbling sound, and shifts his position, kneeling between my legs. His hands move to my hips, holding me steady as he lowers his head, his lips pressing against the sensitive skin of my inner thigh. I shudder, my hands tangling in his hair, holding him close.

"*So beautiful,*" he murmurs, his breath warm against my skin. "*So perfect.*"

His lips trail higher, his tongue flicking out to taste me, to tease the entrance to my body. I cry out, my hips bucking against his mouth, my body arching off the bed. He hums his approval, his tongue delving deeper, his hands holding me firm.

"*Liam,*" I moan, my voice a desperate plea. "*I need—*"

"*I know,*" he says, his voice muffled against my skin. "*I know what you need.*"

His tongue is relentless, his mouth devouring me, his fingers slipping inside me, stretching me, filling me. I'm lost in the sensation, my body on fire, my mind blank except for the overwhelming need for more.

His other hand is on my inner thigh gently pushing me even farther open. it moves up my leg, while his tongue continues to massage my clit and his fingers keep moving inside me... deeper. His hand continues until a finger touches and starts massaging my back hole. I start to gasp

and moan as he slowly pushes in... I feel a new source of pleasure, pressure as his finger slowly moves in and out until it is fully inserted. Then the fingers start moving together, his tongue is the conductor, setting the pace, I think I'm actually screaming, but I can't tell. When I come, it's like a continuous explosion moving up and down my body. I'm convulsing inside, my stomach muscles clench and release, I'm bucking and he continues until I've settled.

His fingers leave me. I'm empty and wanting more. He kisses my bruised pussy and comes up to kiss my mouth and I taste myself on his mouth.

He hugs me against him, and I feel his cock throbbing against me.

I feel him rising, his body looming over mine. I feel him moving and his boxers slide past my leg. I wish I could see him, but I can reach out and try to close my hand around him, but he's too thick.

"Emma," he says, his voice rough.

"Liam—"

"Tell me you want this," he says, his voice a low growl.
"Tell me you want me."

"Yes," I whisper, my voice hoarse. *"I want you. I want this."*

He doesn't hesitate. His body lowers onto mine, his weight pressing me into the bed, his lips capturing mine in a fierce kiss. His hand moves between us, guiding his erection to my entrance, teasing the tip against me.

"Ready?" he asks, his voice a rasp.

"Yes," I breathe, my hands gripping his shoulders.
"Please, Liam."

He thrusts forward, filling me in one slow, deliberate motion. I gasp, my nails digging into his skin, my body adjusting to the feel of him, stretching to accommodate his size.

"So tight," he murmurs, his voice a low groan. *"So perfect."*

He begins to move, his hips rocking against mine, his thrusts slow and deep, each one sending waves of pleasure through me. I meet his rhythm, my body moving with his, my breath syncing with his.

The fire crackles in the background, the only sound aside from our ragged breathing and the occasional moan escaping my lips. Liam's hands roam over my body, his touch both gentle and possessive, his lips trailing kisses along my neck, my collarbone, my breasts.

"Emma," he whispers, his voice thick with emotion. *"You feel so good."*

"Liam," I gasp, my voice a plea. *"I need—"*

"I know," he says, his thrusts becoming more urgent, more desperate. *"I know what you need."*

His hand moves between us, his fingers slipping between my legs, finding the spot that makes me shudder, that sends me spiraling toward the edge. *"Come for me,"* he commands, his voice a low growl. *"Let go."*

I cry out, my body tensing, my release crashing over me. My walls clench around him, milking him, drawing out his own release. He thrusts one last time, his body stiffening, his breath catching as he spills himself inside me.

We lie there, our bodies still joined, our breaths slowly returning to normal. Liam's heart beats against mine, his weight heavy but comforting. I run my hands over his back, savoring the feel of him, the warmth of his skin, the way his muscles relax beneath my touch.

I can see his face by the fire-light. He smiles, a slow, satisfied smile, and rests his forehead against mine. *"Friends now?"*

The fire has died down, the cabin cold once more, but neither of us moves to fix it. For now, we're content to lie

here, our bodies tangled, our hearts still racing, the world outside forgotten.

Liam's hand moves to my hip, his thumb brushing the skin there, his touch gentle, tender. "*Emma,*" he says, his voice low. "*About earlier—*"

"*Shh,*" I say, placing a finger over his lips. "*No regrets. No second-guessing. This is where we are.*"

He nods, his gaze searching mine. "*Wherever that is, I'm glad I'm here with you.*"

I smile, a soft, genuine smile, and kiss him again, pouring all the unspoken words, the fears, the hopes, into the touch of our lips. The snow outside may still be falling, the world may still be cold, but here, in this moment, with Liam, I'm warm. I'm safe. I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.



Liam

Afterward, tangled together, her head on my chest, my hand stroking her hair. The fire is low. We're warm. Sated.

"Liam?" Sleepy murmur.

"Yeah?"

"What happens tomorrow?"

Tomorrow. Cold intrusion. Back to the real world. Emma Sinclair, Managing Partner. Liam Cross, CEO. Saving her company, navigating this.

"I don't know." Honest. Unsettling.

"That's honest." Faint smile.

"Trying to be."

She traces patterns on my chest. Can she feel my heart, still racing?

"Are you sorry?" she asks quietly.

Sorry? For this? For finally understanding?

"Are you?" Rough.

"I asked first." Lawyerly precision.

"No." Emphatic. "Not sorry."

"Good." Soft sigh. "Me neither."

Silence. The storm rages outside, a counterpoint to our peace. Her mind works.

"The spy," she says eventually. "In my office. Someone I trust?"

Morton. But telling her now feels like another betrayal.

"Someone with access," I say carefully. "Knows your vulnerabilities."

"Half my staff." Tight with disbelief.

"I know."

"How do I go back? Look at them, wondering who's selling us out?"

You don't. I already know. But admitting that means admitting my investigation.

"The same way I've looked at business partners for twelve years," I say, words like ash. "Carefully."

"Exhausting? Never trusting anyone?"

It did. Until you.

"Yeah," I admit. "It does."

Quiet. Then, soft, curious, "What made you trust me?"

You fight for others. Care more for employees than comfort. Saw me as human.

"You did."

"Not an answer." Firm, amused.

"You asked what, not how."

She pinches my side. I laugh.

"Tell me how."

You worried more for your staff than yourself. Kept your firm alive by will. Make me want to be the man my father raised.

"You cared more about your people than yourself," I say. "Rare."

"Not rare," she counters. "Basic human decency."

"In my world," I say flatly, "exceedingly rare."

The radio on the kitchen counter crackles. We freeze.

"This is Mountain Rescue calling all stranded parties. Conditions remain dangerous, but evacuations begin midday Sunday. Repeat, evacuations Sunday midday."

Sunday. Tomorrow.

Emma stills. "We have to go back." Flat.

"Yeah." Lead in my chest.

"To separate lives. Separate offices."

Enemies in public, saving her company in private.

"Yeah."

"Can we pretend this didn't happen?" Small, vulnerable.

No. Everything changed.

"Can you?" My own fear, a cold knot.

"I don't want to." Raw admission.

Neither do I.

"Then we don't." A vow.

She lifts her head, green eyes searching mine in the dying firelight. "What does that mean?"

We figure this out. Together. I tell you everything. Even the shameful parts. We make this impossible situation work. For us.

"It means we're in this together now," I say, firm with new conviction. "All of it."

"The company, Blackstone, everything?" Hopeful.

"Everything."

She studies my face. What does she see? Destroyer, or protector?

"Okay," she says finally, a soft smile. "Together."

The word echoes in my mind, a vow. Yes. Together.

I kiss her head, pull blankets higher. The storm outside sighs, dying. I'm not ready for morning.

Not ready to leave this sanctuary where we were just Emma and Liam.

Tomorrow, we figure out how to be partners in the real world.

Tonight, we're just us. For now, that's everything.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Emma

The landline shrills, a harsh tear in the quiet morning. I'm tangled in blankets by the dying fire. Liam, already up, moves toward the kitchen. He has the easy confidence of someone who slept well. Really well.

So did I. A deep, dreamless sleep I haven't known in years.

"Sinclair residence," he answers. I bite back a smile. It sounds so natural, his voice in this cabin.

"Yes, she's here. Hold on." He covers the mouthpiece, his gaze finding mine. "It's Mac."

Mac. On the landline. My stomach drops. That means trouble. Serious trouble.

I wrap a blanket around myself, suddenly self-conscious. My hair is a tangled mess. I'm wearing nothing but an oversized thermal shirt. Liam's shirt. The man I'm supposed to hate. The man I definitely don't.

I take the phone. "Why are you calling the landline?"

"Because your cell keeps going to voicemail, and I have a situation." Mac's voice is tight. He would never call like this unless it's a five-alarm fire.

"What kind of situation?"

"Morton called an emergency partners meeting for tomorrow morning. Says he has urgent information about the Cross Industries situation that can't wait."

My eyes lock with Liam's. He's moved closer, listening. His jaw tightens. I see the shift, the fractional change in his eyes. The concerned lover from last night vanishes. In his place stands the strategic businessman. A flicker of loss, quickly suppressed. This is battle.

"What kind of information?" I ask Mac.

"He wouldn't say. Just that it's time-sensitive and requires immediate action from the partnership."

Time-sensitive. Because Blackstone's moving. Faster than we thought.

"Who else knows about this meeting?"

"Everyone. He sent the email to all partners yesterday evening." Mac hesitates. "Emma, he seemed really nervous when he called to confirm. Kept asking when you'd be back."

Because he needs to know our timeline. Needs to report back to his handlers.

Cold dread washes over me. While Liam and I were lost in each other, in the safety of this cabin, Morton was busy. Orchestrating our destruction. The spy. In my own firm. Someone I've worked with for years, shared countless coffees with, trusted with client confidences. Selling us out for whatever Blackstone promised him.

How did I miss it? How could I have been so blind?

"Tell him I'm still snowed in," I say, my voice surprisingly steady. "That we can't make any major decisions without me present."

"How long can I stall?"

Liam holds up his phone. The weather report. Roads clearing by this afternoon. He's already thinking three steps ahead, calculating timelines, contingencies.

This is why he's successful. This is why he's dangerous. And why, right now, he's my only hope.

"Twenty-four hours," I tell Mac. "I'll be there tomorrow afternoon."

“Okay, but Emma?” Mac’s voice lowers. “Be careful. Something feels off about this whole thing.”

His instincts are rarely wrong.

I watch Liam move around the kitchen. He’s making coffee, his movements methodical, precise. The same precision he probably applies to billion-dollar deals. He avoids looking at me directly. Giving me space.

Protecting me, even now.

“I will. Thanks for the heads up.”

“And honey?”

“Yeah?”

“Please tell me you at least got some good use out of being trapped with the enemy.”

Heat floods my face. Liam’s trying not to smile. I catch the corner of his mouth twitching. If only Mac knew how good. How terrifyingly, wonderfully good.

“Goodbye, Mac.”

“That’s not a denial!”

I hang up, turning to Liam. “Morton’s making his move.”

“Sounds like it.” Liam’s voice is calm, controlled. “Emergency meeting to discuss urgent information about my company. Let me guess, he wants to recommend immediate capitulation before I destroy you all.”

Probably. The thought makes me sick.

“Most likely. But Mac’s right, something feels off. Morton’s not usually the type to call emergency meetings.”

Liam hands me a mug of coffee. Our fingers brush. A jolt goes through me, a familiar spark, but now edged with a desperate awareness. How many more times will we get to touch like this, openly, without the world watching?

“Because he’s being pressured,” Liam says. “Blackstone probably moved up their timeline. Now he has to accelerate his sabotage efforts.”

I take a sip of coffee. Try to organize my thoughts. A hostile takeover. Yesterday, that was the monster under the bed. Now? Corporate espionage. A secret alliance with my supposed enemy. And Liam... My chest aches with feelings I can't dare name. Feelings that are growing with every shared glance, every hushed strategy session.

Three days ago, I thought I knew who I was. Emma Sinclair, defender of the family legacy. Now? I don't recognize my own life.

My breath hitched. This wasn't just a merger; it was war. Active deception. Manipulation. Lying to people I've worked with for years. People I trusted. People who trusted me. The weight of it settles, heavy and cold.

Liam moves to the window, looking out at the clearing skies. "We need to get ahead of this."

"How?" My voice is barely a whisper.

"By giving Morton exactly what he wants to hear. And making sure Blackstone gets the wrong information."

A double-cross. Feed the spy false intelligence. My mind reels.

"What kind of false information?"

"The kind that makes them think they have more time than they do." His eyes meet mine, hard and resolute. "The kind that sends them down the wrong strategic path while we execute the real plan."

I pull the blanket tighter around myself. The fire suddenly doesn't seem warm enough. "What's the real plan?"

Liam turns back to me. His expression is all business now. The tender lover from this morning, the man who held me through the night, has been replaced by the strategic mastermind who built a billion-dollar empire from nothing.

Both versions are him. Both versions are, in some terrifying and exhilarating way, mine now. But seeing the transformation is jarring. This is the man my partners fear, the

one they've been warning me about for months. Ruthless. Calculating. Willing to do whatever it takes to win.

Except he's not trying to win against me anymore. He's trying to win with me.

"That depends on your legal expertise," he says. "I know how to structure the financial side, but I need to understand your company's articles of incorporation, your partnership agreements, your voting structures."

He needs me. Not just as a client to be acquired. As an equal partner in this strategy. My pulse leaped, a thrill shooting through me, then dread coiled tight in my stomach.

For the first time in my career, someone is treating me as an intellectual equal. Not the young woman who inherited her position, not the granddaughter trying to fill impossible shoes, but a capable lawyer whose expertise matters. This is what partnership feels like. Dangerous. Exhilarating.

"What specifically do you need to know?" My voice is stronger now.

"Everything. How decisions get made, who has voting rights, what kind of majority is required for major corporate actions."

I think through our partnership structure, my mind clicking into lawyer mode, organizing the information as I would for any client consultation. "Standard law firm setup. Managing partner has administrative authority, but major decisions require a vote of all equity partners."

"How many equity partners?"

"Seven, including me."

"What constitutes a major decision?"

"Sale of the firm, dissolution, admission of new partners, removal of existing partners."

"What about merger or acquisition?"

"Same threshold. Majority vote of equity partners."

Liam nods, processing this. His focus is absolute, the intensity he probably brought to studying Blackstone's methods now directed at saving my firm. "And Morton?"

"Senior associate." The words taste bitter in my mouth. "No voting rights, but he's been angling for partnership for years."

Morton. With us for two decades. Brought in significant clients. Mentored junior associates. I've always felt a pang of guilt for not promoting him, but something always held me back. An instinct.

My instincts were right. I just didn't know why.

"Which gives Blackstone leverage over him," Liam concludes. "Promise him what he wants most in exchange for cooperation."

Partnership. They probably promised him partnership in whatever entity emerges from Blackstone's wreckage.

"You think they offered him a partnership track?"

"I think they offered him whatever would make him feel valued after years of being overlooked."

That stings. Because it's probably true.

Guilt slammed into me, a fist to the chest. Morton's betrayal isn't just about money or ambition. It's about feeling unappreciated, undervalued, passed over. Things I could have addressed. If I'd been paying closer attention. If I hadn't been so consumed by my own fight for survival.

I should have promoted him.

"Emma." Liam's voice is gentle, cutting through my self-recrimination. "You can't promote someone to partnership because you feel guilty. Partnership is about trust, competence, and alignment with the firm's values. Morton's been selling you out for months. That tells you everything you need to know about his values."

He's right. Intellectually, I know he's right. But it still hurts.

"I trusted him. We all did." My voice is thick. "He's been to my grandfather's birthday parties, for God's sake. He knows how much this firm means to our family."

"Which is why Blackstone recruited him." Liam's tone is hard. "They don't want distant enemies, Emma. They want people close enough to know where to stick the knife."

The image makes me flinch. It's brutal.

"That's a horrible way to put it."

"It's an accurate way to put it."

I set down my coffee mug. Really look at him. Liam Cross, billionaire CEO, standing in my grandmother's kitchen, discussing corporate warfare with the casual ease of someone talking about the weather.

This is his world. This is what he does.

"How do you live like this?" The question bursts out. "Always assuming the worst of people, always looking for threats?"

"By remembering what happens when you don't."

The pain in his voice stops me cold. He's thinking about his father. About the trust that destroyed everything his family built.

He's not paranoid. He's careful. There's a world of difference.

"So what's our strategy?" I ask, my voice quiet now.

"We use his desperation against him. Feed him information that makes Blackstone think they have until the end of the month to make their move."

"When really?"

"Really, we're going to beat them to the punch." His eyes gleam with a predatory light. "File the necessary paperwork, execute the merger, and present Blackstone with a fait accompli."

A done deal. One they can't undo.

"How fast can we move?"

“If we have all the legal documents in place? Forty-eight hours.”

Forty-eight hours. My lungs seized. Forty-eight hours to save everything my family built. The timeline feels impossible. Forty-eight hours to draft merger documents, secure partner approval, navigate regulatory requirements, execute a deal that normally takes months. But if anyone can do it, it's him.

“That's not much time.”

“It's enough.” His confidence is a lifeline. “But we'll need Morton to believe the opposite. We need him to think we're still in the preliminary discussion phase.”

I think through the implications, my legal training kicking into high gear. “So at tomorrow's meeting, I act like I'm still resistant to your offer. Make it seem like negotiations are stalled.”

“Exactly. Give Morton something concrete to report back. Make Blackstone think they have time to position themselves for a hostile takeover.”

“While we're actually finalizing a friendly merger.” My mind races, possibilities clicking into place.

“Right.”

It could work. It's audacious. Dangerous. But it could work. It requires perfect timing. Flawless execution.

“There's one problem.”

“What?”

“The partnership vote.” My stomach clenches. “I can't guarantee we'll have the majority we need. Some of the partners might genuinely prefer to fight rather than merge.”

This is the part that keeps me awake at night. My partners. Good lawyers, smart people. Proud. The idea of surrendering to any takeover, even a friendly one, goes against everything we've been taught about fighting for our clients, for our firm.

How do I ask them to trust me when I'm asking them to trust our supposed enemy?

"How many do you think you can count on?" Liam asks.

I run through the partnership in my head. Elena Rodriguez, fiercely loyal but pragmatic. David Kim, newer, but deeply respectful of the firm's legacy. Sarah Johns, always focused on protecting our people. "Three, maybe four including me."

"That's not enough." His voice is flat.

"No." My heart sinks. "We'd need at least four to have a majority." The math is simple. Brutal. We need four votes out of seven. I can only guarantee three. Everything depends on convincing one more partner that merger is salvation, not surrender. Or finding another way.

Liam's quiet for a long moment. I can practically see the wheels turning, the strategic mind assessing, calculating. "Then we make sure the right partners are the ones voting."

What does that mean? My brow furrows.

"I don't understand."

"Emergency partner meeting," he says, his voice devoid of inflection. "Called by you, for a different reason entirely. Something urgent enough that only the partners who support the merger will attend."

Manipulate the composition of the vote.

My stomach churns. It's legal, yes. But it feels... wrong. Like cheating. Like everything my grandfather taught me about integrity, about fairness, is being tossed out the window in the name of survival.

"That's..."

"Ethically questionable but legally sound?" Liam finishes my thought.

"Yeah."

“Emma.” His gaze is unwavering. “Blackstone isn’t going to play fair. They’re going to use every dirty trick, every legal loophole, every pressure point they can find. We can’t beat them by following rules they don’t acknowledge.”

He’s right. Of course, he’s right. But it still feels like a betrayal. A betrayal of everything Grandpa taught me.

“My grandfather always said the law should be about justice, not just winning.” The words are a quiet rebellion against the pragmatism of the situation.

“And this is justice.” Liam’s voice is firm. “You’re protecting your employees, your clients, your family’s legacy. Sometimes justice requires getting your hands dirty.”

Sometimes the right thing isn’t the clean thing. The realization settles, heavy and uncomfortable.

The landline rings again, a jarring interruption to my internal struggle.

“That’s probably Mac again,” I say, my voice flat.

“Or rescue services,” Liam points out. “Roads might be clearing faster than expected.”

Which means we’re running out of time. Our safe little bubble, this isolated world where we can plan and strategize, is about to burst.

I answer the phone. A knot of dread tightens in my chest.

“Sinclair residence.”

“Ma’am, this is Mountain Rescue Services. We’re calling to inform you that we’ll be able to evacuate stranded parties starting at two PM today. Are you in need of assistance?”

I look at Liam. He nods, his expression grim.

“Yes. There are two of us here.”

“Roger that. We’ll have a team to your location within the hour. Please have your belongings ready for immediate departure.”

One hour. My heart hammers. That's all the time we have left.

"Understood. Thank you."

I hang up. Turn to Liam. "One hour."

"Then we better get to work." His voice is all business.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Liam

We spread documents across her grandmother's dining table. It looks like we are planning a military campaign. In a way, we are.

Emma has pulled her hair back. A simple ponytail. She changed into jeans and a sweater. She looks ready for business. The transformation from sleepy lover to sharp lawyer is remarkable. I watch her. This is the woman who kept her family's firm alive against impossible odds. My admiration for her grows.

Merger templates fill my laptop screen. Emma sketches Sinclair & Associates' organizational structure. She uses the back of an old envelope. Her handwriting is precise. Methodical. Clear hierarchies and reporting relationships take shape. She thinks like I do. Systematically. Strategically.

"Standard acquisition terms won't work," she says. Her eyes scan my draft. "My partners will revolt if they think they're being bought out."

"Then we don't call it an acquisition." I keep my voice even. "We call it a strategic partnership. Cross Industries will be the silent majority stakeholder." Semantics matter in this business. Sometimes everything depends on how you frame the conversation.

"They keep their titles?"

"All existing partners retain their positions. Their compensation structures remain. No one gets fired. No one gets demoted."

I watch her scan my notes. Her legal mind processes the implications. She looks for the catch. The hidden trap. The part where I destroy her people. She will not find one. There is no trap. This is not conquest. It is protection.

"What about client relationships?" Her focus is sharp.

"Unchanged. Sinclair & Associates continues operating under the same name. Same leadership structure. Cross Industries stays in the background. We only step in if specifically needed."

It is better than she expected. Much better. I see the surprise on her face. It shifts quickly to cautious optimism. She expected a typical corporate takeover. Slash and burn. Maximize efficiency. Eliminate redundancy. I offer preservation. What she built is worth preserving.

"And Morton?" Her voice is tight. The question hangs in the air. What do you do with the traitor? The one selling out your family for months.

"He gets what he's always wanted." I keep my expression neutral. "Senior partner track. Assuming he stops feeding information to Blackstone."

Emma looks up. Surprise widens her eyes. "You'd still offer him partnership? After what he's done?"

It is a fair question. In my world, betrayal usually means exile. Complete destruction. But Emma's world operates on different principles. Maybe that is why it is worth saving.

"I'd offer him a choice." I lean back slightly. "Come clean about his arrangement with Blackstone. Earn his partnership the right way. Or continue down his current path. Face the legal consequences." Redemption or destruction. His choice.

"You think he'll take the deal?"

"Desperate people usually choose survival over pride." I have seen it happen dozens of times. When faced with real consequences, most people choose the path that lets them keep their livelihood. Morton will be no different. Unless he is already in too deep.

Her phone buzzes on the table. A text from Mac. I watch her read it. Her shoulders relax slightly.

Postponed Morton's meeting until tomorrow afternoon. He was NOT happy. What's your ETA?

She types a quick reply.

Back by tomorrow morning. Don't let him schedule anything else until I'm there.

Then another from Mac.

Roger that. Are you going to tell me what's really going on?

Emma replies: **Eventually.**

Mac: **That's not reassuring.**

She shows me the exchange. A small smile plays on her lips. "Mac's getting suspicious."

"Good." I nod. "We'll need his help when we get back." Mac Rodriguez. Twenty-nine. Former foster kid. Fiercely loyal to Emma. Overqualified for his current position. He stays out of personal attachment. He could be useful. If we handle him right.

"He doesn't know about us." Emma says it softly.

The way she says 'us' makes something twist in my chest. Like we are a real partnership. Not just a temporary alliance born out of crisis. Aren't we? What is this if not real?

"About the strategy?" I ask. Or about *us* us? The unspoken question hangs there.

She looks down. "Either."

I set down my pen. Look at her. Really look at her. Yesterday morning, she was my adversary. Someone to study. Understand. Potentially defeat. Now she is my partner. In every sense that matters. When did that happen? When

did I stop thinking of this as rescuing her? When did I start thinking of it as joining her?

"What do you want him to know?" I ask.

Her eyes meet mine. "I want him to know you're not trying to destroy my company."

"And the rest of it?" The rest of it. The part that is far more complicated than business.

"The rest of it," she says, her voice low, "is between us."

"For now?" The question slips out.

She nods. "For now." Until we figure out what this is. Until we know if it can survive outside this cabin.

I nod. Go back to my notes. But I catch her watching me. When she thinks I am not looking. The same way I have been watching her. We are both wondering the same thing. Is this real? Or just proximity and crisis? Two people finding comfort in each other.

But the way she contributes to this strategy. The way her mind works with mine. The way she challenges my assumptions. Builds on my ideas. That is not just proximity. That is partnership. Real partnership.

"Emma."

"What?"

"The voting structure. If we can't guarantee the full partnership vote, what other options do we have?"

She thinks. Her legal training organizes the possibilities. "Emergency powers. As managing partner, I can make certain decisions unilaterally. If the firm is facing an imminent threat."

"Define imminent threat."

"Hostile takeover. Bankruptcy. Dissolution. Loss of major clients that would compromise the firm's viability."

"Blackstone definitely qualifies as hostile takeover."

She hesitates. "Yes. But using emergency powers without partner consensus would be career suicide." I see her thinking. The political implications. Emma is not just a

lawyer. She is a leader. She understands that authority without legitimacy is worthless. Her partners respect her. This firm has survived when others have not because of that.

"It would work legally," she continues. "But politically it would destroy me. The other partners would never trust me again."

"Even if it saved their jobs?"

"Even then. Partnership is built on consensus. Shared decision-making. If I go around them, I become exactly the kind of autocratic leader they're afraid of." The kind of leader they think I am.

I close my laptop. Lean back in my chair. "Then we need a different approach."

"Such as?"

"We give them a choice they can't refuse."

Her brow furrows. "I don't understand."

"We present the merger as the only alternative. To something worse."

"Like what?"

"Like Blackstone's actual timeline." My voice is grim. "Not the false one we're going to feed Morton. The real one."

I pull up my files on Victoria Blackstone. The research I compiled for twelve years. Her methods. Her timeline. Her psychological profile. Know your enemy. The first rule of survival.

"They're planning to move this week." I tap the screen. "Victoria Blackstone doesn't wait for things to develop naturally. She identifies targets. Isolates them. Strikes fast."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've been tracking her methods for twelve years. I know how she operates. How she thinks. How she destroys companies."

Emma stares at me. Her expression is a mix of awe and concern. "What's her real timeline?"

"If Morton's calling emergency meetings, it means she gave him forty-eight hours. Gather intelligence. Sabotage your defenses. Then she'll make her move." Forty-eight hours. We do not have time for consensus building.

"So we're back to emergency powers," Emma says, resignation in her voice.

"No." I shake my head. "We're back to the nuclear option."

I pull out my phone. Show her a contact entry. One I never thought I would actually use. Victoria Blackstone. The woman who destroyed my father. The woman I spent twelve years preparing to face.

"We call her directly."

Emma's face pales. "Are you insane?"

Maybe. Sometimes insanity is the only rational response to an impossible situation.

"We tell her we know about Morton." My voice is hard. "We know about her timeline. We're prepared to expose her methods publicly. Unless she backs off." Mutually assured destruction.

"She'll deny everything."

"Of course she will. But she'll also know we're serious. About fighting back. Victoria Blackstone doesn't like uncertain outcomes." I studied her long enough. I know her patterns. Victoria thrives on control. On knowing exactly how each piece will move. Introduce genuine uncertainty. She becomes cautious. Cautious enough to look for easier targets.

"So she'll accelerate her timeline. Instead of backing off." Emma's mind races.

"Maybe. Or maybe she'll decide Sinclair & Associates isn't worth the risk. The public exposure." It is a huge gamble.

"And if we're wrong?"

"If we're wrong, we're in the same position. Fighting for our lives against a superior force." Better to choose our battlefield.

"When do we make the call?"

"Tomorrow. After you brief your partners. On the real situation. After they understand what they actually face."

Truth as a weapon. Transparency as strategy. It is the opposite of how I usually operate. I prefer information asymmetry. Keeping my cards hidden. Until the perfect moment.

But Emma is right. Her partners deserve to know. Besides, scared people make desperate choices. Sometimes desperate choices are exactly what you need.

"They're going to panic."

"Good. Panic motivates action."

The sound of helicopter rotors echoes. Faint at first. Growing stronger. Our rescue. Our return to the real world. Our return to being enemies in public.

I watch Emma's face change. She hears it too. The soft vulnerability from this morning hardens. Professional resolve takes its place. She prepares for the performance. The same way I do.

"We need to talk about logistics," I say. My voice is all business now.

"What kind of logistics?"

"Communication. How do we coordinate? Without raising suspicion. How do we share information? Without anyone knowing we work together."

Emma thinks. "Secure email? Encrypted messaging?"

"Too traceable." I shake my head. "If someone's watching, electronic communication leaves footprints." Someone is always watching in this business.

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Old school." My lips curve into a grim smile. "Phone calls from public places. Face-to-face meetings that look accidental. Dead drops if necessary."

She stares at me. "Dead drops? What is this, a spy novel?"

"Corporate espionage is just spying. With better suits. And higher stakes." She is about to learn that firsthand.

The helicopter is closer now. Maybe fifteen minutes before it is overhead. Maybe twenty before it can land. Not much time. Not enough time to finish planning the most important strategy of both our careers.

"Emma."

"What?"

"When we get back to the city, everything changes." I need her to understand. "We can't be seen together. Can't communicate normally. Can't show any sign that we're anything other than adversaries." Even though you are becoming the most important person in my world.

"I know." Her voice is quiet.

"Do you?" I search her face. "Because this isn't just about business anymore. This is about us. About what happened here. About what we mean to each other." Whatever that is.

She looks at me. Those green eyes. I see my own uncertainty reflected back.

"What do we mean to each other?" she whispers.

I do not know. I know I want to protect you. I trust you with my most important secrets. The thought of going back to being your enemy makes me sick.

"I don't know yet." My voice is rough. "But I want to find out."

"After we save my company?"

"After we save your company." If we save your company. If we do not destroy each other in the process.

The helicopter is directly overhead. Circling. Looking for a place to land. The sound drowns out everything else. I see Emma's lips moving. I cannot hear her. Time is up.

I start gathering papers. Shutting down my laptop. Preparing to become Liam Cross, corporate raider, again. The man who wants to destroy everything Emma Sinclair built. The lie we must tell. To save her truth.

Before I can move from the table, Emma grabs my arm. Her touch is electric.

"Liam."

"What?"

"Whatever happens out there." Her eyes are fierce. "Whatever we have to do. Whatever we have to say. This is real. What happened here. What we planned here. What we feel for each other. This is real."

This is real. The words echo in my chest.

I cover her hand with mine. "I know."

"Promise me we won't lose this." Her voice is a plea.

I cannot promise that. I do not know if what we built here can survive the world we are going back to.

"I promise we'll fight for it." That is all I can promise. That I will fight for her. For us. For the chance to find out what this could become.

The helicopter lands. A roar of rotors. Flying snow. Through the window, I see figures moving toward the cabin.

Our rescue has arrived.

Our separation begins now.

CHAPTER NINE

Emma

The rescue team finds us packing in separate rooms like strangers.

“Two individuals requesting evacuation?” The lead paramedic’s voice is loud. He stomps snow from his boots onto the cabin’s worn floorboards.

Liam emerges from the bedroom. His duffel bag is slung over one shoulder. He doesn’t look at me. His face is a mask. The game begins.

“That’s right,” Liam says. His tone is clipped, impersonal. “Weather caught us both off guard.”

My throat tightens. This charade. It’s harder than I imagined.

“Any injuries or medical concerns?” the paramedic asks.

“No injuries,” I say. My own bag feels heavy on my shoulder. “Just eager to get back to civilization.”

Eager. The word is a lie. I feel a knot forming in my chest. Dread.

The paramedic nods, speaking into his radio. “Two passengers, stable condition, ready for immediate transport.”

Two passengers. Like we’re strangers who happened to get caught in the same storm. My stomach churns.

Outside, the helicopter blades whip the air, a deafening roar. A clearing has been carved from the snow-laden trees.

Rescue workers spent hours making this landing zone. All this effort to pull us back to our separate, warring realities.

"Watch your heads," the pilot shouts over the noise.

Liam climbs in first. He chooses a seat by the window, his profile unreadable. I take the seat across from him. As far as possible. The paramedic straps us in, hands us headsets. Each click of the buckle feels like another lock snapping into place.

This is difficult. My hands tremble.

"Flight time about twenty minutes to the main road," the paramedic's voice crackles through the comm system. "Transport vehicles waiting there to take you wherever you need to go."

Twenty minutes. To re-learn how to be enemies. To bury the warmth, the trust, the intimacy of the last few days.

The helicopter lifts. The cabin shrinks below. My family's retreat. The place where everything changed. Where I fell for the man across from me. The man now pretending I don't exist.

I try to memorize it. The stone chimney, smoke still a faint curl from our fire. The windows we sealed together. The bedroom where we shared... everything.

Will I ever see it the same way again? The raw beauty of it is now overlaid with a sharp, bittersweet ache.

"So," the paramedic says, his voice a cheerful intrusion. "You two know each other?"

Liam finally looks at me. His eyes are gray. Empty. Professional. Cold.

God, he's good at this. A sliver of ice pierces my heart.

"Ms. Sinclair and I have had some business dealings," he says. The words are precise, measured. "Unfortunately, we got caught in the same weather system."

“Unfortunately,” I echo. My voice sounds brittle, unfamiliar. Lying burns my throat. “Mr. Cross and I don’t exactly see eye to eye on most things.”

We see eye to eye on everything that matters. We think alike. Plan alike. Want the same future. But this is the story. Our new, necessary fiction.

“Business rivals, huh?” The paramedic grins, oblivious. “Must have been an interesting few days.”

“Enlightening,” Liam says. His gray eyes hold mine. A challenge. “I learned quite a bit about Ms. Sinclair’s... negotiation style.”

Heat floods my face. He means last night. This morning. The way I responded to his touch, to his words. The way I negotiated the terms of our survival, our connection. I turn away, staring out the window at the blur of white.

“Mr. Cross has a very aggressive approach to business,” I manage, my voice tight. “I’m not surprised he’d take advantage of a captive audience.”

“Take advantage?” His voice drops, dangerously quiet. “I was under the impression our discussions were mutually beneficial.”

Stop. We’re pushing too far. Giving too much away. The air in the helicopter crackles with a tension only we understand.

The paramedic watches us. His smile has faded. He senses something beneath the surface. If only he knew.

If anyone knew.

“Perhaps we should agree to disagree,” I say. My tone is firm, final.

“Perhaps we should.” Liam’s voice is equally clipped.

The pilot’s voice cuts in. “Landing in two minutes. Transport vehicles are standing by.”

Two minutes. Until we step into separate cars. Drive away from this fragile truce, back to our battle lines.

I steal one last look at Liam. He stares out his window. His jaw is tight, hands clenched in his lap. The only visible sign this performance costs him something too.

Or maybe I'm just seeing what I desperately want to see.

The helicopter touches down in a cleared parking area. Three vehicles wait. A black town car, Cross Industries plates gleaming. A nondescript sedan, presumably mine. And a police cruiser.

Police? My heart lurches. Why are police here?

"Routine check-in," an officer explains as we climb out. The ground feels unsteady beneath my feet. "Any time we have stranded civilians, we like to make sure everyone's accounted for and safe."

He takes our names, contact information. Asks basic questions. Were we adequately supplied? Any conflicts or incidents? Any medical needs?

Conflicts. The word is a bitter irony.

"No conflicts," I tell him. My voice is steady. A small victory. "We mostly stayed out of each other's way."

"Smart approach," Liam adds. His voice is smooth, devoid of emotion. "Close quarters can be challenging with incompatible personalities."

Incompatible. The word is a barb. My chest aches. We're not incompatible. We fit. Perfectly. He knows it. But this lie. Our new reality.

The officer finishes his paperwork. He hands us each a card. "If you need any follow-up services or want to file a report about the rental company mix-up, give us a call."

The rental company. I'd almost forgotten. The absurd error that threw us together. Changed everything.

Or maybe it wasn't an error. Maybe it was fate. A cruel, beautiful fate.

"Thank you, officer."

My driver approaches. "Ms. Sinclair? I'm here to take you back to the city."

Back to the city. Back to my life. Back to pretending this weekend, this man, never happened.

“Ready when you are.” My voice is a stranger’s.

I head toward the sedan. Liam’s voice stops me.

“Ms. Sinclair.”

I turn. He stands by his town car. He looks every inch the powerful, ruthless businessman who tried to buy my company two weeks ago.

Except now I know the lines of his face in the early morning light. Now I know how he takes his coffee. The way he says my name when he’s falling asleep, a soft murmur against my skin.

“Mr. Cross.”

“I trust you’ll give my proposal the consideration it deserves.”

His proposal. The merger terms. The lifeline we crafted together this morning, huddled over my grandmother’s table.

“I’ll review your terms with my partners.”

“I hope you’ll find them reasonable.”

“I find your entire approach presumptuous.” Good. That sounded appropriately hostile. The words scrape my throat, sharp and false. The officer is still watching. Let him wonder. Better that than the truth.

“Nevertheless,” Liam says, his eyes unreadable, “I look forward to your response.”

He climbs into his town car. No backward glance. The windows are tinted. I can’t see his face as the car pulls away.

Gone.

“Ma’am?” My driver holds the sedan door open. “Ready to go?”

No. I’m not ready. I want to run after his car. Tell him this is insane. I want to go back to the cabin. Back to where we were just Emma and Liam. Not opposing forces in a war we created to survive a bigger one.

"Yes." I slide into the car. "I'm ready."

The drive back to the city is two hours. Winding mountain roads straighten into relentless highways. I stare out the window. My reflection is a pale ghost. I try to process what just happened. Reconcile the man who held me last night, whose touch set me on fire, with the stranger who just drove away.

He warned me it would be like this. The cold performance. The necessary distance. But I didn't think it would feel like losing him. Like a vital part of me has been amputated.

My phone vibrates. Seventeen missed calls. Ten from Mac. Four from various partners. Three from numbers I don't recognize.

The vultures are circling. They smell blood in the water.

I start with the unknown numbers. Reporters, most likely. They must have caught wind of the Cross Industries situation.

"Ms. Sinclair? This is Jennifer Kim from the Financial Tribune. I'm wondering if you have any comment on the rumors about Cross Industries making an offer for your firm?"

Already? How do they know? The speed of it is unnerving.

I delete the voicemail. The second unknown number is similar. Different reporter, same intrusive questions. The third claims to represent "interested investors." They want to discuss "alternative options" for Sinclair & Associates.

Blackstone. It has to be Blackstone. Already maneuvering.

I delete all three. My hand is shaking. I call Mac.

"Jesus Christ, Emma, where have you been? I've been calling for hours." His voice is a mix of relief and exasperation.

"Sorry. No cell service until we got to the main road."

“We?”

Damn it. A slip.

“The rescue helicopter picked up several stranded people.” I keep my voice even.

“Including your sexy nemesis?” Mac’s tone is teasing, but there’s an undercurrent of concern.

Life-changing. Terrifying. Perfect.

“Including Mr. Cross, yes.”

“How was that? Uncomfortable?”

Professional. That’s the party line.

“Professional.”

“That’s disappointing. I was hoping for some enemies-to-lovers drama.”

If only you knew, Mac. If only you knew the half of it.

“This is real life, Mac, not a romance novel.”

“More’s the pity.” He sighs. “So what’s the plan for tomorrow? Morton’s been calling every hour asking when you’ll be back.”

Morton. The spy. The traitor we have to fool. The reminder is a shock of cold water. Morton isn’t just a colleague. He’s an active threat. Feeding our secrets to people who want to destroy us.

How do I face him? How do I sit in a room with him, knowing what he’s done?

“Schedule the partners meeting for two PM.” My voice is firm. “Tell Morton I want to hear his urgent information before I make any decisions about Cross Industries.”

“What kind of decisions?”

Whether to accept Liam’s offer, our secret lifeline. Or fight him publicly, a charade to mask our real strategy.

“The kind that will determine the future of our firm.”

“Emma, you’re scaring me.”

Good. You should be scared. We all should be.

“I’ll explain everything tomorrow. Just make sure everyone’s there.”

“Everyone including Morton?”

“Especially Morton.” He needs to believe he’s still fooling us. Blackstone needs to think they have more time.

I hang up. Lean back against the seat. My head throbs. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I look my colleagues in the eye and lie. Tomorrow I pretend Liam Cross is my enemy while secretly, desperately, working with him.

Tomorrow I become someone I’m not. For a cause I believe in. For a man I...

The city skyline appears. Glass and steel and ambition. My world. The world where I’m Emma Sinclair, managing partner. Fierce defender of my family’s legacy.

Not the woman who fell asleep in Liam Cross’s arms. Not the woman whose heart aches with a longing she can’t name.

But as we get closer to downtown, my eyes scan the traffic. I look for a black town car. Tinted windows. Any sign of him. The man who is my secret partner. My enemy in public.

We reach my apartment building. The sun dips low, painting the sky in bruised colors. The doorman helps with my bag. Asks if I had a good weekend. I murmur something noncommittal. Escape to the elevator.

Good weekend. An understatement. A lifetime ago.

My apartment feels foreign. Too clean. Too organized. Too empty. Everything is exactly where I left it. Like time stopped while I was gone.

But I’m not the same person. The woman who left here Friday afternoon is gone.

I pour a glass of wine. Stand at my living room window. The city lights glitter, cold and distant. Somewhere out there, Liam is in his penthouse office. Making calls. Moving pieces. Preparing for tomorrow.

Working to save my company. While I stand here. Missing him.

My phone buzzes. A text. Unknown number.

Strategy meeting. Your apartment. 9 PM. Come alone. - L

Liam. He wants to meet. Tonight.

My breath catches. We said we'd be careful. We couldn't be seen together. But he's coming here.

Because we're not done planning. Too many details. Too many contingencies.

Or because he needs to see me. As much as I need to see him.

I type back. My fingers tremble.

See you at 9.

Enemy in public, partner in private.

Starting now.

I check my watch. 7:30. An hour and a half. My reflection is a stranger. How do I face him? The man I... The man who will knock on my door, a public enemy, a private hope.

This is insane. Terrifying. Necessary.

I think about my grandfather. The firm he built. The employees who trust me. I think about Morton's betrayal. Blackstone's relentless hunger. Everything we stand to lose.



The buzzer sounds. Exactly 9 PM.

"Yes?" My voice is surprisingly steady.

"It's me."

His voice. Simple. Intimate. Not the voice of a conspirator planning corporate warfare. My heart hammers.

"Come up."

I buzz him in. Wait by the door. Each second stretches. When he knocks, I open it.

Liam Cross stands there. Dark suit. Briefcase in hand. He is the image of a formal business call.

I'm wearing a comfortable short skirt and white blouse, which he seems to appreciate while pretending to not look.

Except it's the most important business meeting of both our lives.

"Ms. Sinclair," he says. His voice is formal, distant.

"Mr. Cross." I match his tone. "Please, come in."

He steps into my apartment. For a moment, we just stand there. Looking at each other. The professional masks we wore during the rescue. The careful distance. All of it falls away in the privacy of my living room.

This is real. What we have. It's real.

"How was your drive back?" I ask. The question feels absurd.

"Long." His eyes scan my face. "Yours?"

"The same." Polite small talk. For two people who shared secrets, strategy, and a bed less than twelve hours ago.

He sets down his briefcase. Looks around my apartment. Takes in the law books. The family photos. The framed diplomas.

"Nice place."

"Thank you."

This is ridiculous. We're acting like strangers. This pretense, even here, is suffocating.

"Liam."

He meets my gaze. "What?"

"We don't have to pretend here." The words rush out. "Not in my apartment. Not when it's just us."

He nods. Some of the tension leaves his shoulders. A muscle in his jaw relaxes. "You're right. Sorry. It's going to take some getting used to."

He takes his jacket off and lays it on the back of the couch.

“The pretending?”

“All of it.” He gestures vaguely. All of it. The strategy. The secrecy. The relationship we can’t define. The danger.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“Coffee, if you have it.” His eyes are serious. “This is going to be a long night.”

I make coffee. My hands are steady now. He opens his briefcase. Spreads documents across my dining table. The same methodical precision he brought to planning at the cabin. But now we’re in my world. My territory.

Now the stakes feel terrifyingly real.

“What did you find out?” I ask. I hand him a mug. Our fingers brush. The familiar spark ignites, a warmth spreading through me.

“Three things.” He takes a sip of coffee. His gaze is direct. “First, Morton made contact with his Blackstone handler this afternoon. They know you’re back in the city.”

My blood runs cold. “How do you—”

“I have people watching the people who are watching you.” His voice is flat. “Morton’s phone calls are being monitored.”

Of course they are. This is his world. A world of surveillance and counter-surveillance. A world I’m now part of.

“Second,” Liam continues, “Victoria Blackstone is in New York. She flew in this afternoon. Which means she’s planning to be here for the final phase.”

The final phase. The destruction of my family’s firm. The end of everything I’ve fought for.

“And third?” My voice is barely a whisper.

“Third, we have less time than I thought.” His eyes are grim. “They’re not waiting until the end of the week. They’re moving tomorrow.”

The coffee mug nearly slips from my grasp. “Tomorrow?”

"Tomorrow." His voice is a quiet confirmation of my worst fears. "Which means we execute our plan in the morning. Before Morton's afternoon meeting."



The strategy session finally comes to an end at midnight. Liam and I collapse onto the couch, the weight of the day lifting from our shoulders. The room glows under the desk lamp, casting long shadows across the walls.

My perfume mingles with his cologne—floral and earthy musk. We've been sitting side by side for hours, our focus sharp. Now, with the work done, the silence between us crackles with unspoken tension.

Liam shifts closer, his arm sliding around my shoulders. The gesture feels both casual and deliberate. His touch sends a shiver down my spine, and I lean into him instinctively, my body craving his warmth.

"You've been working too hard," he murmurs, his voice low and rough. His lips brush against my temple, sending a jolt of heat through me.

I close my eyes, savoring the moment. The weight of his arm around me. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat against my side. The faint scent of his skin.

His hand moves down, resting on my breast. His fingers splay over the curve through the thin fabric of my blouse. My breath hitches as he begins to stroke me gently, his touch firm yet tender.

"Liam," I whisper, my voice trembling. I turn my head, meeting his gaze, and he kisses me—slow, deep, and hungry.

His lips are warm and insistent, his tongue brushing against mine. I melt into him, my hands tangling in his hair.

The kiss ignites a fire within me, and I shift, straddling his lap, facing him. My legs spread wide around his thighs, and I feel the hard press of his desire against me. His hands move to my waist, pulling me closer, and I grind down, seeking friction, needing to feel him against me.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he murmurs against my neck, his breath hot against my skin. His hands roam, cupping my breasts, squeezing gently, his thumbs brushing over my nipples through the fabric.

I arch into his touch, moaning softly, my head falling back as pleasure coils low in my belly.

"*Liam*," I gasp, my voice desperate, my body aching for more. "*I need more.*"

His eyes darken with desire, and he nods, his hands moving down to my hips. "*What do you want, Emma?*" he asks, his voice a low growl that sends shivers down my spine.

I hesitate for a moment, my cheeks flushing, but the need is too strong to ignore. "*I want you to finger me,*" I whisper, my voice barely audible. "*In my ass. Like before.*"

A wicked smile spreads across his face, and he reaches down, gripping the waistband of my panties. With a swift, decisive motion, he tears them off, the fabric ripping with a soft *snap*. I'm left bare and exposed, the cool air of the room brushing against my skin.

My breath quickens as he lifts me to my knees, still straddling him, my legs trembling slightly. The position is intimate, vulnerable, and I feel a rush of excitement mixed with a hint of fear.

"*You're so fucking sexy like this,*" he murmurs, his hands roaming over my thighs, my hips, my ass. His touch is reverent, possessive, and I feel a surge of desire for him. One of his hands moves between my legs, his fingers sliding through my wetness, circling my clit. I gasp, my head falling back, my hips instinctively rocking into his

touch. His other hand moves to my ass, his thumb pressing against my tight hole, teasing, circling, promising.

"Please," I whisper, my voice hoarse, my body begging for more. "*Don't tease me.*"

He chuckles, a low, dark sound that vibrates through me, and his thumb presses in, slowly, steadily. I bite my lip, my body tensing as he stretches me, filling me. His other hand never stops, his fingers stroking my clit in firm, rhythmic circles, sending waves of pleasure crashing over me.

I'm caught between two sensations, the fullness of his thumb in my ass, and the relentless pressure on my clit, and I'm drowning in it, lost in the sensation.

"That's it, baby," he murmurs, his voice thick with desire. "*Take it. Take it all.*"

I moan, my hips moving of their own accord, seeking more, needing more. His thumb slides in and out, slow and deliberate, stretching me, filling me, while his other hand keeps up its relentless rhythm. The combination is overwhelming, and I feel my orgasm building, a tight coil of pleasure in my core.

"Liam," I gasp, my voice desperate, my body on the edge. "*I'm close.*"

"Me too," he growls, his grip on my hips tightening. He speeds up, his thumb fucking my ass with more urgency, his fingers on my clit moving faster, harder. I'm teetering on the edge, my body trembling, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

"Cum for me, Emma," he commands, his voice rough, demanding. "*Cum on my hand.*"

The words push me over the edge, and I shatter, my orgasm ripping through me like a storm. I cry out, my body convulsing, my pussy clenching around his fingers, my ass tightening around his thumb. It's too much, too intense, and yet I want more. I want it to last forever.

Liam groans, his own release catching him off guard. I feel his cock twitch against my thigh, his body tensing as he comes, his hand stilled in my hair. We stay like that for a moment, suspended in the aftermath, our breaths ragged, our hearts pounding. The room is silent except for the sound of our heavy breathing, the only light the soft glow of the lamp.

Slowly, he withdraws his thumb, his fingers trailing through my wetness one last time. I collapse onto his chest, my legs shaky, my body still buzzing with pleasure. He wraps his arms around me, holding me close, his lips pressing against my hair.

I smile, a lazy, satisfied smile, and lift my head to kiss him. It's gentle this time, tender, a silent acknowledgment of what we've just shared. The room is quiet, the only sound our breathing, the only light the soft glow of the lamp.

As I sit up, Liam's hand rests on my thigh, his thumb brushing circles on my skin. There's an unspoken question in his touch, a hint of what could come next. I meet his gaze, my heart racing, and for a moment, we just look at each other, the air thick with possibility.

"*What now?*" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper, my body still humming with anticipation.

He smiles, a slow, knowing smile, and leans in, his lips brushing against my ear. "*Now?*" he murmurs, his breath tickling my skin. "*Now, we see where this takes us.*"

And with that, he pulls me back into his arms. The promise of more lingers in the air like a secret waiting to be uncovered.

His hands move to my back. His fingers trace the curve of my spine, sending shivers down my body. I lean into him, my head resting on his shoulder. The scent of his cologne wraps around me like a blanket.

"*You're still wearing too many clothes,*" he teases. His voice is low and playful.

His hands move to the buttons of my blouse, undoing them one by one. I shiver, not from the cold, but from the anticipation of his touch. He pushes the fabric off my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. I'm left in nothing but my bra.

"Your turn," I whisper. My fingers move to the buttons of his shirt.

He chuckles, letting me undo them. His chest rises and falls with each breath. His skin is warm under my fingertips, his muscles taut and defined. I trace the lines of his body, my touch light, teasing. He groans, pulling me closer.

"Impatient, aren't we?" he murmurs. His lips brush against my neck.

His hands move to my bra, unhooking it with practiced ease. It falls away, leaving me bare. My breasts rise and fall with my quickening breath. His eyes darken as he looks at me, his gaze hungry, possessive.

His hands cup my breasts. His thumbs brush over my nipples. I moan, arching into his touch, my body craving more.

He leans down, taking one nipple into his mouth, sucking gently. His tongue swirls. I gasp, my hands tangling in his hair, my hips instinctively pressing against him.

"Liam," I whisper. My voice is pleading. *"I need you."*

He chuckles, a dark, sinful sound, and shifts, standing up, pulling me with him. I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck. He carries me to the edge of the desk, setting me down gently.

The wood is cool against my back. A stark contrast to the heat of his body.

"Where do you want me?" he asks, his voice a low growl, his eyes scanning my body.

"Inside me," I whisper, my voice desperate. *"Now."*

He doesn't need to be told twice. His hands move to his belt, unbuckling it quickly, his pants falling to the floor. His cock springs free, thick and hard, and I lick my lips, my body aching for him. He steps closer, his hands moving to my hips, positioning me. With one swift thrust, he's inside me, filling me completely.

"*Fuck*," I gasp, my head falling back, my body adjusting to his size. He holds still for a moment, letting me get used to him, his forehead resting against mine.

"*Ready?*" he asks, his voice hoarse.

"*Yes*," I whisper, my hands gripping his shoulders.

He pulls out slowly, then thrusts back in, setting a steady rhythm. The desk creaks beneath us, the sound echoing in the quiet room. His hands move to my ass, lifting me, meeting his thrusts, our bodies moving in perfect sync. The air is full of the sounds of our pleasure, our moans, the slap of skin against skin, the creak of the desk.

"*Harder*," I demand, my voice sharp, my body craving more.

He obliges, his thrusts becoming more urgent, more desperate. The desk groans under the force, but he doesn't slow down, doesn't stop. His lips find mine, our kisses frantic, our breaths mingling. I wrap my legs tighter around him, my heels digging into his back, urging him deeper.

"*Cum with me, Emma*," he growls, his voice raw, his body tensing. "*Cum on my cock*."

His words send me over the edge, my orgasm crashing over me like a wave. I scream his name, my body convulsing, my pussy clenching around him. He follows, his own release catching him off guard, his cock pulsing inside me, his body trembling.

We stay like that for a moment, suspended in the aftermath, our breaths ragged, our hearts pounding. Slowly, he pulls out, his hands moving to my back, lowering me

gently to the desk. I lie there, my body still buzzing, my skin glistening with sweat.

He smiles, a lazy, satisfied smile, and kisses me gently. The room is quiet, the only sound our breathing, the only light the soft glow of the lamp.

As he stands, pulling me with him, I wrap my arms around his waist, my head resting on his chest. "*What now?*" I ask, my voice sleepy, content.

He chuckles, a warm, deep sound, and kisses the top of my head. "*Now? Now, we rest. But tomorrow... tomorrow, we see where this takes us.*"

CHAPTER TEN

Liam

My phone buzzes. 6 AM. Jennifer. Three missed calls. Bad.

I sit up, the sheets pooling around my waist. The penthouse office is dark, the city a sleeping beast below. Sleep. I barely remember what it feels like. Not after last night. Three hours with Emma, dissecting our strategy, anticipating every counter-move. Every contingency.

Too many failure points.

I grab the phone. "Jennifer."

"Sir?" Her voice is tight. Strained. "We have a situation."

"What kind?" I'm already out of bed, moving towards the coffee machine.

"Victoria Blackstone. She's in New York. Checked into the St. Regis last night. Under her own name."

Victoria. Here. No subtlety. A declaration. She wants us to know. She's close. Ready.

"Morton?"

"Four calls. Same blocked number. Last night. The final one was at 11:47 PM." Jennifer pauses. "Right after the Sinclair & Associates partners received an urgent meeting notification."

After Emma would have gotten back. After she would have briefed Mac.

"The notification?" I pour coffee, black.

“Emergency partnership meeting. Two PM today. All partners required. Urgent discussion. Cross Industries acquisition offer.”

Morton. Moving fast. Faster than we anticipated.

I walk to the window. The city stirs. Gray light bleeds into the sky. Emma. She’s out there. Facing her own storm. Her own crisis calls.

We fight the same war. Separate battlefields.

“Jennifer, cancel my morning.”

“All of it, sir?”

“All of it.” I need focus. “Secure conference room. Ten AM. Completely private.”

“Yes, sir. Anything else?”

Yes. Figure out how to save Emma. Without destroying everything I’ve built. Execute a plan that needs flawless timing. Perfect coordination. With the woman I’m supposed to destroy.

“Legal team. Nine AM. Hostile takeover defense strategies. Tell them to bring everything.”

“Whose takeover are we defending against, sir?”

Good question. Mine, technically. But not really. I’m defending against Blackstone. My fake takeover is the shield for her real one.

“It’s complicated.” My voice is flat. “Tell them to be prepared for anything.”

I hang up. The coffee is bitter. In eight hours, Emma walks into that meeting. Morton, her trusted colleague, will try to feed her partners to the wolves. She’ll have to argue against my offer, the one we crafted. Secretly support it. Blind to Morton’s exact script.

And I’ll be here. Across the city. Orchestrating our counter-attack. Unable to reach her. Until it’s done.

The secure phone on my desk rings. Red light flashing. Only three people have this number.

My gut clenches.

“Cross.”

“It’s me.” Emma’s voice. Tight. Strained. Fear, sharp and cold, lances through me. “We have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Morton moved up the meeting. Noon.” Her words are clipped. “He says Blackstone’s timeline accelerated. We need to make a decision. Today.”

Today. Not tomorrow. Today.

My mind races. Calculations. Timelines shredded.

“Six hours.” Her voice is a thin thread. “To execute everything. Legal documents. Financial transfers. Partner votes. Regulatory filings. All of it.”

“Can you do it?”

“I don’t know.” Doubt, raw and honest. “The partners are panicking. Half want to fight you to the death. The other half want to surrender immediately. Nobody wants to consider a merger. They think it’s just surrender with better terms.”

Exactly what Morton, what Blackstone, wants them to think.

The strain in her voice. The weight she carries. Alone. Pretending.

“Emma.”

“What?”

“We can do this.” My voice is firm. A rock for her to hold onto.

“How can you be so sure?” A whisper of desperation.

Because I’ve planned for this. For twelve years. Because I know Victoria Blackstone. Her methods. Her mind. Better than she knows them herself. Because I have resources she doesn’t see. Strategies she can’t predict.

Because I believe in you.

“Because we’re better,” I say. My voice is quiet, intense. “Smarter. Faster. More prepared.”

“And if we’re not?” Her fear mirrors my own.

If we're not, you lose everything. And I live with the knowledge I failed you. Failed us.

"We are."

Silence. I hear her ragged breath. She's processing. The fear. The stakes. The impossible odds.

"Liam?"

"Yeah?"

"Last night." Her voice cracks. "When you said this was real. What we have. Did you mean it?"

"I meant it."

"Good." A shaky exhale. "Because I'm about to risk everything I've ever worked for. Based on trusting you."

And I'm risking everything I've ever built. Based on loving you.

"Emma."

"What?"

"Whatever happens today. Whatever we say to each other in public. Whatever performance we give. Remember last night. Remember the cabin. Remember this is more than business."

"I'll remember." Her voice is stronger now.

I hope we both will.

"I have to go." Her words are rushed. "My partners will be here soon. I need to prepare them. For the fight of their lives."

"Emma?"

"Yeah?"

"Give them hell."

She laughs. A real laugh. The sound of the woman who fell asleep in my arms. "You too."

The line goes dead.

Alone. Coffee. City. The most important day.

Time for war.

I pull up Victoria Blackstone's file. Photos. Financials. Psychological profiles. Business history. Twelve years of

watching her. Learning her. The hunter becomes the hunted. Today.

My intercom buzzes. "Mr. Cross? Your legal team is here."

"Send them in."

Patricia Granger, David Park, Sarah Kim. My legal eagles. They walk in. Boxes of documents. Expressions of barely controlled panic. They've worked all weekend. Preparing for a scenario they don't understand.

Join the club.

"Gentlemen. Ladies. Thank you for coming in."

"Sir." Patricia Chen, my head of legal, speaks first. "We've prepared the merger documents. As requested. But this timeline. It's extremely aggressive. Normally, a transaction like this takes weeks. Not hours."

"Normally," I say, my voice flat, "we're not racing against a hostile takeover. From Blackstone Capital."

A hush falls. Patricia's face pales. David exchanges a look with Sarah.

"Blackstone?" Patricia's voice is a shocked whisper. "Sir, if Blackstone is targeting Sinclair & Associates, shouldn't we advise them directly? Instead of pursuing our own acquisition?"

How do I explain? That I am advising them. Directly. Just not in any way they'd understand.

"Our acquisition is their best defense." My gaze sweeps over them. Hard. Unyielding. "If we move fast enough, we present Blackstone with a fait accompli. They can't acquire a company that's already been acquired."

"And Sinclair & Associates is willing to be acquired by us?" David Park, my corporate finance specialist, asks. His skepticism is clear.

The trillion-dollar question.

"Ms. Sinclair is... Considering our offer."

Among other things.

"Sir." David persists. "The regulatory filings alone. They'll take most of the day. And that's assuming no delays. No complications."

"Then we ensure no delays. No complications." Because if there are, Emma loses everything. And I lose her.

"What about due diligence?" Sarah Kim, our compliance officer, chimes in. "We haven't had time. To properly vet Sinclair & Associates. Their financial position. Client relationships. Internal structures."

I've vetted them. For two years. I know their financials better than they do.

"I've monitored their situation closely." My voice is firm. "They're a solid firm. Strong fundamentals. Excellent leadership."

"But sir." Patricia interjects. Her worry is palpable. "Without proper due diligence, we expose Cross Industries. To significant liability. What if there are hidden debts? Undisclosed lawsuits? Regulatory violations?"

What if Emma doesn't love me? What if this is just survival? Proximity? Adrenaline?

"I'll take full personal responsibility." My voice is quiet. Dead serious. "For any complications."

Because this isn't just about acquiring her company. It's about betting my future. My life. On the woman who runs it.

"Sir, with all due respect." David's voice is tight. "This isn't just liability. It's your reputation. The company's reputation. If this goes wrong, if the merger fails, creates problems, the business press will tear us apart."

They'll tear me apart anyway. When they find out. That I've been secretly working with Emma. That this hostile takeover is a facade. To protect her. From a real threat.

"The greater risk," I say, my voice low, "is doing nothing. Watching Blackstone destroy a good company. Good people."

And the woman I love.

My secure phone rings again. Caller ID: Unknown.

Emma, from a different phone? Or...

"Excuse me." I hold up a hand to my team. "I need to take this."

I answer on the third ring. My pulse is a slow, heavy drum.

"Cross."

"Mr. Cross. This is Victoria Blackstone."

The devil herself. Her voice is cool. Confident.

"Ms. Blackstone. An unexpected pleasure." My own voice is equally cool.

"I think it's time we had a conversation."

I think it's time I ended you.

"I'm listening."

"Not over the phone. Meet me. The Vault. One hour."

The Vault. Of course. Exclusive. Secure. Neutral ground. No scenes.

"And if I decline?"

"Then Sinclair & Associates will be in bankruptcy. By the end of the week."

The threat. As expected.

"One hour."

"Mr. Cross?"

"What?"

"Come alone."

The line goes dead.

I stare at my legal team. Their faces are a mixture of confusion and concern. Everything just got infinitely more complicated.

The enemy wants a face-to-face.

She's desperate. Or supremely confident.

I'm about to find out.

"Change of plans." My voice is sharp. "I need those documents ready. For filing. In two hours. Not six. Whatever

corners you cut, whatever procedures you expedite, make it happen.”

“Sir, that’s impossible.” Patricia protests. Her voice is strained. “The regulatory requirements alone—”

“Then make it possible.” My gaze sweeps over them. Uncompromising. “Call in favors. Pay expedite fees. Do whatever it takes. I want everything ready to file. The moment Ms. Sinclair gives us the green light.”

Because Victoria Blackstone isn’t requesting a meeting to negotiate. She’s requesting a meeting to deliver an ultimatum.

And I need to be ready.

The Vault. Manhattan’s most exclusive restaurant. Private booths. Soundproof walls. A clientele of power brokers. Heads of state. Fortune 500 CEOs.

Perfect for a conversation that could destroy lives.

Victoria Blackstone is already there. Corner booth. Clear view of the room. Platinum blonde hair. Cold blue eyes that miss nothing.

The woman who destroyed my father.

“Mr. Cross. Thank you for coming.” Her voice is smooth, like polished steel.

“Ms. Blackstone.”

I slide into the booth. She’s positioned herself perfectly. Back to the wall. Exit routes mapped. Phone face-down, within easy reach. Calculated. Maximum advantage.

Just like I would.

“You’re not what I expected,” she says. Her eyes study me. The same intensity I’ve seen in boardroom photos.

“Neither are you.”

“What did you expect?”

A monster. Obvious evil. Obvious corruption. Someone easier to hate.

“Someone older.”

She laughs. Surprisingly genuine. "I get that a lot. People expect corporate raiders to be ancient men. Expensive suits. But the young ones. Always hungrier."

Hungrier. Like predators.

"Speaking of hunger." She gestures to the table. "I took the liberty of ordering. The wagyu here is exceptional."

The waiter approached. "Ms. Blackstone has already ordered for you, Mr. Cross." Victoria offered a cool smile. Always in control.

"How considerate." My voice is dry.

"I'm a considerate person, Mr. Cross. Which is why I wanted to speak with you. Before things get... unpleasant."

Here it comes.

"Unpleasant how?"

"You're making a play for Sinclair & Associates." A statement. Not a question. She knows. Her intelligence network is good. Or Morton. Feeding her more than we realized.

"I'm exploring opportunities."

"Don't be coy. It doesn't suit you." She leans forward. Her eyes are like ice chips. "We both know you've made an offer. To Emma Sinclair. We both know she's considering it."

How much does she know? The cabin? Our real relationship?

"Ms. Sinclair is a smart businesswoman. I'm sure she's considering all her options."

"Including mine."

There it is.

"You've made an offer?"

"I'm making one now. Through you."

What?

The waiter arrives with our food. A brief respite. Time to process. Victoria waits. Patient. Predatory.

"Here's what's going to happen, Mr. Cross." Her voice is soft. Deadly. "You withdraw your offer to Sinclair & Associates. You recommend Ms. Sinclair accept my terms. In exchange, I make you very, very rich."

Betray Emma. Hand her to the wolves.

"What makes you think I'd be interested?"

"Because you're a businessman. Not a romantic. You understand sentiment is expensive. Profit is eternal."

She has no idea.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I destroy you both." Casual confidence. Like discussing the weather. She cuts into her steak.

How?

"Elaborate."

"Your hostile takeover of Sinclair & Associates. It will fail. Spectacularly. Emma Sinclair will fight you. With everything she has. She's formidable when cornered. The legal battle will drag on. Months. Costing you millions. Destroying your reputation."

Not wrong. If Emma and I were truly adversaries. That's exactly what would happen.

"Meanwhile," she continues, her voice a silken threat, "I'll be quietly acquiring her debt. Her client contracts. Her real estate leases. When the dust settles, there won't be anything left. Of Sinclair & Associates. For either of us to acquire."

Scorched earth. If she can't have it, no one can.

"You'd rather destroy it than let me have it?"

"I'd rather have a compliant partner than a dead competitor."

Compliant partner. She wants me to work for her.

"What exactly are you proposing?"

"A joint venture. Blackstone-Cross Acquisitions. You bring capital. Clean reputation. I bring expertise. Client

network. Together, we could own half the legal services market. In five years.”

Everything I thought I wanted. When I started this. Power. Wealth. Revenge.

All I have to do is betray Emma.

“That’s quite an offer.” My voice is carefully neutral.

“It is.” She sips her wine. “And it expires. In exactly...” She checks her watch. A delicate, diamond-studded timepiece. “Three hours. When Ms. Sinclair’s partners meeting begins.”

Three hours. When Emma walks into the most important meeting of her career.

“Why the deadline?”

“Because that’s when I make my counter-offer. To Sinclair & Associates. With or without your cooperation.”

The trap. It springs shut. Betray Emma now. Or Victoria destroys us both later.

“What’s your counter-offer?”

“Acquisition. Thirty percent above current market value. Full employment guarantees. All current staff. Retention of the Sinclair name. Management structure.”

A good offer. Better than good. Better than most firms in Emma’s situation could hope for.

And it’s a lie.

“That’s generous.”

“I can afford to be generous. When I’m certain of the outcome.”

She knows something I don’t. Or thinks she does.

“What makes you so certain?”

Victoria smiles. For the first time, I see the true predator. Cold. Calculating. Utterly ruthless. “Because James Morton has been feeding me intelligence. About Sinclair & Associates. For six months. I know exactly how desperate their financial situation is. Exactly which partners

are wavering. Exactly what pressure points will make them break.”

Morton. She’s counting on Morton. To deliver Emma’s partnership.

“And if Morton can’t deliver?”

“Then I have other assets.”

Other assets? What other assets?

“Such as?”

“Let’s just say.” Her voice drops. A silken whisper. “Ms. Sinclair has some very interesting vulnerabilities. That could become public knowledge. If necessary.”

Vulnerabilities. What vulnerabilities? What does she know about Emma?

A cold rage, lethal and absolute, tightened my chest. If she touched Emma...

“I see you understand me now,” Victoria says. Her eyes watch my face. Sharp. Knowing. “This isn’t just about money, Mr. Cross. This is about power. And I have more of it than you do.”

We’ll see about that.

“You’ve given me a lot to think about.” My voice is carefully controlled.

“Don’t think too long. Three hours.”

She stands. Leaves money on the table. For both our meals.

“Mr. Cross?”

“What?”

“I’ve been doing this for a very long time. I’ve destroyed companies worth ten times Sinclair & Associates. I’ve ruined men with twice your net worth. Half your scruples.”

Is that supposed to intimidate me?

“Your point?”

“My point is. You can be my partner. Or my victim. But you cannot be my equal.”

Watch me.

She walks away. Leaving me. With the check. And the sudden, chilling realization. Victoria Blackstone is everything I expected. And worse.

She's not just trying to acquire Emma's company. She's trying to acquire me.

And she has no idea. She just declared war. On the wrong man.

My secure line buzzes. A text.

Ms. Sinclair, we need to talk. The St. Regis, Presidential Suite. Come alone. You have thirty minutes. - V. Blackstone

Victoria. She's summoning Emma. Moving to the endgame.

Victoria's words echo. *Everything you think you know about what happened to Cross Manufacturing is wrong.*

What did she mean? What truth about my father?

It doesn't matter. Not now. Emma. I have to get to Emma.

I grab my coat. Head for the door. Whatever Victoria plans to tell Emma. Whatever truth she thinks she holds. I need to be there.

Because the only truth that matters now is the one Emma and I build. Together.

Everything else is just noise.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Emma

"Emma, you look like hell."

Mac's greeting is exactly what I need. A jackhammer pounded behind my eyes. Sleep? A distant memory. I manage a weak glare as he strolls into my office.

"Thanks. That's exactly the confidence boost I was looking for on a Monday morning."

He picks up my coffee cup, sniffs it, and recoils. "This could strip paint."

"It's fuel." I snatch it back, nearly sloshing the cold dregs. The office is already a disaster zone of files and frantic energy. The emergency partners meeting looms, two hours away. Two hours to determine the fate of everything.

"Seriously, honey. When's the last time you slept?" Mac's voice softens, a rare occurrence.

Three nights ago. In Liam's arms, a lifetime ago, before this fresh hell began. "I'll sleep when this is over." If it ever is.

I head straight for my desk, Mac trailing with a fresh cup—this one actually steaming—and a stack of print-outs. Crisis reports. The call with Liam echoes in my mind. Victoria Blackstone's offer to him. Betray me, get rich. Three hours to execute our plan before she makes her counter-move.

Three hours. The meeting starts in two. My stomach churns.

"Morton's been here since eight," Mac says, his voice low. "Locked in his office, making phone calls. Whatever he's planning for this meeting, he's coordinating with someone."

Victoria Blackstone. The name screams in my head. Morton. Twenty years. Coffees shared, cases won. Now this. A cold fist clenches in my gut. How did I miss it? How could I have been so blind to the viper in our midst?

"Who else is here?" I try to keep my voice steady.

"Rodriguez and Kim arrived an hour ago. Conference room, going through financial projections. Sarah is on her way from her weekend place. The others should be here within the hour."

Five partners plus me. Six votes. I need three for a majority. Right now, I'm not sure I have even one. Liam's plan, our plan, hinges on swift, decisive action. And trust.

"Mac, I need you to do something for me."

"Anything." His loyalty is a small, warm spot in the icy dread.

"Call our accountants. Tell them I need a complete financial analysis of the Cross Industries offer by noon. Every detail, every implication, every scenario."

His eyebrows shoot up. "That's in forty minutes."

"Then they better work fast." My partners deserve to understand exactly what they're choosing. Even if I can't tell them the whole truth.

Elena Rodriguez and David Kim emerge from the conference room. Their faces are grim. Elena, fifteen years with us, a corporate law bulldog. David, newer, brilliant, fiercely loyal to the firm's traditions. Two votes I might, just might, be able to count on if I can navigate this perfectly.

"Emma," Elena says, her voice tight. "We need to talk."

"About?"

"About whether we're really considering surrender to Cross Industries."

Surrender. That's how they see it. Liam's carefully constructed offer, our lifeline, reduced to surrender. "Let's wait until everyone's here. I don't want to have this conversation twice."

Sarah Johns arrives at 11:15, looking harried. Our employment law specialist. Her focus is always our people. A potential third vote, if I can convince her Liam's offer protects them.

"Emma," Sarah says, pulling me aside. Her voice is hushed. "I've been getting calls all morning from staff. Rumors. Cross Industries, emergency meetings, job security. What do I tell them?"

Tell them I'm trying to save their jobs. Tell them I'm risking everything. "Tell them we're exploring all our options. No decisions have been made." A half-truth. The best I can offer.

"And Morton?" Sarah continues, her brow furrowed. "He's been asking for personnel files, employment contracts, salary information. I stalled him, but he says he has authorization from the partnership."

He's building a dossier for Blackstone. My blood runs cold. Information to sweeten their offer, identify pressure points, pick us apart. "Don't give him anything else. Not without written authorization. From me. Personally."

At 11:30, partners Williams and Foster arrive. Together. The old guard. With the firm since before I was born. They remember my father, my grandfather. They will be the hardest to convince. They will see any deal as a betrayal.

"Emma." Williams' voice is sharp, no pleasantries. "What's this about Cross Industries? Are we really considering selling out to that corporate shark?"

Corporate shark. If only you knew. If only you knew he's trying to save us from bigger, deadlier sharks. "We're considering our options."

"Our option is to fight," Foster declares, his jowls quivering. "This firm has been in your family for four generations. We don't surrender to hostile raiders."

Fight with what? Money we don't have? Against lawyers we can't afford? While our clients lose confidence and our staff looks for lifeboats? "Sometimes," I say, my voice quiet but firm, "fighting means choosing the battle you can win."

Morton appears at 11:45. He carries a thick folder. He wears the smug expression of a man who thinks he's about to save the world. Or destroy it. My stomach lurches.

"If everyone's ready," he says, his voice unctuously smooth, "I think we should begin."

"This is a partners meeting, Morton," Elena says, her tone glacial. "You're not a partner."

"Emma asked me to present the relevant information," Morton counters, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes. "Given my research into Cross Industries and their methods."

Research. Right. Intelligence reports. From Blackstone. We file into the conference room. The air is thick with tension, unspoken fears.

For the next twenty minutes, we listen. Our accountants, via speakerphone, deliver a grim breakdown of Sinclair & Associates' financial reality. It's worse than I thought. Not catastrophic. But vulnerable. Precarious. Any major client loss, any unexpected expense, could tip us over the edge. We are an attractive target. A wounded animal.

"So," Morton says when the accountants hang up, his voice taking on a new resonance, a false gravitas. "I think we can all see that we're in a precarious position. Which

makes Cross Industries' offer even more significant." He opens his folder. Starts distributing copies of documents. Documents I've never seen.

Where did he get these?

"These," Morton announces, "are Cross Industries' financial statements for the last three years. Their acquisition history. Their post-acquisition employment practices."

I scan the pages quickly. Genuine Cross Industries letterhead. But the content... it paints a picture of aggressive cost-cutting. Workforce reductions. Operational changes that bear no resemblance to the partnership Liam and I crafted. This isn't the deal we negotiated. This is a fabrication. He lied to me. Or these are lies. A cold dread washes over me. The rug is being pulled out, and I'm scrambling for purchase.

"As you can see," Morton continues, his voice dripping with false concern, "Cross Industries has acquired seventeen companies in the last five years. In every case, they've eliminated between thirty and sixty percent of the workforce within the first year."

That's not true. It can't be. Liam wouldn't... But I can't contradict Morton. Not without revealing how I know the real story. Not without exposing Liam, and us.

"Where did you get this information?" I manage, my voice tight.

"Public filings. SEC documents." Morton shrugs. "It's all a matter of public record."

But it's not the whole picture. There has to be more. He's twisting it.

"What are you suggesting, Morton?" Williams asks, his voice gruff.

"I'm suggesting," Morton says, leaning forward, "we explore other options before we surrender to Cross Industries."

Other options. Here it comes. The betrayal, wrapped in a veneer of concern.

"Such as?" I keep my voice even.

"I've been approached by another firm." Morton pauses for dramatic effect. "Blackstone Capital. They're interested in acquiring us. Under much more favorable terms."

The trap springs shut. My heart hammers against my ribs. This is it. The moment Morton reveals his true allegiance. The moment Blackstone makes their play, through their inside man.

"Blackstone Capital?" Elena frowns. "I've never heard of them."

"They're a private equity firm," Morton explains smoothly. "Specializing in legal services. They've successfully acquired and grown dozens of law firms across the country."

Successfully destroyed dozens, he means. My hands clench under the table.

Morton pulls out another set of documents. Passes them around. "Full employment guarantees for all current staff. Retention of the Sinclair name and all existing partnerships. Continuation of current management structure."

It sounds perfect. Too perfect. A siren song, luring us onto the rocks. The partners around the table exchange glances. After Morton's damning presentation about Cross Industries, Blackstone's offer sounds like a miracle. Which is exactly what he, and Victoria, intended. The walls are closing in.

"And the downside?" I ask, my voice deceptively calm.

"There is no downside," Morton says, his smile beatific. "It's a straightforward acquisition. Complete protection for everyone."

Except it's a lie. Everything about it is a lie. And I have no way to prove it. Not without revealing everything Liam

told me. Not without destroying the fragile trust we've built.

My mind races. Liam's warning. Victoria's deadline. Our plan. It's now or never.

"I'd like to propose a motion."

The room goes quiet. A heavy, expectant silence. In twenty years of partnership meetings, I've never used formal parliamentary procedure. They know. This is serious. This saves us. Or it destroys everything.

"A motion to accept Cross Industries' merger offer, effective immediately."

The silence shatters. Elena's face goes white. "Emma, what?"

"You heard me." My voice is firm. Unwavering.

David Kim shifts uncomfortably. "Don't you think we should discuss both offers before making any decisions?"

"There's nothing to discuss." My gaze sweeps the room, meeting each partner's eyes. "Blackstone Capital is a corporate raider. They destroy everything they touch. Cross Industries is offering us a legitimate partnership."

"How can you be so sure?" Morton asks. I hear the edge of panic in his voice now. He didn't expect this.

Because I've seen Liam's real plans. Because I've worked with him, side-by-side, to design this merger. Because I trust him. With my firm. With my life. Because I'm in love with him. That thought, sharp and clear, cuts through the chaos.

"Because I've done my research."

"What research?" Foster demands, his face reddening. "You've been trapped in a cabin all weekend. When did you have time for research?"

Good question. How do I explain that I spent the weekend falling in love with the man who's trying to save us? The man they see as the enemy? "I've been investigat-

ing Cross Industries for months. Their offer is legitimate. Their terms are fair. Their track record is solid."

"Their track record of eliminating jobs?" Morton waves his fabricated documents. "Emma, I understand you want to find a solution. But we can't ignore the facts."

"Those aren't facts." My voice is cold. "Those are selectively chosen data points. Designed to make Cross Industries look bad." And I have no way to prove it. Not yet.

Morton's face hardens. "Are you accusing me of falsifying documents?"

Yes. Yes, I am. "I'm saying your presentation lacks context. It appears designed to push us toward a predetermined conclusion."

"Emma," Sarah says gently, her eyes full of concern. "I think we need to slow down. This is too important to rush."

We don't have time to slow down. In less than two hours, Victoria Blackstone makes her real move. Then it's too late.

"I'm invoking emergency powers."

There it is. The nuclear option. The words hang in the air, heavy, irrevocable.

The room erupts. Williams slams his hand on the table. "Unacceptable, Emma!" Foster's face is a mask of outrage, his complexion turning a dangerous shade of purple.

"You're what?" Williams is on his feet. "Emma, you can't just—"

"Article twelve." My voice cuts through the uproar, clear and cold. "Our partnership agreement grants the managing partner unilateral decision-making authority. In cases of imminent threat to the firm's survival. I'm exercising that authority. Now."

"This is insane!" Morton's voice rises, shrill with panic. "You're destroying this firm! To satisfy some personal vendetta against Blackstone!"

Personal vendetta. If only he knew the half of it. "I'm saving this firm. From people who want to destroy it."

"By handing us over to Cross Industries?" Elena's voice is incredulous. Disbelieving. "Emma, this is madness." She knows. Somehow, she suspects. About the cabin. About Liam.

"My decision is based on months of research and careful analysis." The lie tastes like ash, but I hold my ground.

"Research you apparently conducted in secret," Foster says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Without consulting your partners. Without seeking our input. Without considering our concerns."

Because I couldn't tell you the truth. Because you wouldn't have believed me. Because love makes you do things that look like betrayal but are actually salvation. "Sometimes leadership means making hard choices."

I stand. Look around the table. At the faces of people I've worked with for years. Some angry. Some confused. Some hurt. Some... relieved. Sarah is nodding slightly, a flicker of understanding in her eyes. David looks thoughtful, not outraged. Even Elena, despite her protests, seems to grasp the desperation of the situation. They trust me. Despite everything, a part of them still trusts me.

"The Sinclair & Associates partnership votes to accept Cross Industries' merger offer. Effective immediately." My voice is steady, unwavering, though my insides are a maelstrom. "Meeting adjourned."

Done. For better or worse. It's done.

The conference room empties in a stunned, angry silence. I'm left alone, the weight of my decision pressing down, a physical ache in my chest. I grab my phone. I need to call Liam.

Before I can dial, Mac appears in the doorway. His face is a mixture of shock and concern. "Emma, what the hell just happened in there?"

How do I explain? That I just used emergency powers to approve a merger with a man I'm secretly in love with. While fighting off a hostile takeover from a woman who wants to destroy everything I care about.

"I saved our jobs."

"By invoking emergency powers?" Mac's voice is incredulous. "Emma, the partners are furious."

I know. I know I've destroyed my relationships with them. Maybe permanently. I've become exactly the kind of autocratic leader they feared. The kind I swore I'd never be. A cold wave of regret washes over me, the true cost of my actions hitting home.

"Mac, I need you to trust me." My voice is a plea.

"I do trust you." He steps closer. "But I need to understand what's happening. Why Cross Industries? Why now? Why this way?"

Because Liam Cross is the only person standing between us and complete destruction. Because I love him. Because sometimes you have to risk everything to save what matters most. "Because it was the right thing to do."

"That's not an answer." His eyes search mine.

It's the only answer I can give you. "It's the only answer I have."

Mac stares at me for a long moment. His expression softens. Please don't ask. Please don't make me lie to you any more than I already have.

"Okay," he says finally. His voice is quiet. "I trust you."

Relief washes over me, so potent it nearly buckles my knees. "Thank you."

"But Emma?" He hesitates. "Whatever's really going on here, whatever you're not telling me—be careful. I can't lose you too."

Lose me too. Like he lost his family. Like he's lost everyone else who mattered. My heart aches for him. "You're not going to lose me, Mac."

"Promise?" His vulnerability is a rare, fragile thing.

I promise to try. I promise to fight. I promise that if I survive this, I'll never shut you out again. "I promise."

He nods. Leaves, closing the door softly behind him. I'm alone again. With my phone. My fears. The echoing silence of my office. The aftermath of the most important, most terrifying decision of my career.

Did I just save my family's firm? Or did I just hand it over to the man I'm falling in love with? Is there a difference anymore?

My hands shake as I dial Liam's number.

"Cross." His voice is calm. A lifeline.

"It's done."

"How did it go?"

Like I just set fire to every professional relationship I've spent years building. "I used emergency powers. The merger is approved."

"Emma, are you okay?" His voice softens with concern.

No. I'm not okay. I just betrayed the trust of everyone who's ever believed in me. And I did it for a man I've known for two weeks. A man who was, until recently, my nemesis. "I will be. What's our next move?"

"Documents are being filed now. My team has everything ready. By close of business today, Cross Industries will officially own controlling interest in Sinclair & Associates."

Own. Not partner with. Own. The word is a cold shock.

"And then?"

"And then we find out if we saved your company. Or if Victoria Blackstone has one more card to play."

There's always one more card. Another move. Another threat. Another crisis.

"Liam?"

"Yeah?"

"Whatever happens next, I want you to know—I don't regret this. The decision. The risk. Any of it."

"Even if it costs you everything?"

Especially if it costs me everything. Because some things are worth more than everything. "Even then."

Because I love you. Because you saved me before I even knew I needed saving. Because sometimes the only way to keep what matters most is to risk losing it all.

"Emma—"

"I have to go." My voice is suddenly urgent. "Morton's planning something. I need to figure out what it is. Before he can execute it."

"Be careful."

"You too."

I hang up. Lean back in my chair. Stare at the ceiling. One hour. I've approved a merger. Invoked emergency powers. Potentially destroyed my career. And I'd do it again. For him. For us. For the chance to find out what we could be. Together.

My phone buzzes. A text. Unknown number.

Ms. Sinclair, we need to talk. The St. Regis, Presidential Suite. Come alone. You have thirty minutes.
- V. Blackstone

Victoria Blackstone. She wants to meet. Which means she knows her plan is falling apart. Which means we're winning.

Or it means she's about to destroy me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Liam

My secure phone. I dial Emma's number before my feet hit the pavement outside The Vault.

"Cross."

"It's me." Her voice is tight. "We have a problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"The kind where Victoria Blackstone just offered to make me rich if I hand you over to her."

Silence. A beat of ice.

"And?" Emma's voice is quiet.

"And I told her I'd think about it."

"Liam—"

"It buys us three hours. Three hours to execute our plan before she makes her counter-move."

Three hours. To save Emma. To end the woman who destroyed my father.

Three hours. To prove love beats greed.

Three hours. To win.

"What did she offer you?" Emma asks.

I walk fast. Back to my office. My mind churns. Victoria's words. Her threats. Each step hammers the urgency. "Partnership. Blackstone-Cross Acquisitions. Half the legal services market in five years."

"That's..."

"Everything I once thought I wanted." Before Emma. Before I knew revenge tasted like ash compared to her.

"And you turned it down." A statement, not a question.

"I didn't turn it down. I bought us time." Time. Before Victoria realizes I would burn my empire to the ground before I betrayed Emma.

"How much time?"

"Three hours. She makes her counter-offer to your partnership at your meeting."

"Which is in two hours." Emma's voice is strained.

"It means we accelerate everything." I try to keep my tone steady. For her. "Emma, your partners. The emergency powers. How did they take it?"

Please tell me they stood by you. Please tell me you didn't have to burn every bridge.

"About as well as you'd expect." Her voice is flat. "Half think I've lost my mind. The other half think I've been compromised."

Compromised. She had been. For me. For us.

"That's not the point," she says, her voice regaining strength. "What's our next move?"

"Legal documents are being filed. Now. My team has worked since dawn. Everything processed before Victoria's deadline." My team. They think I'm insane too. Patricia stared at me, her face pale, when I ordered them to expedite everything.

"Will it be enough?" Emma's question is a fragile thread.

"It has to be." I pause. "Emma, there's something else." Something I should have told her. Something that changes why I'm here. Why I fight.

"What?"

"Victoria knows about us."

Her breath catches. A sharp, audible gasp. "What do you mean, she knows about us?"

"She knows we're working together. She mentioned your 'vulnerabilities' during our meeting." My gut tightens. "I think she has surveillance photos. Maybe recorded conversations."

Photos. Us at the cabin? Last night at her apartment?

"How is that possible?" Disbelief colors her tone.

"She's been planning this for months. She probably had you followed. Your phones monitored. Your apartment watched."

Her apartment. Where I went last night. Where we finalized this strategy.

Where I knew, with absolute certainty, I loved her.

"So she knows everything." Emma's voice is small.

"She knows we're not enemies. Not really." I try to reassure her. "But she doesn't know our strategy. Not the details. She doesn't know how far ahead we are."

Not yet.

"What do we do?"

"We accelerate. Full execution. Next hour. No more waiting. No more coordination. Pure speed."

One hour. To complete a merger that should take weeks.

I'm back at my building. The elevator climbs. My reflection in the steel doors is a stranger. Hard. Cold. Ready. I'm already organizing the next phase in my head.

"Liam, if this doesn't work—"

"It's going to work." My voice is a steel blade.

"But if it doesn't—"

"Emma." I cut her off, softer this time. "It's going to work."

It must. I cannot lose her. Not now. Not like this.

"How can you be so sure?" she whispers.

"Because I've planned for this for twelve years." My voice is low. Intense. "Because I know Victoria Blackstone. Better than she knows herself. Because I've waited my entire adult life for the chance to destroy her."

Destroy her. Not just beat her. Annihilate her.

The words hang there. I hear how they sound. Revenge over love. Victoria over Emma.

It's not true. Not anymore.

"What aren't you telling me?" Emma's question cuts through my thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

"This isn't just about saving my company, is it? This is personal for you."

More personal than she can imagine.

I'm in my office. The city sprawls below, indifferent. How do I explain twelve years of hate? Twelve years of planning? Twelve years of a single, burning focus?

How do I tell her this started as vengeance, and somehow, somewhere, became love?

"Victoria Blackstone didn't just destroy my father's company, Emma." My voice is quiet. Raw. "She destroyed my father."

A beat of silence. Then, Emma's soft, "Oh, God."

"What happened?" she asks, her voice barely a breath.

She took everything. His pride. His purpose. His will to live. "After the takeover, after he lost everything, he started drinking." The words are hard. Each one a stone in my throat. "Started blaming himself. For trusting the wrong people. For not seeing the trap. He died two years later. Heart attack, the doctors said. But really, he died of shame."

The pain. Still sharp. Still there.

Emma's breath hitches. "Liam, I'm sorry."

"She took everything from him. His company. His pride. His life. She did it because she could. Because it was profitable. Because men like my father were just obstacles. To her vision of efficient capitalism." Men like her grandfather. Women like her.

"So this is revenge," she says softly.

It was. It was always supposed to be.

"This started as revenge." My voice is rough. "But somewhere along the way, it became about saving you."

Saving her. Not her company. Her.

"What's the difference?"

Everything. The difference is everything. I don't care about destroying Victoria anymore. Not like I did. I care about protecting Emma.

"The difference is that I don't care about destroying Victoria anymore." The words are a revelation, even to me. "I care about protecting you."

How did this happen? How did I change so much? From planning her company's demise to planning our future?

"Liam."

"What?"

"When this is over," she says, her voice hesitant. "When we've saved the company. Beaten Blackstone. Dealt with whatever fallout comes. What happens to us?"

Us. That word. Again.

The future I'm afraid to hope for. The question I've avoided.

"What do you want to happen?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

I want to wake up with you. Every morning. Work with you. Build with you. Be partners. In everything. I want to stop pretending. Stop being enemies. Start admitting I love you.

"I want to find out what we could be," she says, her voice a fragile hope. "If we didn't have to hide."

If we could just be Liam and Emma. Not Cross Industries and Sinclair & Associates.

"Then that's what we'll do." If we survive this hour. This day.

“Emma, I have to go.” My other phone rings. Victoria Blackstone. Right on schedule. “She’s calling. I need to convince her I’m still considering her offer.”

Time for the performance of my life.

“Be careful,” Emma says.

“You too.” I pause. “And Emma?”

“Yeah?”

“Whatever happens. Whatever she threatens. Whatever she tries to make you do. Don’t give her anything. Don’t admit we’re working together. Don’t confirm her suspicions. Don’t give her any ammunition.”

“Even if it means sacrificing the merger?” Her voice is small.

“Especially then.” My voice is fierce. “I’d rather lose everything than watch her destroy you.”

“Call me when it’s done,” she whispers.

“Count on it.”

The line goes dead.

Alone. My coffee is cold. The city waits. The most important call of my life.

Time to lie to the devil.

I answer Victoria’s call on the third ring.

“Cross.”

“Mr. Cross. I trust you’ve had time to consider my offer.” Her voice is smooth. Confident.

My offer. To betray Emma. For money. For power I no longer crave.

“I’m still processing.” My voice is carefully neutral.

“What is there to process? I’m offering you wealth. Power. The chance to be part of something revolutionary.”

Revolutionary. Destroying family businesses. Social progress? Hardly.

“It’s a significant decision.”

“It’s a simple decision. Partner with me. Prosper. Or oppose me. Lose everything.”

The threat. I expected it.

"You seem confident. That you'll succeed either way."

"I am confident. Because I have information you don't have."

Information? What information?

"Such as?"

"Such as Emma Sinclair just used emergency powers. To approve your merger. Without partner consensus."

How? How does she know already? The meeting just ended.

"If you say so." My voice is flat.

"I do say so. Because James Morton called me. Twenty minutes ago. He reported your supposed enemy just handed her company over to you. Unilateral executive authority."

Morton. Of course. The snake.

"Interesting."

"Interesting?" Victoria's voice sharpens. "Mr. Cross, don't you see? Emma Sinclair just destroyed her professional relationships. Violated her partnership agreements. Exposed herself to legal challenges. From her own colleagues."

She did it for me. She risked everything. For me. For us.

"And?"

"And that makes her desperate." Victoria's voice is triumphant. "Vulnerable. Easy to manipulate."

You have no idea how wrong you are. Emma is steel.

"What's your point?"

"My point is your merger faces serious legal challenges. Emergency powers can be overturned. Especially under questionable circumstances."

Questionable circumstances. Like falling in love with the woman whose company you're supposed to acquire.

"What kind of legal challenges?"

“The kind that allege conflict of interest. Breach of fiduciary duty. Personal relationships affecting business judgment.”

She has the photos. The recordings. She will use our relationship against us.

“You have evidence of that?” My voice is cold.

“I have photographs, Mr. Cross. Recordings. Documentation. Of your personal relationship with Emma Sinclair.”

There it is. The blackmail.

“I see.”

“Do you? Because if those materials become public, your merger becomes invalid. Both your reputations are destroyed.”

She’s not just threatening Emma’s company. She’s threatening us both. Personally.

“What are you proposing?”

“I propose you withdraw your merger offer. Voluntarily. Recommend Sinclair & Associates accept my acquisition terms instead. In exchange, those materials remain private.”

Blackmail. Pure. Simple. Vicious.

“And if I refuse?”

“Then tomorrow morning, every business reporter in New York receives a very interesting story. Corporate corruption. Personal relationships affecting fiduciary duty. The spectacular collapse of two supposedly professional business-people.”

She will destroy us both. Without a second thought.

My secure line buzzes. A text.

Ms. Sinclair, we need to talk. The St. Regis, Presidential Suite. Come alone. You have thirty minutes.
- V. Blackstone

Victoria. Texting Emma. Moving to the endgame. She means to isolate Emma. Break her.

"Mr. Cross? Are you still there?" Victoria's voice is impatient.

"I'm here." My mind races.

"Good. You have fifteen minutes. Make your decision."

"Fifteen minutes?"

"Fifteen minutes. Before I have a conversation with Emma Sinclair. A conversation she might find... unpleasant."

She is going after Emma. Directly. Now.

"What kind of conversation?" My voice is a low growl.

"The kind where she learns some very interesting things. About your real motivations. About your father's company. About why you're really here."

What does she mean? Learn about my father's company? She destroyed it. What else is there to learn?

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't." Her voice is laced with contempt. "Because you've been operating under false assumptions. For twelve years."

False assumptions?

"Elaborate."

"Not over the phone." Her tone is smug. "But I will say this, Mr. Cross. Everything you think you know about what happened to Cross Manufacturing is wrong."

Wrong? Everything I know is wrong? My hand tightens on the phone. A cold wave washes through me. What is she saying?

"You're lying." My voice is hoarse.

"Am I? Ask yourself. If I really destroyed your father's company, why partner with his son? Why risk bringing someone with a personal vendetta into my organization?"

Because you think you can control me. Because you think money and power matter more than love. Loyalty.

"Because you think you can manipulate me."

“Or because the story you’ve told yourself for twelve years isn’t the whole truth.”

What truth? What story? My world tilts.

“What are you talking about?”

“Fifteen minutes, Mr. Cross. Decide quickly.”

The line goes dead.

Victoria Blackstone. She knows something about my father’s death. Something I don’t.

Everything you think you know is wrong.

What if she speaks the truth? What if I have been wrong? About everything?

My coat. I grab it. Head for the door. Whatever Victoria plans to tell Emma. Whatever twisted truth she thinks she holds about my father. I must be there.

Because I learned one thing this past week. The only truth that matters now is the one Emma and I build. Together.

Everything else is just noise. Distraction. Lies.

Emma. I have to get to Emma.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Emma

The St. Regis Presidential Suite. It is precisely what I expect from Victoria Blackstone. Floor-to-ceiling windows. Sweeping views of Central Park. Antique furniture that costs a fortune. The atmosphere of power is a physical weight.

Victoria stands at the windows, a silhouette against the afternoon light. She does not turn when the butler announces me.

"Ms. Sinclair. Thank you for coming." Her voice is cool.

"Ms. Blackstone."

I step into the room. She chose the power spot. Backlit. Elevated. Forcing me to look up. Liam warned me.

"Please, sit." She gestures to a chair directly facing the windows. I would squint. She would remain shadowed.

Not happening.

I walk to the side. I choose a chair that puts us on equal visual footing. "I prefer this spot."

She turns. I get my first clear look. Cold. Sharp. Perfect. And absolutely ruthless.

"Clever." Her lips curve. "I see why Liam finds you interesting."

There it is. She knows.

"I'm not sure what you mean." My voice is steady.

"Come now, Ms. Sinclair." A dismissive wave. "We're both intelligent women. No need for games."

She moves to the bar. Pours expensive scotch. "Can I offer you anything?"

"No, thank you."

"Are you sure? You look like you could use it."

I probably could. My hands are clammy. But I need my head clear.

"I'm fine."

"Of course you are." She settles into the chair across from me. Scotch in hand. Her gaze is sharp. "You've had quite a morning. Emergency partnership meetings. Unilateral decision-making. Approving mergers without proper due diligence."

She knows about the meeting. Morton. He reported immediately. The snake.

"I made the decision I felt was in my firm's best interests."

"Did you? Or did you make the decision Liam Cross convinced you was in your best interests?"

How much does she know?

"Mr. Cross made an offer. I evaluated it. I accepted it." My tone is clipped.

"After spending three days alone with him in a mountain cabin."

Shit. My stomach plummets.

"The weather trapped us both. An unfortunate coincidence." My heart hammers.

"Was it?" Victoria pulls out her phone. Swipes to a photo. "This was taken yesterday morning."

She shows me the screen. A picture. Liam and me. Through the cabin window. Clearly intimate. Clearly more than business adversaries. Surveillance. A cold dread coils in my stomach, tight and suffocating.

"I see you're beginning to understand." Victoria watches my face. "I've been monitoring both of you. Your phone calls. Your meetings. Your... personal interactions."

How long? How much? My mind races.

"What do you want?" My voice is a low growl.

"I want you to understand you're being played, Ms. Sinclair. Liam Cross isn't trying to save your company. He's trying to acquire it. For his own purposes."

That's not true. I know it isn't. The plans we made. The vulnerability in his eyes. "You're wrong."

"Am I?" She sips her scotch. "Tell me, what do you actually know about Cross Industries' acquisition history?"

More than you think. "I know enough."

"Do you know about the seventeen companies they've acquired? The job eliminations? The asset stripping? The dismantling of family businesses?"

The falsified documents Morton showed. She fed him that. The same script.

"Those documents were fabricated."

Victoria's eyebrows rise. "Fabricated? A serious accusation. Do you have proof?"

Only Liam's word. Only my trust. A trust that now feels like lead. "I have enough."

"Enough for what?" Her voice is silk over steel. "Enough to bet your family's legacy on a man you've known for two weeks?"

Two weeks. It feels like a lifetime.

"Mr. Cross has been honest with me about his intentions." Even as I say it, doubt, sharp as glass, pierces me.

"Has he?" Victoria leans forward. "Has he told you about his father?"

Yes. The pain in his voice was real. "What about his father?"

"About how Richard Cross's company was destroyed by a hostile takeover twelve years ago?"

She destroyed his company. She knows that. She's playing. "I know about that."

"Did he tell you who orchestrated that takeover?"

You did. The words scream in my head. "Yes."

"Did he tell you why?"

Why? What game is this?

"Because you're a corporate raider."

Victoria laughs. A genuine, amused sound that chills me. "Is that what he told you? That I'm some corporate villain?"

What is she talking about?

"That's what you are." My voice lacks conviction.

"Ms. Sinclair, I didn't destroy Cross Manufacturing." Her gaze is unwavering. "I tried to save it."

That cannot be true. Liam wouldn't lie about that. "You're lying."

"Richard Cross came to me, Ms. Sinclair." Her tone is patient. Condescending. "His company was failing. Declining revenues. Mounting debt. Obsolete equipment. He needed capital."

No. That's not what Liam said.

"I don't believe you."

"I offered him a partnership. Fifty-fifty ownership. Full operational control. Employment protection. Do you know what he did?"

I don't want to hear this. Dread tightens my chest.

"He rejected my offer." Victoria's voice is flat. "Went to a traditional bank. Took out massive loans. Factory as collateral. The automotive downturn hit. He couldn't make payments."

Stop.

"The bank foreclosed, Ms. Sinclair. Not me. The bank." Her eyes are cold. Triumphant. "I tried to buy the assets at auction. Preserve jobs. Outbid by a scrap metal company."

This isn't true. It cannot be.

"Liam's father lost everything because he was too proud to accept help from a woman." Victoria delivers the line with precision. "Now his son repeats history."

No. My head shakes. "You're lying."

"Am I?" She raises an eyebrow. "If Liam Cross truly wanted to save your company, why not offer partnership? Why the hostile takeover charade? Secrecy? Manipulation?"

Because... Blackstone was threatening us. He needed to get there first. That was the reason. Wasn't it?

"Because you were planning to destroy us."

"I was planning to acquire you, yes." Her smile is predatory. "Under terms identical to his father's. Partnership, not ownership. Preservation, not destruction."

She's lying. She must be.

"Then why did Morton say—"

"Morton said what I told him." Victoria cuts me off. "He presented falsified information about Cross Industries. I needed you to make an emotional decision. Not rational."

What? My breath catches.

"I needed you to choose love over logic." Her voice drops. "Trust Liam Cross despite all evidence."

Why? This makes no sense.

"Why?"

"Because emotional decisions are easy to overturn." Her eyes gleam. "Emergency powers under duress. Merger agreements without due diligence. Partnerships based on personal relationships."

Oh God. The implications slam me.

"Your merger with Cross Industries won't survive a legal challenge." Victoria leans back. Savoring her victory. "When it falls apart, when partners vote no confidence, clients lose faith, Sinclair & Associates will be vulnerable. To a real takeover."

The trap. This whole thing. An elaborate, cruel trap.

"You played us against each other." My voice is hollow.

"I gave you both what you wanted." Her tone is almost sympathetic. "He wanted revenge. You wanted a white knight. I let you find each other."

And now we've destroyed ourselves.

"The merger documents—"

"Challenged in court tomorrow." She waves a dismissive hand. "Three law firms. Injunctions. Procedural violations. Conflict of interest."

Conflict of interest. Our relationship. The photos.

"You have photos of us."

"Photos. Recordings. Financial records. Coordinated planning." Her smile is chilling. "Enough to prove this merger was personal. Not business."

We're finished. She has us.

"What do you want?" A surrender.

"Dissolve the merger. Voluntarily." Her voice is smooth. "Accept my original offer. Understand this is the only way to save your employees' jobs."

Her original offer. Too good to be true. Because it was.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then tomorrow, every reporter in New York gets a very interesting story." Her eyes narrow. "Corporate corruption. Personal relationships affecting fiduciary duty. Collapse of a respected law firm."

She'll destroy my reputation. My company. My legacy.

"I need time to think." My mind is a maelstrom.

"Fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes. My company or the man I love. Or thought I loved.

"What happens to Liam?"

"Mr. Cross will survive." A shrug. "Rich men always do. His reputation damaged. Business suffers. He'll live knowing his revenge quest destroyed the woman he claims to love."

Claims to love. Does she think he's lying about that too?

"He does love me." A desperate defense.

"Does he?" Victoria's voice is laced with pity. "Or does he love the idea of you? The symbol of his father's loss?"

Stop. My head spins.

"Thirteen minutes, Ms. Sinclair." Her voice is cold. Final. "Use them wisely."

Victoria stands. Walks back to the windows. Dismissing me.

Thirteen minutes. Love or legacy. Who do I trust? The manipulator? Or the liar? Or has he lied?

I pull out my phone. Hand trembling. I need to call Liam.

Before I can dial, a knock.

"Come in," Victoria calls.

The door opens. Liam walks in.

Liam. He came. My heart lurches. Hope and dread.

"Mr. Cross." Victoria doesn't turn. Amusement in her voice. "How good of you to join us."

"Ms. Blackstone." Liam's voice is tight.

He looks at me. His eyes. Love, fear, determination, and a raw vulnerability mirroring my own.

"Emma, are you all right?" His concern is a balm.

"I'm fine." I'm not. Confused. Scared. What is real?

"How touching." Victoria finally turns. Her smile is predatory. "The lovers reunited."

Liam's gaze hardens. "What do you want?"

"What I've always wanted. A reasonable business arrangement."

"Nothing reasonable about blackmail." Liam's voice is ice.

"Blackmail?" Victoria laughs, sharp, brittle. "Incentive alignment."

"Call it what you want." Liam steps further in, slightly in front of me. Protective. "The answer is no."

"Even when you hear what I tell Ms. Sinclair about your father?" Victoria's eyes gleam.

Liam goes very still. "What about my father?"

"How he really died. What really happened to Cross Manufacturing. The truth you've run from for twelve years."

The truth he's run from?

"I know what happened." Liam's voice is a low growl. "You destroyed his company."

"I tried to save his company." Victoria's tone is patient. "He destroyed it himself."

"That's a lie."

"Is it?" Victoria moves to her briefcase. Pulls out a file folder. "Original documents. Cross Manufacturing acquisition. Loan agreements. Foreclosure notices. Auction records. Public information, Mr. Cross. Verifiable."

She hands the folder to Liam. "Read them."

Liam takes it. His hand is steady. A muscle twitches in his jaw. "Whatever's in here, it doesn't change anything."

"Doesn't it?" Victoria's voice is silk. "Ms. Sinclair might be interested. Your revenge quest is based on a lie. You manipulated her. To get close to someone who never hurt your family."

Manipulating me. My breath catches. The room tilts.

"Liam," I say, voice barely a whisper. "Open the folder."

"Emma—" His eyes plead.

"Open it."

He looks at me. A long, agonizing moment. His gaze drops. He opens it. Starts reading.

I watch his face. Color drains. Features stark. Jaw rigid. A tremor I've never seen runs through his hand. His eyes, when he finally looks up, are hollow. A world shattered. He sways slightly.

Oh God. She's telling the truth.

"I don't understand," he says finally. A broken whisper.

"Your father came to me for help." Victoria's voice is relentless. "I offered partnership. Preservation. Family control. He refused. Couldn't stand a woman saving his company."

Pride. Liam's father. Lost everything. Pride.

"So he went to First National Bank." Victoria continues, emotionless. "Borrowed against assets. Gambled. The automotive industry changed. Contracts dried. Loans came due. He lost everything."

Not to Blackstone. His own choices.

"I tried to buy Cross Manufacturing. Foreclosure auction." Victoria's voice is almost gentle. "Reopen it. Rehire workers. Honor his legacy. Outbid by Stratton Salvage. A scrap metal company."

She tried to save it. Bitter irony.

"Your father didn't die because I destroyed his company." Victoria's words are hammer blows. "He died because he destroyed it himself. Couldn't live with his choices."

Liam stares at the documents. Face white. Devoid of expression.

Everything he believed. Twelve years. His empire. His revenge. Everything that brought him to me. A lie. A tragic misunderstanding.

"So you see, Ms. Sinclair," Victoria continues, turning to me. Voice smooth. Persuasive. "Your knight isn't saving you. He's using you. Healing wounds never my responsibility."

Using me. The words. A fist, stealing my breath.

"Is that true?" I ask Liam. Small. Afraid.

He looks up. His eyes. Pain so profound it takes my breath away. He doesn't know what's true. I see it. Confusion. Devastation.

"I don't know," he says quietly.

I don't know.

The man I love. Trusted with everything. Doesn't know if he used me. Or saved me.

"Well." Victoria's voice is laced with triumph. "This is awkward."

Awkward. Catastrophic.

"Ten minutes left, Ms. Sinclair." Crisp. Businesslike. "Make a decision based on facts. Not feelings."

Facts. Not feelings.

Liam built his life avenging a wrong never done. He found me seeking Victoria, not saving me. I don't know if anything he told me is true.

But I look at him. Really look. I see something Victoria cannot.

The man who held me when scared. Planned terms to protect my employees. Would rather lose everything than betray me.

I see love.

Real love. Whatever brought him. Whatever he believed. What's between us now. This fragile, powerful thing. It's real.

"You're right," I tell Victoria. Voice stronger now. Clearer. "This should be about facts. Not feelings."

"Exactly." Her smile is confident.

"The fact is you manipulated both of us." I meet her gaze. Unflinching. "The fact is you used Morton to spy. The fact is you played elaborate games. Instead of an honest offer."

Victoria's smile falters. Slightly. "Ms. Sinclair—"

"The fact is Liam Cross has been honest with me." My voice gains strength. "About his feelings. His plans. His intentions. You've been honest about nothing."

I stand. Decision made. Solid. Unshakeable.

"The fact is," I say, voice ringing with conviction, "I trust him more than I trust you."

"Even knowing his motivation is based on a lie?" Sharp disbelief.

Even knowing. Love isn't motivation. It's choice. What we build from wreckage. "Especially knowing that."

I turn to Liam. His eyes. Still pained. Confused. But a flicker of hope. "Whatever brought you to me," I say, soft but firm. "Whatever you believed about your father. What matters is what you choose now. What do you choose?"

He looks at me. Then Victoria. Back at me. His gaze clears. Pain remains. But something else shines. Resolve. Certainty.

Choose me. Choose us. Love over revenge. Truth over lies. Partnership over manipulation. Please.

"I choose you," he says. His voice is quiet. It fills the room. Fills my heart. "I choose us."

I choose you.

That's all I needed to hear. All that matters.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Liam

"I choose you," I say, looking into Emma's green eyes. "I choose us."

The words crack something open in my chest. Twelve years of rage, of planning, of building my empire on the foundation of my father's ghost—all of it crumbles in the face of this simple truth.

I choose her.

Victoria's laugh is sharp as broken glass. "How romantic. And how foolish."

But Emma stands, and I watch her transform. The uncertainty that clouded her face when she walked into this gilded trap vanishes. Her shoulders square. Her chin lifts. The woman who's kept her family's firm alive against impossible odds steps forward.

"Is it?" Emma's voice cuts through the afternoon light streaming through the presidential suite's windows. "Because I think you're the one who's been foolish."

Victoria's perfectly manicured fingers tighten around her scotch glass. "Excuse me?"

"You spent months manipulating us. Playing elaborate games. Setting traps." Emma moves closer to me, a deliberate choice that makes my pulse quicken. "All to acquire a company you could have bought six months ago with a straightforward offer."

The accusation hangs in the air. Victoria's control is absolute, but I catch the flicker—a micro-expression of annoyance that she masks quickly.

"I made you a straightforward offer through Morton."

"You made me a lie through a traitor." Emma's voice is ice. "There's a difference."

I step closer to her, drawn by her strength. This is the woman who outmaneuvered lawyers twice her age. Who kept her grandfather's legacy alive when everyone said she'd fail. This is who I fell in love with.

Not the symbol of what my father lost. Not a way to heal old wounds. Her.

"Victoria," I say, my voice steady for the first time since I walked into this room. "This is over."

"Over?" Victoria sets down her glass with deliberate precision. "Mr. Cross, you seem to be forgetting that I have photographs. Recordings. Evidence of your coordinated deception."

She pulls out her phone, swipes to a photo. The cabin. Emma and me through the window, clearly intimate. My stomach clenches, but Emma doesn't flinch.

"I can destroy both your reputations with a single phone call."

Emma looks at the photo. At Victoria. At me. When she speaks, her voice is calm.

"Go ahead."

Victoria blinks. "I'm sorry?"

"Go ahead. Release your photographs. Tell your story about personal relationships affecting business judgment."

My breath catches. Emma's calling her bluff. But this isn't poker—Victoria has the cards to destroy us both.

"You think I won't?"

"I think you will." Emma's hand finds mine, her fingers warm and steady. "And I think it won't matter."

Victoria's smile is predatory. "You're willing to destroy your career for him?"

"I'm willing to risk my career for what's right."

The words hit me like a physical blow. She's not just choosing me, she's choosing principle over safety. Truth over reputation.

Victoria moves to the bar, refills her glass. The sound of liquid hitting crystal is loud in the sudden quiet.

"The truth?" She turns back to us, scotch in hand. "The truth is that you've violated every principle of sound business management. Emergency powers under duress. Merger agreements without due diligence. Partnerships based on personal relationships."

"The truth is that I've saved my company."

"By handing it over to a man whose entire motivation is based on a lie?"

Emma's grip on my hand tightens. "By partnering with a man who's been honest about everything that matters."

Honest about loving her. Honest about wanting to protect her. Honest about choosing partnership over revenge.

"Everything that matters?" Victoria's voice drips condescension. "Ms. Sinclair, he built his entire business empire on a false premise."

"So what?" Emma's voice sharpens, fierce. "So what if his motivation was wrong? His actions were right."

She gets it. She understands that intention matters more than origin. That who I am now matters more than who I was.

Victoria moves to her briefcase with the deliberate calm of someone playing their final card. The leather is expensive, the brass fittings gleaming. Everything about her screams wealth and power.

"Since you seem determined to ignore reason, let me make this very simple."

She pulls out a legal document, thick with official seals and letterhead.

"This is an injunction prepared by my legal team. It challenges your merger on grounds of procedural violations, conflict of interest, and breach of fiduciary duty."

The nuclear option. Legal warfare that could drag on for months, bleeding us dry.

"It will be filed first thing tomorrow morning, unless you voluntarily dissolve your agreement with Cross Industries."

Same old Victoria. When manipulation fails, move to threats.

"File it," Emma says.

What?

"Emma," I say quietly, my voice tight with concern. "You don't have to—"

"No, I want her to file it. I want this to go to court."

She wants to fight this in court? Against Victoria's army of lawyers? The woman has resources that dwarf most small countries.

"You want to fight this in court? Against my legal team?" Victoria's eyebrows rise, genuine surprise flickering across her features.

"I want to fight this in court because we'll win."

The confidence in Emma's voice is absolute. She knows something. My chest tightens with anticipation.

"You're very confident for someone whose entire defense is based on romantic feelings."

"My defense is based on facts."

Emma pulls out her phone. Her thumb moves across the screen with practiced efficiency. I watch Victoria's face, see the first crack in her composure.

"Mac? It's Emma. I need you to send our legal team something."

Victoria goes very still. The scotch glass freezes halfway to her lips.

"What, honey?" Mac's voice comes through the speaker, warm and familiar.

"The Morton recordings."

Recordings? What recordings?

Victoria's face goes white. The scotch glass trembles in her hand. "What recordings?"

"The recordings of every conversation Morton had with your people over the last six months. Audio, video, financial transfers. All of it."

Holy shit. Emma's been recording everything.

"That's impossible." Victoria's voice is barely a whisper.

"Is it? Did you really think Morton was the only one capable of corporate espionage?"

"When did you—" I start to ask.

"Three months ago. When I started noticing information leaks, patterns that didn't make sense. I had our IT department install monitoring software."

Three months ago. She's been protecting her firm, gathering intelligence, preparing for this exact moment.

She's been three steps ahead of all of us.

"Everything he sent you, every instruction he received, every payment you made to him. We have all of it."

Victoria sets down her glass. Her hand shakes slightly. "You're lying."

"Am I? Mac, are you there?"

"Still here, boss."

"Send Ms. Blackstone a sample. The recording from last Tuesday where Morton discusses falsifying the Cross Industries employment records."

The falsified documents. She has proof of the entire conspiracy.

"Sending now," Mac says.

Victoria's phone buzzes. She checks it, and I watch her realize that Emma has just flipped the entire script. The hunter has become the hunted.

"Corporate espionage, bribery, conspiracy to defraud," Emma lists off with lawyer precision. "Those are federal crimes, Victoria."

"You can't prove—"

"I can prove all of it. Morton kept detailed records of every transaction, probably as insurance against exactly this situation."

Always the careful lawyer, even when committing crimes.

"So here's my counter-offer," Emma continues, and her voice has gone ice-cold. "You withdraw your legal challenges, you stay away from my company and my employees, and I don't turn this evidence over to the FBI."

Checkmate.

Victoria stares at Emma for a long moment. The silence stretches, thick with tension. Then she starts laughing.

"You brilliant, brilliant woman."

What?

"I'm sorry?" Emma says, wariness creeping into her voice.

"You've been playing me from the beginning, haven't you?"

Has she? Has Emma been that strategic?

"I don't know what you mean."

"The emergency powers, the rushed merger, even this meeting. You've been setting me up to overplay my hand."

Maybe she has. Maybe Emma's been more strategic than any of us realized.

"You wanted me to threaten you publicly so you could use the Morton evidence to destroy my credibility."

"Smart businesswoman, remember?" Emma says with a slight smile.

God, I love her.

Victoria finishes her scotch and picks up her briefcase. But she doesn't move toward the door. Instead, she studies Emma with something that might be respect.

"You know, I almost admire you."

"Almost?"

"You could have destroyed me months ago with that evidence. Instead, you waited. Let me dig my own grave."

Emma's smile is sharp. "I wanted to see how deep you'd go."

"And now you know."

"Now I know."

Victoria heads for the door, then stops. Her hand rests on the ornate handle.

"Mr. Cross?"

"What?"

"Your father would be proud of you. Not for the revenge, that was never necessary. But for choosing love over hatred. For building something instead of destroying it."

Building something instead of destroying it. That's what I've been doing all along, isn't it? Not just acquiring companies, but saving them. Not just seeking revenge, but seeking justice.

"That's it?" Emma asks. "You're just walking away?"

"Ms. Sinclair, I'm a businesswoman, not a fanatic. When a deal stops being profitable, I move on to the next opportunity."

And we're no longer profitable. We're too strong, too prepared, too united.

"Besides," Victoria adds, her hand on the door, "watching you two try to manage a merger based on romantic feelings should be entertainment enough."

One last dig.

"We'll manage just fine," Emma says.

"I'm sure you will. You're both stronger than I gave you credit for."

A compliment from Victoria Blackstone. I never thought I'd see the day.

She opens the door, then pauses.

"Oh, and Ms. Sinclair? Next time you want to monitor employee communications, make sure your IT department uses better encryption. I've been reading those Morton recordings for weeks."

She knew. She knew Emma had the evidence.

"Then why—" Emma starts.

"Because I wanted to see what you'd do with it. Whether you'd use it defensively or offensively. Whether you'd try to destroy me or just protect yourself."

It was another test.

"And?"

"And you chose protection over destruction. Interesting choice for someone supposedly motivated by revenge."

Victoria looks at me. "Perhaps you learned something from her after all."

I learned everything from her.

With that, she's gone.

The door closes behind her with a soft click. We're alone in the presidential suite. The afternoon sun streams through the windows, and the silence feels like victory.

We won.

"Is it really over?" I ask.

Emma sinks into the chair Victoria vacated, her professional mask finally slipping. I see the exhaustion underneath, the weight of months of preparation and fear.

"I think so."

I walk over and sit on the desk edge.



Emma

"Is it really over?" I sink into the chair Victoria vacated, my professional mask finally slipping. I can feel the exhaustion weighing me down, the aftermath of months of relentless preparation and fear. My green eyes, usually sparkling with determination, now reflect the toll this ordeal has taken.

"I think so," Liam replies, his deep voice cutting through the tension in the room. I watch as he walks over, his tall, broad-shouldered frame moving with a confidence that's both reassuring and intimidating. He sits on the edge of the glass desk, his presence dominating the space. The office, with its sleek stainless-steel furniture and the faint scent of his cologne lingering in the air, feels more intimate than it should.

I take a deep breath, my auburn hair falling loosely around my shoulders as I lean back in the chair. "It's been a long few months," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. The weight of the words feels heavier than I expected, and for a moment, I'm lost in the relief that it might finally be over.

Liam's piercing blue-gray eyes meet mine, and I see a flicker of something in them—understanding, maybe, or something deeper. He doesn't say anything at first, just reaches out, his fingers brushing against my thigh. The touch is light, almost tentative, but it sends a jolt through me. I've always been drawn to his ruggedness, his no-nonsense demeanor, and the way he seems to see right through me.

Before I can process the sensation, his hand slides further, slipping under the hem of my pencil skirt. My breath catches as his fingers trace the edge of my lace panties, teasing the fabric before delving into my wetness. I gasp softly, my head falling back against the chair, eyes closing as his touch becomes more insistent.

"Liam," I whisper, my voice trembling. His name feels like a plea, a surrender to the moment.

He doesn't respond with words, just continues his relentless exploration. His fingers move with purpose, first teasing my clit, then slipping inside my cunt. I'm already so wet, and his touch feels electric, sending shivers down my spine. I bite my lip to stifle a moan, but it's no use. The sound escapes, soft and needy, filling the quiet office.

Then, without warning, he shifts, his fingers leaving my pussy to trace the curve of my ass. My breath hitches as he presses a finger against my tight asshole, circling it slowly before pushing inside. The sensation is overwhelming—a mix of pleasure and tension that makes me arch my back, pressing my chest forward. My tailored blouse feels too restrictive now, the buttons straining against my breasts.

"Fuck, Liam," I groan, my hands gripping the arms of the chair. His touch is relentless, his fingers moving in and out of my ass, stretching me in a way that's both uncomfortable and exquisitely pleasurable. I'm trembling now, my body on the edge, teetering between control and surrender.

When he finally pulls away, I'm left gasping, my breath ragged and uneven. My skirt is bunched around my waist, my panties discarded on the floor. I feel exposed, vulnerable, but also incredibly alive.

"Your turn," I murmur, my voice hoarse. I push myself up from the chair, my legs unsteady as I kneel in front of him. The desk presses against my thighs, but I barely notice. All I can focus on is him—his rugged face, his messy dark hair, and the way his eyes darken with desire as I reach for his belt.

I unbuckle it slowly, savoring the moment as I unzip his pants. His cock springs free, thick and hard, the head glistening with pre-cum. I lick my lips, my mouth watering

at the sight of him. I've always loved this part—the anticipation, the power I feel when I take him into my mouth.



Liam

I don't respond, simply watch as she unzips my pants, her fingers trembling slightly as she frees my cock. She takes me in her mouth, her lips wrapping around my shaft with a tightness that sends a jolt of pleasure through my body. Her tongue swirls around the tip, teasing and tormenting me as she begins to suck.

The sensation is electric, her mouth warm and wet as she takes me deeper. I groan, my hands tangling in her hair as I guide her movements. She moans around my cock, the vibrations sending shivers down my spine. I can feel her desire, her need, as she sucks me harder, her lips moving up and down my shaft with a rhythm that's both urgent and deliberate.

Emma's eyes remain locked on mine, her gaze intense and hungry as she pleasures me. I can see the desire burning within her, the need to be filled, to be claimed. I know this is only the beginning, a prelude to what's to come.

As she continues to suck me, her mouth working its magic, I feel my control slipping. My hands tighten in her hair, my fingers threading through the strands as I guide her movements. "Emma," I warn, my voice hoarse with need. "Slow down, or I won't last."

She ignores my plea, her mouth moving faster, her tongue swirling and teasing as she takes me deeper. I can feel the pressure building, the tension coiling tighter and tighter within me. I know I'm close, teetering on the edge of release.

With a growl, I pull her away, my cock slipping from her mouth with a wet pop. Emma looks up at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief and desire. "Not yet," I say, my voice firm. "I'm not done with you."



Emma

Pulling back slightly, I look up at him, my lips wet and swollen from his cock. "Not yet," he says, his voice a promise.

I stand up, my skirt falling back into place, though it does little to cover my arousal. I'm dripping wet, my clit throbbing, my ass still tingling from his touch. I step closer, pressing my body against his, my breasts against his chest, my lips brushing his ear.

"I want you inside me," I whisper, my breath hot against his skin. "Now."

His hands grip my hips, pulling me tighter against him. I can feel his cock pressing against my thigh, hard and insistent. The office, with its sterile atmosphere and professional veneer, feels like a distant memory now. All that matters is this moment, this connection, this raw, unfiltered desire.

But as I turn to face him, my eyes meeting his, I pause. The intensity of the moment is overwhelming, the air thick with anticipation. I can see the desire in his eyes, the hunger, the need. But there's something else too—a vulnerability, a rawness that I've rarely seen in him.

"What are you thinking?" I ask, my voice soft.

He hesitates, his gaze dropping to my lips before meeting my eyes again. "That I don't want this to end," he says, his voice rough. "Not ever."

His words send a jolt through me, a mix of surprise and something deeper. I've always known there was more to Liam than his gruff exterior, but hearing him say it, hearing him admit to something beyond the physical, catches me off guard.

I reach up, my fingers brushing his cheek, tracing the line of his jaw. "It doesn't have to," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper.

His hand covers mine, holding it against his face. For a moment, we just stand there, lost in each other's gaze, the tension between us electric. The office, the meeting, Victoria—it all fades into the background. There's only him and me, suspended in this moment, on the brink of something more.

But the desire is too strong, the need too urgent. I step back, my hands gripping his shoulders as I push him down into the chair. He goes willingly, his eyes never leaving mine as I straddle his lap, positioning myself above him.

I reach down, guiding his cock to my entrance. The tip presses against my wetness, and I pause, savoring the anticipation. Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, I lower myself onto him, taking him inch by inch. He fills me completely, his thickness stretching me, his length pressing against my deepest spots.

"Fuck," he groans, his hands gripping my hips as I settle fully onto him. I'm so wet, so tight around him, and the sensation is overwhelming. I close my eyes, tilting my head back as I begin to move, my hips rocking in a slow, sensual rhythm.

The chair creaks beneath us, the glass desk pressing against my back as I ride him, my breasts bouncing with each movement. I'm lost in the sensation, the way he feels inside me, the way his hands grip my hips, guiding my movements.

"Harder," he demands, his voice rough. "Ride me, Emma."

I obey, picking up the pace, my hips moving faster, my body slamming down onto him with each thrust. The sound of skin on skin, the wetness of our bodies, the scent of sex filling the air—it's all intoxicating. I'm on the edge, teetering closer to my climax with each movement.

But I want more. I want everything.

Reaching back, I press a finger against my asshole, circling it before pushing inside. The sensation is intense, the stretch and fullness sending me over the edge. "Liam," I cry out, my body trembling as my orgasm washes over me. I'm tight around him, my walls clenching as I cum, my breath coming in short, ragged gasps.

He doesn't give me time to recover, his hands gripping my hips as he sits up, pressing me against the desk. His thrusts become more urgent, more demanding, his cock pounding into me with a rhythm that's both relentless and primal.

I go over the edge again, my body shaking as another orgasm ripples through me. I'm a mess, my hair falling into my face, my makeup smudged, my clothes disheveled. But I don't care. All I care about is him, the way he feels, the way he makes me feel.

He cums with a loud groan, his body tensing as he fills me, his cum shooting deep inside me. I can feel it, hot and thick, and the sensation sends another wave of pleasure through me.

For a moment, we just stay like that, our bodies pressed together, our breaths ragged and uneven. The office is a mess, the desk cluttered, the chairs overturned. But none of that matters. All that matters is this moment, this connection, this raw, unfiltered intimacy.

Slowly, I push myself up, my body sliding off his cock with a wet sucking sound. I'm trembling, my legs unsteady

as I step back, my skirt falling into place. Liam leans back in the chair, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling with his heavy breaths.

I watch him for a moment, taking in the sight of him—his rugged features, his messy hair, the way his body looks sated and satisfied. Then, with a soft smile, I reach for my blouse, buttoning it back up.

"We should probably clean up," I say, my voice soft. "Before someone walks in."

He opens his eyes, a smirk playing on his lips as he looks at me. "Or," he says, his voice low and husky, "we could just stay like this. See who walks in first."

I laugh, a soft, breathless sound, as I step closer, pressing a kiss to his lips. "Tempting," I murmur, "but I think we've caused enough chaos for one day."

He chuckles, his hands reaching up to grip my hips, pulling me closer. "You're probably right," he admits, his voice reluctant. "But just so you know, I'm not done with you yet."

I smile, my fingers tracing the line of his jaw. "I'm counting on it," I reply, my voice a promise.

As we straighten up, the office slowly returning to its professional state, I can't shake the feeling that something has shifted between us. It's not just the sex, though that's been incredible. It's the vulnerability, the connection, the way we've both let our guards down.



Liam

"Emma, about what she said. About my father, about my motivations—"

"Liam."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't?"

"Whatever brought you to me, whatever you believed or didn't believe, what matters is what we choose from here."

What we choose. What we build together.

"And what do we choose?"

She stands, moves to the window. The city sprawls below, indifferent to our small drama. But for us, everything has changed.

"We choose us. We choose the merger. We choose to build something together."

Together.

"Even knowing that I might have been using you without realizing it?"

Even knowing that I built my entire adult life around a lie?

"Especially knowing that. Because you're not using me now."

Now I'm choosing her. That's what counts.

I pull her closer, wrapping my arms around her, feeling like I'm finally home. She smells like her floral shampoo and the faint scent of the coffee we shared this morning in what feels like another lifetime.

This is where I belong. Not seeking revenge for wrongs that were never done to me, but building a future with the woman I love.

"I love you," I say. "Not because of what you represent, not because of what you can give me. I love you because you're you."

Because you're brilliant and fierce and loyal and everything I never knew I needed.

"I love you too."

For who I am now, not who I was or why I came to you.

"So what happens now?"

Now we go back to the real world. Now we make this merger work. Now we build something neither of us could have created alone.

"Now we go save our company."



The press conference two hours later is a controlled chaos of flashing cameras and shouted questions. Standing beside Emma at the podium in the Cross Industries conference room, watching her field questions with the same precision she brought to defeating Victoria, I feel something I haven't felt in years.

Peace.

"This partnership combines Sinclair & Associates' four generations of legal expertise with Cross Industries' business development capabilities," Emma explains to the reporters.

Partnership. Not acquisition, not takeover. Partnership.

"Mr. Cross will serve as Chairman of the Board while I continue as CEO and Managing Partner."

Equal partners. In business and in life.

A reporter in the front row raises her hand. "Ms. Sinclair, there are rumors about your personal relationship with Mr. Cross. How do you respond to allegations that this merger is based on romantic rather than business considerations?"

Emma's smile is professional, but I catch the warmth in her eyes when she glances at me.

"Mr. Cross and I have developed a strong working relationship based on mutual respect and shared vision for the future of both our companies. Any personal friendship that has developed is secondary to our professional partnership."

Friendship. I bite back a smile.

"Mr. Cross," another reporter calls out, "what attracted you to Sinclair & Associates specifically?"

I lean toward the microphone. "Their reputation for integrity, their commitment to their clients and employees, and their track record of excellence over four generations. Ms. Sinclair has built something remarkable, and I'm honored to be part of its future."

When the questions turn to financial details and regulatory approvals, we handle them with the same professional grace we've brought to everything else. But underneath the corporate speak, there's something else. A current of understanding, of shared purpose.

After the reporters leave and the cameras are turned off, it's just the two of us in my office. Our office now.

Emma collapses into one of the leather chairs facing my desk, finally allowing herself to show the exhaustion of the day.

"So," I say, loosening my tie. "How does it feel to outmaneuver Victoria Blackstone herself?"

"Terrifying. Exhilarating. Like I might throw up." She laughs, running her hands through her hair. "How does it feel to realize your entire adult life was based on a misunderstanding?"

I consider the question. The man who walked into that hotel suite this afternoon was driven by rage and revenge. The man sitting here now is driven by love and hope.

"Like the beginning of something."

"Something good?"

I move around the desk, pull her to her feet, finally allowing myself to believe that this is real. That we made it through the fire and came out stronger.

The company is saved. The merger is complete. The woman I love is in my arms.

"Emma Rose Sinclair," I say, using her full name because I love the sound of it. "CEO, Managing Partner, and the woman who just saved both our asses."

"Liam Cross," she replies, her hands finding the lapels of my jacket. "Chairman of the Board, former revenge seeker, and the man who chose love over hatred."

"I love you, Emma Sinclair."

"I love you too, Liam Cross."

And that's not everything—it's the beginning of everything.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Emma

I'm standing at the kitchen counter in our apartment, reviewing the quarterly reports one more time before we leave for the cabin, when I realize I'm humming.

Actually humming. The melody drifts out without conscious thought, some half-remembered tune that feels like contentment made audible.

"You're humming."

Liam's voice carries amusement as he appears in the doorway, already dressed for our weekend trip. Dark jeans that fit him perfectly, a navy sweater that brings out his eyes. Six months of waking up next to this man, and he still makes my breath catch.

"I don't hum." I set down the reports and reach for my coffee mug.

"You absolutely hum. You've been doing it all morning."

Have I? I suppose I have. The numbers on these pages tell a story I'm still learning to believe. Sinclair & Associates—our firm now—posted the strongest quarter in its ninety-year history. Revenue up thirty-two percent. Client retention at ninety-seven percent. Three major corporate clients signed in the past month alone.

"I'm happy," I admit, closing the folder.

"About the quarterly numbers?"

"About everything."

About waking up in your arms. About building something together that neither of us could have created alone. About the life we've made from the wreckage of our original plans.

Liam moves closer, his hand finding the small of my back in that casual, possessive way that still sends warmth through me. "The numbers are good?"

"Better than good. We've had twelve firms approach us about partnerships this quarter. Partnerships, not acquisitions. They want to work with us, not be absorbed by us."

The distinction matters. It means we've built something worth emulating instead of something that devours.

"Because of what we've created together," he says, and I hear the pride in his voice. Not just in the business success, but in us. In what we've proven possible.

I lean into his touch, still amazed by how natural this feels. Six months ago, I was terrified of letting anyone too close, convinced that partnership meant losing control. Now I can't imagine making decisions without his input, his perspective, his steady presence beside me.

"The Hendricks account signed yesterday," I tell him. "Full representation for their expansion into international markets. Mac says it's the biggest single contract we've ever landed."

"Mac's probably already planning the victory party."

"Mac's planning our vacation coverage. He's convinced we need a full week off after this weekend."

"Smart man."

Liam's thumb traces small circles against my spine, and I feel that familiar tingle of awareness. Six months, and he still affects me like this. Still makes me want to forget about quarterly reports and weekend plans and lose myself in him instead.

"Are you packed?" he asks.

I glance at my overnight bag by the door. "Have been for an hour. Are you going to tell me why you're being mysterious about this trip?"

His smile turns secretive. "Not mysterious. Just... prepared."

Prepared for what? But before I can press him, his phone buzzes with a text from his driver.

"Car's here," he says, pressing a quick kiss to my temple. "Ready to go back where it all started?"

Where it all started. The cabin where we fell in love while pretending to be enemies. Where we planned the merger that saved my firm and transformed his business philosophy. Where we learned that building something together was infinitely more satisfying than tearing things apart alone.

"More than ready."

The drive up to the mountains passes in comfortable conversation about work, about the upcoming partners meeting next week, about the wedding invitation we received from Sarah Johns and her fiancé. Normal couple things that still feel miraculous to me.

"Elena thinks we should expand the employment law division," I tell him as we wind through the foothills. "Hire two more associates, maybe a junior partner."

"What do you think?"

"I think she's right. The demand is there, and we have the resources now." Thanks to you. Thanks to the capital and connections you brought to the firm. "But I want to be careful about growth. I don't want to lose what makes us special."

"You won't." His confidence is absolute. "You know what makes Sinclair & Associates special? It's not the size or the client list. It's the culture. The way people care about each other, about the work. That doesn't change with a few new hires."

This is why we work. He sees the big picture where I see the details. He thinks in terms of systems and growth while I focus on people and relationships. Together, we make better decisions than either of us would make alone.

"Morton's been asking about the expansion plans," I mention, watching Liam's reaction.

His jaw tightens slightly. Morton, our former spy, now genuinely reformed and working to rebuild trust. It's been an ongoing process, integrating him back into the team after his betrayal.

"How do you feel about including him in the planning?"

"Cautiously optimistic. He's been solid for six months. No more mysterious phone calls, no more fishing for information he shouldn't have. Mac's been monitoring his communications, and everything looks clean."

"You're giving him a second chance."

"I'm giving him the opportunity to earn one. There's a difference."

Liam nods, understanding the distinction. Trust, once broken, has to be rebuilt from the ground up. But people can change, can choose to be better. We're living proof of that.

The cabin comes into view as we round the final curve, and my chest tightens with recognition. It looks exactly the same—weathered wood siding, stone chimney, the ridiculous wind chime my grandmother hung that somehow survived another winter. But everything feels different.

Six months ago, I arrived here desperate and afraid, running from a crisis I didn't fully understand. Now I'm choosing to be here, with the man I love, in the place where we discovered what we could be together.

"Strange being back," Liam says as he parks next to the cabin.

"Good strange or bad strange?"

"The best kind of strange. Like coming full circle."

He carries our bags while I unlock the door, and stepping inside is a rush of sensory memory. The smell of pine and old wood, the way afternoon light slants through the windows, the comfortable shabbiness of furniture that's seen four generations of my family.

But now it feels like our place too. Not just mine.

"I'll get the fire started," Liam says, setting our bags down.

"I'll make coffee."

We move around each other with practiced ease, a domestic choreography we've perfected over months of shared mornings and quiet evenings. He builds the fire with the same methodical precision he brings to everything, while I measure coffee and fill the machine, humming again without realizing it.

When the fire is crackling and the coffee is brewing, we settle onto the couch together. The same couch where we first admitted our feelings, where we planned our strategy against Victoria Blackstone, where we learned that partnership could be more powerful than either of us imagined.

"Do you ever think about how different things might have been?" I ask, curled against his side. "If the storm hadn't hit? If we'd never been trapped here together?"

"Every day." His arm tightens around me. "And every day I'm grateful for that storm."

"Even though it was based on a lie? The whole rental mix-up was Victoria's manipulation."

"Especially because of that. She thought she was setting us up to destroy each other. Instead, she gave us exactly what we needed."

What we needed. Each other. A chance to see past the corporate masks to the people underneath.

"I have something for you," Liam says suddenly, shifting beside me.

"It's not my birthday."

"It's not that kind of present."

He's reaching into his jacket pocket, and my heart starts a slow, heavy rhythm as he pulls out a small velvet box.

Oh.

Oh God.

"Liam." My voice is barely a whisper.

"Emma Rose Sinclair." He uses my full name, the way he does when he's being completely serious. "Six months ago, I came to this cabin planning to destroy the woman who I thought had ruined my father."

His father. The pain that drove him for twelve years, based on a misunderstanding that nearly cost us everything.

"Instead, I found you." He slides off the couch and onto one knee, and I can't breathe. "I found a woman who fights for everyone she loves. Who risks everything to protect what matters. Who chose to trust me when she had every reason to run."

My hands are shaking. Actually shaking.

"I found my partner, my equal, my match in every way that counts." He opens the box, revealing a ring that's absolutely perfect. Classic, elegant, timeless. Everything I would have chosen for myself. "Emma, you saved my company, my reputation, and my soul."

Tears blur my vision, happy tears that I can't seem to control.

"You taught me that building something is infinitely better than destroying it. That love is stronger than revenge. That the best way to honor my father's memory isn't to seek vengeance, but to create something he would be proud of."

Yes. Yes, exactly.

"You're everything I never knew I was looking for, and everything I never want to live without." His voice is

steady, but I can see the emotion in his eyes. "Will you marry me?"

The words stick in my throat because I'm crying and laughing and my heart is beating so fast I'm dizzy with it.

Say something. Say yes. Say anything.

"Emma?" His voice holds the tiniest edge of uncertainty, and that breaks me out of my shocked silence.

"Yes." The word comes out as a whisper, then stronger. "Yes, yes, of course yes."

How could it be anything else? How could the answer ever be anything but yes?

He slips the ring onto my finger, and it fits perfectly, like it was made specifically for me. Like everything about this moment was always meant to happen exactly this way.

"I love you," I whisper, and he's kissing me before I can say anything else.

Soft and sweet and full of promise. The kiss of two people who've found their way home to each other despite impossible odds.

When we break apart, I hold up my hand to admire the ring. It catches the firelight, throwing tiny rainbows across the cabin walls.

"When did you know?" I ask. "That you wanted to marry me?"

"Honestly? I think I knew that first night. When you fell asleep in my arms and I realized I never wanted to let you go." He settles back onto the couch, pulling me close. "But consciously? The morning after we defeated Victoria. Watching you handle that press conference like you'd been doing it your whole life."

The press conference. I remember that morning, the chaos of reporters and cameras, the way we presented a united front to the world.

"You were fielding questions about corporate governance and merger ethics, and I looked at you and thought

'I want to do this with her for the rest of my life.'" His fingers trace patterns on my arm. "Not just the business. Everything."

Everything. The daily decisions and long-term planning and quiet moments like this one.

"What about you? When did you know?"

"The same morning, actually. But for a different reason." I twist the ring on my finger, still getting used to the weight of it. "You were talking to the reporters about how we'd built something neither of us could have created alone. And I realized that's what love is."

He's listening with that complete attention he gives to things that matter to him.

"Not losing yourself in someone else, but becoming more yourself because of them." I meet his eyes. "That's what you did for me. Made me more myself."

"How?"

"You made me braver. More willing to take risks. More trusting." More willing to love. "Before you, I was so focused on control, on protecting what I had, that I forgot about growing it."

"And now?"

"Now I know that the best protection is partnership. That two people working together can weather storms that would destroy either one alone."

He kisses my forehead, a gentle benediction. "We're good together."

"We're perfect together."

In business and in bed and in every way that matters.

"So what's our next challenge?" I ask. "Planning a wedding in record time?"

"How quickly are we talking?"

"How does next month sound?"

Next month? My practical brain immediately starts calculating logistics. Venue, catering, flowers, dress, guests, music...

"That's ambitious."

"We've wasted enough time pretending we weren't perfect for each other." His voice is firm. "I don't want to waste any more."

Neither do I. We've already proven we can pull off the impossible when we work together.

"Next month it is." I'm already making mental lists. "We should call Mac. And my grandfather. And Jennifer."

"Later." He pulls me closer. "Right now, I just want to sit here with my fiancée and remember how this all started."

Fiancée. I'm his fiancée.

"How did it start?"

"With you being the most stubborn, beautiful, impossible woman I'd ever met."

"And you being the most arrogant, mysterious, protective man I'd ever encountered."

"Protective?"

"Dangerous to my peace of mind. To my independence. To my carefully controlled life." To my heart.

"And now?"

"Now you are my peace. My partner. My perfectly uncontrolled life."

My choice. My forever.

The fire crackles in the hearth, and outside I can hear the wind in the pine trees. But there's no storm this time. No crisis forcing us together. Just choice. Just love. Just us.

"We should probably head back tomorrow," I say eventually. "I want to tell my grandfather in person."

"Good idea. And we need to start making lists."

I laugh, because he knows me so well. "You're right. I do love lists."

"Wedding planning is going to involve a lot of lists."

Vendors and venues and flowers and food and music and a thousand other details that will somehow come together to create one perfect day.

"Then I'm going to love planning our wedding."

Our wedding. The beginning of our official life together.

Mr. and Mrs. Cross. Emma Cross. Emma Sinclair-Cross.

I have time to figure out the name.

"Liam?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For saving my company. For keeping your promises. For choosing me over revenge." For loving me enough to propose.

"Thank you for letting me." His voice is soft. "For seeing something worth saving in a man whose entire life was built on a misunderstanding."

"Your life wasn't built on a lie. Your motivation was wrong, but your heart was right." I trace circles on his chest. "You've always been someone who builds instead of destroys. You just needed to realize it."

And I helped you realize it, the same way you helped me realize that partnership doesn't mean losing control.

"I love you, Emma Sinclair."

"I love you too, Liam Cross."

Soon to be Emma Cross. Soon to be Liam's wife.

The words send a thrill through me that has nothing to do with the ring on my finger and everything to do with the man holding me. The man who chose love over hatred, building over destroying, partnership over dominance.

The man who saved my company by saving me first.

Outside, the wind picks up, rattling the windows with familiar mountain music. But inside, by the fire, with my

fiancé's arms around me and our future stretching out bright and full of possibility, I've never felt safer.

We built something beautiful here. Something that started with a storm and grew into forever.

Something worth every risk we took to find it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mac

I'm posted up at the bar watching Emma and Liam work this engagement party, and yo, if they get any more perfect together I might actually lose it.

"Another cosmopolitan, sir?" the bartender asks.

"Make it a double, my guy. About to drop some real talk on these people, and they need to be ready."

Twenty-eight years old and Emma's straight glowing. Never seen her shine like this, not once in all the years I've known her.

Emma spots me from across the Rainbow Room and throws up a wave. She's rocking this emerald green dress that probably costs more than my rent, but she's still the same girl who used to live off cereal and crash at her desk.

Except now she bounces at five-thirty. Now she's always laughing. Now she looks like someone who remembers what happiness feels like.

Liam whispers something and she throws her head back laughing—that real laugh that lights up everything around her.

Finally, finally, finally.

"Mac!" Elena Rodriguez slides up next to me, already feeling good from her drinks. "Can you believe this madness? Our Emma, engaged to the enemy."

Former enemy. Current love of her life. Whole different game now.

"Yo, I been calling this since day one. Saw it coming from a mile away."

From that very first phone call. 'Your fine nemesis is about to be trouble,' I said. Called it perfect.

"You did not call anything."

"Elena, girl, I got the receipts. Emma was all 'he's arrogant and annoying,' and I was like 'that's sexual tension, baby girl.'"

Classic Emma move. Fighting her feelings till they knocked her flat.

I watch Liam's hand find the small of Emma's back while they're talking to the senior partners. Protective but gentle. Like he still can't believe she chose him.

Good. She deserves someone who thinks she's magic.

"Marcus Rodriguez!"

Aw man. Emma's grandfather locked onto me.

Martin Sinclair navigates that walker through the crowd like he's commanding a ship. Two strokes ain't slowed down this man's energy one bit.

"Mr. Sinclair. Looking strong tonight."

"I'm looking ancient, but I'm feeling victorious."

Victorious?

"How's that?"

"I told everyone that girl would find her match eventually. They said she was too independent, too married to work. I said she just needed someone who could keep up."

Someone who could keep up with Emma. That's a tall order.

"And Liam Cross can keep up?"

"That boy saved my firm and made my granddaughter happy. Far as I'm concerned, he's golden."

Can't argue with that logic.

"Plus," Martin leans in like he's dropping secrets, "he asked for my blessing before he proposed. Real respect. I appreciate that in a young man."

Of course he did. Mr. Perfect strikes again.

"When was this?"

"Two months back. Came to the house, brought flowers for my nurse, sat through every single photo I had of Emma growing up."

Two months. He's been planning this for two months.

"Said he wanted to do everything right, wanted to honor how we do things in this family."

Family matters to Emma. Course Liam would get that.

"What'd you tell him?"

"Told him if he ever hurt her, I'd track him down with this walker and mess him up proper."

I believe you would too.

"And?"

"And if he kept making her smile like she has been, I'd be proud to call him family."

Family. The thing Emma guards most fierce.

The room starts getting quiet, and I realize everyone's looking at me.

Right. Toast time. About to make these lawyers emotional.

"Yo, everybody," I call out, and conversations die down. "Need y'all to listen up for a minute."

Here we go.

Emma's staring at me with that look that says she knows I'm about to embarrass her.

She's absolutely right.

"Been asked to say something about these two lovebirds."

Asked is generous. More like I demanded the mic.

"Known Emma Sinclair for five years. Watched her grind sixteen-hour days, live off coffee and pure will, sacrifice everything to keep everyone else's dreams alive."

Real talk. Nothing but facts.

"Also watched her stress herself sick over decisions that would affect people she loved, always putting everyone else first."

The weight she carried. The pressure she took on.

"Emma's the strongest person I know. Also the most stubborn, most loyal, and most deserving of all the good things."

Every single word true.

"Six months ago, she called me from some cabin up in the mountains. Trapped in a blizzard with a dude she was convinced wanted to wreck everything she'd built."

Best phone call of my life.

"She was scared, mad, and absolutely sure that Liam Cross was the villain."

So wrong. So beautifully wrong.

"I told her then what I'm telling y'all now: sometimes the person who pushes you hardest is exactly who you need."

Sometimes your enemy is really your blessing in disguise.

"Liam Cross didn't destroy Emma's company. He elevated it. Didn't take her independence. Gave her a partner who matches her energy."

A real partner. Not someone trying to control her, but someone who gets her.

"Didn't change who she is. Helped her remember who she could be."

Happy. She could be happy.

"Emma, you deserve someone who sees your brilliance, backs your dreams, and loves you enough to check you when you're being crazy about work."

Laughter rolls through the room.

"Liam, you get to marry the most incredible woman in New York. Don't mess this up, bro."

More laughs. Good. Keep it light.

"To Emma and Liam: may your partnership stay as fire in marriage as it's been in business."

And may y'all remember the best things are worth the fight.

"May you always choose love over fear, trust over control, and each other over everything else."

Choose each other. Every single time.

"Cheers!"

The room explodes in applause. Emma's crying—good tears, thank God—and Liam looks ready to cry too.

Perfect. They should be emotional. This is big.

Everyone raises their glasses, and I catch Emma's eye across the room. She mouths "I love you" and I mouth back "I know."

Course she loves me. I'm incredible.

But more important, she's loved. Finally, completely, perfectly loved.

Emma

Two hours later, Liam and I are walking across the Brooklyn Bridge at midnight, the city lights glittering below us. The engagement party was perfect, but this quiet moment together is better.

This is us. No audience, no performance, just us.

"Your idea or his?" I ask, gesturing toward the bridge.

"Mine," Liam says. "I wanted to end the night somewhere that felt like a beginning."

A beginning. After all we've been through, we're still at the beginning.

"The bridge was a good choice."

Bridges connect things. Join separate shores. Make new paths possible.

"Mac's toast was something else."

Mac, who knows me better than anyone except the man walking beside me.

"He made me cry."

Happy tears. The best kind.

"He made everyone cry. Did you see Williams? I thought he was going to have an emotional breakdown."

Williams, who's never shown emotion in fifteen years of partnership meetings.

"Williams has a soft spot for love stories."

We all do. That's why we're here.

The bridge stretches out ahead of us, empty except for a few late-night joggers and tourists. Manhattan glitters on one side, Brooklyn on the other, and we're suspended between them.

Between what was and what will be.

"Emma."

"What?"

"Are you happy?"

Happy. Such a simple question with such a complicated answer.

"I'm terrified."

Because happiness this big feels dangerous. Could disappear if I'm not careful.

"Of what?"

"Of how much I love you. Of how much this matters. Of how much I have to lose now."

Everything. I have everything to lose now.

"You're not going to lose me."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because we chose this. Not because we were forced together by circumstances, not because we needed to survive a crisis. We chose each other."

We chose each other.

"After we knew all the ugly truths. After we'd seen each other at our worst. After we'd fought and lied and nearly lost everything."

After we knew what we were getting into.

"We still chose each other."

We did. Despite everything, because of everything.

"I love you," I tell him. "Not the idea of you, not what you represent. You. The man who makes pancakes and terrible coffee. Who reads financial reports and falls asleep watching documentaries."

The man who held me when I was scared and challenged me when I was wrong.

"The man who saved my company and my sanity and my heart."

All of it. Everything.

"I love you too. The woman who organizes her revenge files alphabetically and cries at insurance commercials."

"I do not cry at insurance commercials."

"You absolutely cry at insurance commercials. And dog videos. And that commercial with the soldier coming home."

Okay, maybe I cry at that one.

"That commercial is emotional manipulation and you know it."

But effective emotional manipulation.

"The woman who fights for everyone she loves and pretends she doesn't need anyone to fight for her."

I used to pretend that. Before you.

"I don't pretend that anymore."

Because you taught me that needing someone doesn't make me weak.

"I know. That's why I love you."

Because I let you see my vulnerabilities. Because I trust you with my heart.

We reach the center of the bridge and stop, looking out over the water. The city never sleeps, but it feels quieter up here. More peaceful.

This is what I want to remember. This moment, this feeling, this certainty.

"What are you thinking about?" Liam asks.

Everything. Our future. Our wedding. Our life together.

"The wedding. Three weeks."

Three weeks until I become your wife.

"Cold feet?"

The opposite of cold feet.

"Warm feet. Very warm feet. I can't wait to marry you."

I can't wait to call you my husband.

"Good. Because the invitations are already out."

Two hundred people who want to celebrate our love story.

"Speaking of which, did you see who RSVP'd today?"

Please tell me it's not someone complicated.

"Who?"

"Victoria Blackstone."

Victoria. The woman who tried to destroy us and ended up bringing us together.

"She's coming to our wedding?"

Why would she want to come to our wedding?

"Apparently. She sent a very expensive bottle of champagne and a note that said 'Congratulations on proving me wrong about romantic feelings and business sense.'"

That sounds exactly right for Victoria.

"Are you okay with that?"

Victoria at our wedding. The woman who manipulated us, threatened us, tried to tear us apart.

"Actually, yes. She's part of our story, isn't she? Part of how we found each other."

Part of what we survived together.

"Besides, I want her to see what we built. What real partnership looks like."

What love looks like when it's strong enough to survive anything.

"What we built is pretty amazing."

The firm is thriving. We're thriving. Everything is exactly as it should be.

"The firm, you mean?"

"Everything. The firm, our relationship, our future."

Our future. The thing I was too scared to dream about six months ago.

"What do you see when you look at our future?"

Adventures and quiet moments and fights and reconciliations and all the messy beautiful reality of a life together.

"I see us working together, building something bigger than either of us could create alone."

In business and in life.

"I see us fighting sometimes, because we're both stubborn and opinionated."

But fighting fair. Fighting for each other, not against each other.

"I see us growing old together, still challenging each other, still surprising each other."

Still choosing each other every day.

"I see kids."

The words slip out before I can stop them.

"Kids?"

Do you want kids? We've never really talked about kids.

"Is that... do you want kids?"

Please say yes. Please want the same future I want.

"I want everything with you, Emma. Kids, a house, a dog, Sunday mornings in bed, family vacations where we argue about directions."

Everything. All of it.

"I want to teach our daughter to be as strong as her mother and our son to be as kind as his father."

Our children. The family we'll build together.

"You want a house?"

We've been living in his penthouse, which is beautiful but not exactly family-friendly.

"I want a home. With you. Somewhere with enough room for kids and grandparents and Mac to visit."

A real home. Not just a place to sleep between work sessions.

"Mac will want his own guest room."

And frequent babysitting privileges.

"Mac will want his own wing."

True.

"We'll get him his own wing."

Whatever makes our family happy.

Liam takes my hands, and even through our gloves, I can feel the warmth of his touch.

Warm. Safe. Home.

"Emma Rose Sinclair."

Soon to be Cross.

"Liam James Cross."

Soon to be my husband.

"Are you ready for this? All of it? The marriage, the kids, the future?"

Am I ready? Six months ago, I couldn't imagine trusting anyone with my company. Now I'm planning to trust you with everything.

"I'm ready."

More than ready. Eager.

"I'm ready to be your wife, your partner, your family."

I'm ready to build a life with you.

"I'm ready to wake up next to you for the next fifty years and still feel lucky."

Lucky that you chose me. Lucky that I was brave enough to choose you back.

"Only fifty?"

Greedy man.

"Okay, sixty. But after that, we'll have to renegotiate."

Deal.

"Deal."

He kisses me there on the bridge, with the city lights around us and the future spreading out ahead of us. This is what happily ever after feels like.

Not an ending, but a beginning.

Not perfection, but possibility.

Not a fairy tale, but something better: real life with the right person.

When we break apart, I look back toward Manhattan, toward the building where our firm is, where our story began with a hostile takeover that was really a rescue mission.

Where enemies became partners became lovers became family.

"Ready to go home?" Liam asks.

Home. Yes.

THE END

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If you like Liam and Emma, you will love Ethan and Darla in **The Recovering Billionaire's Ex**

Parker

Why the fuck did I agree to this?

The camera flashes are like lightning strikes, blinding and relentless, and I'm the unlucky tree getting hit repeatedly. My jaw tightens as the paparazzi swarm, shouting questions.

"Mr. Devlin! What can we expect from River?"

"Parker, is it true the app could disrupt the financial sector?"

"Is your family attending the gala this weekend?"

"Mr. Devlin! Over here!"

I swear, if one more reporter shoves a mic under my nose, I might throw it into the street.

"Mr. Devlin! Over here!"

I don't know what's colder, the wind or my mood.

I duck my head. "If these people get any closer, they'll be asking me for my blood type."

I hate cameras. Hate them. Always have, always will. My bodyguard, Jordan, muscles through the crowd, carving a path to the revolving doors of the Hilltop Hotel. The hotel looms above me, its massive glass facade glittering against the night sky.

His hand hovers protectively near my back, but I've dealt with these vultures long enough to know how to keep moving without flinching.

Connor steps out of his car behind me, already wearing a sleek black mask that covers the upper half of his face. He's grinning like he's having the time of his life.

"Did you miss the memo, Parker?" he teases, handing me a matching mask.

I snatch it from him. "If the memo was about wasting my fucking evening at a party I don't want to be at, then yeah, I missed it."

Connor adjusts his mask, his grin widening. "It's called networking, boss man. You should try it sometime."

"I call it torture," I mutter, slipping the mask on. It fits snugly, leaving my mouth free but shrouding the rest of my face. "Happy now?"

"Thrilled. Now, let's go before Lila decides you're enemy number one again."

We step inside, and the air shifts from frigid to warm, almost stifling. The ballroom is dimly lit, the walls draped in black and gold, with chandeliers casting a soft glow over the scene. People in masks and expensive gowns move like shadows across the polished floor.

A string quartet plays a haunting melody in the background, setting an almost otherworldly tone. Couples twirl on the dance floor, their laughter muffled by the music. Servers glide between groups, balancing trays of champagne flutes.

Connor claps me on the back. "See? Not so bad. You just have to smile, nod, and pretend you care for thirty minutes. Then you can sneak off to the suite I booked for you."

I shoot him a look. "Thirty minutes, huh? Let's make it twenty."

"Baby steps." He beams and melts into the crowd, already schmoozing with board members like the politician he should've been.

I head straight for the bar. The bartender nods as I approach. "Whiskey, neat."

The glass lands in front of me within seconds. I take a sip, savoring the burn.

Then, I see her.

She's leaning against the bar a few feet away, swirling her drink in her hand like it's the only thing keeping her sane. Her gown clings to her figure, a deep emerald green with a plunging neckline and thin straps that reveal pale, beautiful skin. The satin catches the light every time she moves, shimmering like a jewel.

Her brown hair is pinned up, but a few strands frame her face.

It's her eyes behind the mask that pull me in, green, though they seem almost black in the dim light. They're sharp, scanning the room like she's calculating how fast she can leave without anyone noticing.

I'm not the only one out of place here.

I get off my stool and occupy the stool beside her. "You look like you hate this party as much as I do," I say, leaning closer.

She turns to me, one brow arched beneath her delicate mask. "Hate is a strong word. But yeah, I'm not exactly thrilled to be here."

"Not your scene?"

"Not even in the slightest."

"Same. Let me guess, dragged here by someone who claimed it would be 'fun'?"

She laughs softly, and it's a low, warm sound that catches me off guard. It makes me want to smile. "How'd you know?"

“Wild guess. My so-called best friend is somewhere in this crowd, convincing people I’m enjoying myself.” I take another sip of whiskey. “Who do I have to blame for your misery?”

She tilts her glass toward me. “That’d be my best friend, Jasmine. Said I needed to ‘let loose.’” She rolls her eyes. “This is not what I had in mind.”

I chuckle, the sound surprising even me. “Yeah, this isn’t exactly my definition of fun either.”

“What is your definition of fun?”

I pause, caught off guard by the question. “Not this.”

“What is?”

“I feel like we should know each other a little better before I tell you what my definition of fun is.”

“Ooh.” She smiles, flashing perfect teeth. “Mysterious.”

“Well, I do have a mask.”

She grins, and it’s a quick, mischievous thing that makes something in my chest tighten. “Well, you’re in luck. I have an idea.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Probably not. But it’ll be better than standing here pretending to enjoy overpriced whiskey.” She downs the rest of her drink and sets the glass on the bar.

“What kind of idea are we talking about?”

She steps closer, and her scent, floral and warm, wraps around me.

“Dancing.”

“Dancing?”

“Yeah, you know, that thing people do when there’s music playing?”

Her grin widens as she shakes her body, and her teeth sink into her bottom lip like she’s daring me to say no.

“I don’t dance.”

“Perfect. Neither do I.” She grabs my hand, her fingers cool against mine. “Come on. Live a little.”

For a second, I consider saying no. I should. But before I can stop myself, I down the rest of my drink, set the glass down, and let her pull me toward the dance floor.

“What the hell am I doing?” I mutter under my breath.

She glances back at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Having fun, maybe?”

The music shifts as we reach the edge of the dance floor. It’s slower now, sultry, the kind of melody that drips with tension. She stops, turning to face me, her hand still in mine.

“Ready?”

“Not even a little.”

“Good.” She steps closer, her other hand resting lightly on my shoulder. “Just follow my lead.”

Then she moves in, her body aligning with mine until there’s no space left to pretend this is just a dance. Heat flares where her gown grazes my suit, silk on wool, a subtle friction that seems to ignite every nerve. Her breath mingles with mine, soft and steady, and the barest tilt of her head brings her lips tantalizingly close.

My hand settles at her waist, hesitant, fingers barely pressing against the fabric. But she leans in, a subtle shift that answers without words. Her eyes catch mine, wide and unguarded, and suddenly the room collapses away, the music and chatter reduced to a distant drone.

“You’re better at this than you let on”

“Don’t get used to it.”

She laughs again, and the sound wraps around me, loosening something tight in my chest. “I don’t do this, you know?”

“What? Force strange men to dance with you?”

She chuckles. “You’re grinning a lot for someone being forced, you know?”

“What can I say? I’m a nice person.”

My hand hovers just above the curve of her ass, and I can feel my length pressed against her. If she can feel it, she doesn't give a hint. This isn't me: I don't dance. I don't spend my night laughing with masked women, but maybe my hidden identity is why I'm acting out of character.

"What's on your mind?"

I stare down at her, her green eyes holding mine. She feels perfect in my arms. My gaze drops to her heart-shaped red lips, and I wonder what they taste like, cherry? The thought grips me, and refuses to let go. The alcohol must've gone to my head because I can feel myself hardening right there on the dance floor.

"Mr. Blue-eyes," she says, her voice low. "You still haven't told me what's on your mind."

"You really wanna know?"

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't want to."

"What's on my mind is I want to know what you taste like." Before she can say anything, I continue, "And I know that's a crazy thing to say to someone I literally met a few minutes ago, but I can't stop thinking about kissing you."

She stares at me for a second, freezing in my arms. "What if I say I'm thinking the exact same thing?"

Just like that, my entire night takes a turn.