

# CEO's Regret After I Divorced

## - Chapter 1 Only a Substitute

*Chapter 1: Chapter 1 Only a Substitute*

Serena's POV

The freezing water slammed into my face, jolting me awake like I'd been electrocuted.

My breath stolen by the icy shock, my throat instinctively tightened as flickering lights and shadows swam before my eyes.

I curled up on the cold, wet cement floor, my wrists burning from the rough plastic zip ties cutting into my skin, the chill penetrating straight through to my spine. I heard water dripping, the faint echo of metal doors clanging, and the low laughter of three men.

"Well, look who's finally awake," a scarred man leaned down, his gaze slicing over me like a skinning knife. "Look at that face, that body... premium merchandise right here."

"Damn right," another man with brown hair grinned, exhaling cigarette smoke in my face. "Put her in an underground auction, she'd fetch a good price. Ten grand minimum."

The third man lounged lazily against the wall, licking his teeth. "Or we could sample the goods ourselves before selling. Not like anyone would care what happens to her."

My stomach churned violently as my fingers dug into the freezing floor.

Fear coiled up my spine like a poisonous snake, but I forced myself to lift my head, keeping my voice as steady as possible.

"Wait!" My teeth chattered, but I fought to speak clearly.

"I'm... Serena Blackwood. Ryan Blackwood's wife. If it's money you want, I can give you more than any auction would pay. Just let me call my husband."

The three exchanged glances before erupting into louder laughter.

"Blackwood?" The scarred man narrowed his eyes. "The North American Blackwood family? You're his wife? How come I've never heard about you?"

He snickered, "Ha! Probably some mistress giving herself a fancy title. If she really was his wife, he'd be here already. Would we be having this little chat?"

Their mockery pierced my heart like nails.

Truth is, I wasn't sure myself. Three years ago, when Ryan pulled me from the sea, I had no memory. No family, no background—Ryan became my whole world's only light.

When he asked if I'd be his wife, I agreed without hesitation. But at night when we made love, he'd hold me while whispering a stranger's name—his deceased girlfriend, Sophie Hart.

That's when I realized I was just Sophie's shadow, a substitute wife.

To the outside world, Ryan Blackwood appeared the perfect, devoted husband. He looked after his ex's sister Ivy, while supposedly never letting his wife feel neglected.

He promised me that whatever he gave to Ivy, I'd receive tenfold. I would always be Mrs. Blackwood.

When he worried Ivy Hart might catch cold, he'd buy her a soft cashmere coat for \$100, then turn around and give me a designer coat worth \$1,000.

When he gifted Ivy a \$5,000 diamond necklace for her birthday, I received a sapphire set worth \$500,000.

I sealed all those gifts in the storage room, never opening them.

Each luxury item was like evidence, reminding me: he loved her, I just got the compensation.

But now, with my life in these men's hands, I had to gamble that he cared about me, even just a little.

"Number." The scarred man barked.

Trembling, I recited his private number, watching him dial.

Ring... ring...

Each tone cut like a knife.

Then, the call connected.

"Hello?" A sickeningly sweet voice came through, carrying a familiar laugh.

Ivy Hart.

My heart sank.

"Ivy," I struggled to keep my voice steady, "Put Ryan on the phone. I... I have an emergency—"

"Oh, Serena." She laughed softly, each note stabbing my heart like needles.

"You really know how to pick your timing. Ryan's at the charity gala right now. You know how important today is, don't you? Don't bother him."

The kidnappers beside me burst into laughter.

"Haha! Did you hear that? Her husband doesn't want to talk to her!"

"I told you she was delusional!"

I clenched my jaw, my palms bleeding from my nails digging in.

"Ivy, listen to me." I lowered my voice, crushing my dignity bit by bit.

"Go to the storage room in the Blackwood mansion, code 0503. You know what those things are worth. I'll trade them for one minute with Ryan."

A brief silence on the other end, followed by her slight intake of breath—she knew I wasn't lying.

"Fine," she said languidly. "But make it quick."

Moments later, I heard his familiar yet cold voice.

"What is it?"

Hearing him, I nearly broke down crying. "Ryan, I—please—something's happened, I—"

"Serena." He cut me off, his tone filled with impatience and contempt.

"Do you have to make a scene right now? I didn't bring you to the gala, and I'll make it up to you. A villa. I've already arranged it. Can't you just behave yourself?"

A villa.

I froze, feeling like someone had hollowed out my chest with bare hands. Had he bought Ivy a house?

Tears welled in my eyes as a broken laugh escaped my throat.

"Ryan, you make me sick." I enunciated each blood-soaked word. "You and that bitch... you'll regret this someday!"

"You—" he seemed about to say something, but I was already screaming with all my might, my voice hoarse and breaking: "I hope you both rot in hell!"

The phone slammed down.

The kidnappers tossed the phone aside, laughing.

"So she really is Blackwood's wife." The scarred man grabbed my hair, yanking my face upward.

"Too bad you're not a valued wife. Since you can't give us the money we want, we'll just collect some interest ourselves."

"Let go of me!" I fought desperately, but their hands were rough and strong.

Fear and humiliation exploded inside me.

Like a cornered animal, I suddenly lunged forward, sinking my teeth into one man's wrist. The taste of blood immediately flooded my mouth.

"AHHH!! You crazy bitch!" he screamed, releasing me.

I stumbled toward the door, bare feet slapping against the cold cement, my heart threatening to burst through my chest.

The night air hit my face as I half-ran, half-crawled toward the lake.

Behind me came furious roars and hurried footsteps.

No time. No way back.

I plunged into the pitch-black water.

The cold pierced my skin like a thousand needles, suffocation and terror nearly tearing my chest apart, but I kept swimming forward into the deeper darkness. Each stroke felt like racing against death itself.

I won't die here. I won't be Sophie Hart's shadow anymore.

As consciousness began to fade and darkness closed in from all sides, my final thought was crystal clear and resolute—

I'm escaping this marriage for good. Even if it costs me my life.

## Chapter 2: Chapter 2 Divorce

### Serena's POV

I woke to the sterile smell of antiseptic and the rhythmic beeping of medical equipment. My entire body felt like it had been trampled by a herd of stampeding horses.

Through blurry vision, I could make out the figure of Simon Graves, Ryan's personal assistant, standing awkwardly near the window of my hospital room.

"Mrs. Blackwood, you're awake," Simon said, his voice betraying relief tinged with discomfort. *freewe&novel.com*

"How long have I been here?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Two days," Simon replied. "A fisherman found you washed up near the shore and called emergency services. You had severe blood loss, three broken ribs, and numerous lacerations."

"Where's Ryan?" I asked, my voice raspy from disuse.

The memories came flooding back—the kidnapping, the phone call, my desperate escape into the lake. "Does he know what happened?"

Simon shifted nervously, avoiding eye contact. "Mr. Blackwood is... attending to some important matters. He asked me to stay with you until you regained consciousness."

The hollowness in my chest expanded.

Even now, after I had nearly died, Ryan couldn't be bothered to sit by my bedside. Three years of marriage, and I wasn't worth even a few hours of his time.

"I understand," I said quietly. "You can go now. Thank you for coming."

He simply nodded and left the room.

I sat alone in the hospital bed, my heart aching with cold emptiness. I tried to accept that Ryan didn't love me, but I couldn't help trying to convince myself that maybe he truly did have something important to attend to.

But then the door suddenly opened again.

I thought it might be Simon returning, but when I looked up, I saw a familiar beautiful face framed by golden waves.

My heart sank as Ivy Hart glided in, her face arranged in a mask of concern that didn't reach her eyes.

"Oh, dear Serena!" she exclaimed with theatrical concern, clutching a bouquet of lilies—flowers I was allergic to, as she well knew.

"Everyone at the family house has been absolutely beside themselves with worry!"

She barely paused to breathe before continuing, her tone syrupy sweet.

"Ryan has been so overwhelmed. You know how he gets when the family's reputation is on the line. His wife getting kidnapped? It's been a public relations nightmare."

I remained silent, watching her performance unfold.

"The doctors say you'll make a full recovery," she said, arranging the lilies where their pollen would most easily reach me.

"Though... they did mention some concerning bruising. Ryan's been awfully anxious about how you got yourself into such a situation."

The implication was clear—she was suggesting I had somehow brought this upon myself.

"So Ryan sent you, did he?" I asked coldly, my voice flat and devoid of warmth.

"Of course not," she replied quickly, with mock sincerity. "I only came because... seeing you reminds me so much of my sister. It's sentimental, really."

"Save the act for Ryan," I said, my voice like ice. "I'm not your audience."

Ivy's saccharine smile finally slipped. Her eyes swept over me, "I just thought I'd see how far you had fallen."

Then she stepped closer, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"Honestly, I'm disappointed you didn't die, but I've gained quite a bit from this, so thank you for your gift. I hope you can recognize your place. In Ryan's eyes, you're nothing."

The verbal dagger struck precisely where she intended—right through my heart.

"But don't worry," she continued sweetly, "Ryan knows his duty to the family includes maintaining appearances with his... stand-in wife."

I stared at her, too exhausted to even feel anger anymore. "Is there something specific you wanted, Ivy?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, feigning distraction. "I nearly forgot to tell you about the charity gala last night. Ryan made such a generous donation in Sophie's memory. He also bought me a small apartment near NYU."

I knew that place. It was the apartment where Sophie and Ryan had once lived together.

As she spoke, her phone slipped from her hand, clattering to the floor between us. The screen illuminated with a photo that made my blood freeze in my veins.

It showed Ryan carrying Ivy into the Crescent Moon Hotel—the most exclusive venue in the city—his arms wrapped intimately around her waist, her head nestled against his chest.

The timestamp showed 2:17 AM—while I had been fighting for my life in this hospital bed.

"Oops!" Ivy giggled, retrieving her phone. "How clumsy of me. You shouldn't be seeing this right now."

My stomach churned violently. While I lay here broken and bleeding, my husband had been taking my kidnapping as an opportunity to rekindle things with his dead girlfriend's sister.

Something inside me finally snapped.

Three years of silent suffering, of trying to be the perfect wife, of accepting crumbs of attention from a man who had never wanted me—it all culminated in this moment of perfect clarity.

Without hesitation, I reached out and slapped Ivy Hart across her smug face, the crack of skin against skin reverberating through the sterile room.

"You shameless bitch," I hissed, my voice low and dangerous.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice how you've been throwing yourself at my husband for three years? How many times have you 'accidentally' touched him, needed his help, arranged to be alone with him? You're pathetic."

Ivy's hand flew to her reddening cheek, her eyes wide with shock. "How dare you—"

The door swung open, and Ryan Blackwood stood in the threshold, his powerful frame filling the doorway.

His normally immaculate appearance was slightly disheveled, as if he'd dressed in a hurry.

His piercing gray-blue eyes took in the scene—Ivy clutching her cheek, me sitting upright in bed with fury radiating from every pore.

In three swift strides, he was at my bedside, his hand clamping around my wrist with bruising force.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he growled, his face inches from mine.

I met his gaze without flinching, something I'd never done before. "Exactly what I should have done years ago—standing up for myself."

"You will apologize to Ivy immediately," he commanded, his voice dropping to that dangerous tone that had always made me shrink before.

But something had changed within me.

Perhaps it was the near-death experience, or perhaps it was the final, undeniable proof that I meant nothing to him.

Whatever it was, his command washed over me without effect.

"I will not," I replied coldly. "While I was being kidnapped, beaten, and fighting for my life, you were taking her to hotel rooms. I think I'm the one who deserves an apology."

Ryan's eyes widened slightly—the only hint that my defiance had taken him by surprise.

"What hotel?" he said, voice cold and clipped. "I've already told you—we're not what you think. And you're forgetting your place, Serena."

"My place?" I laughed bitterly. "My place as your stand-in? Your replacement wife? The convenient body you married because I looked like Sophie?"

"That's enough," he snarled, his fingers tightening around my wrist.

"Ryan, it's okay," Ivy interjected tearfully. "She's clearly traumatized from her ordeal. We should be understanding."

The gentle concern in her voice as she placed her hand on Ryan's arm made me want to vomit. More disgusting was how he immediately softened at her touch.

"The doctor says you'll be discharged tomorrow," Ryan said, abruptly changing the subject. "Simon will arrange for a car to take you home. Once there, you'll remain in our quarters until this incident blows over."

The last thing the Blackwood family needs is gossip about their lady being kidnapped due to her own carelessness."



His words struck me like physical blows. No concern for my wellbeing. No questions about what had happened. Just orders about how I should behave to preserve his precious reputation.

"After I'm discharged," I said quietly, my voice steady despite the storm raging within me, "I want a divorce."

*Chapter 3: Chapter 3 What could have happened?*

Serena's POV

The room went deathly silent. Ryan stared at me as if I'd spoken in an alien language.

I slipped the wedding band from my finger and tossed it onto the floor at his feet, where it landed with a small, definitive ping.

"Your debt of saving my life was repaid years ago," I continued, each word precise and final. "This replacement game ends now. I'm done being Sophie's shadow."

Ryan's face transformed with shock before darkening with fury. He leaned forward, his hands gripping the rails of my hospital bed until the metal creaked under his strength.

"What did you just say?" he growled, his voice barely above a whisper.

I met his gaze unflinchingly, my eyes as cold as winter ice. "I said I want a divorce."

Ryan's eyes darkened dangerously, his face transforming into a thunderstorm of barely contained rage.

The hospital room's air pressure seemed to drop instantly, the atmosphere becoming suffocating with his dominant presence.

He stared at me with cold intensity, his voice cutting like ice. "Serena, you dare bring up divorce as if it's some kind of game?"

"This isn't a game," I replied steadily. "Our marriage was never real—it was a business arrangement brokered by your grandmother, but you never wanted me, and I'm done pretending otherwise."

His large hand gripped my waist firmly as he pinned me against the bed, his voice low and fierce: "What gives you the right to ask for a divorce? Without me, how would you survive in the outside world?"

I responded coldly: "I'm physically healthy and mentally sound. Why couldn't I survive on my own?"

Ryan clenched his jaw as he stared at me, his gaze growing increasingly cold.

I stared back defiantly, my lips curling into a mocking smile. "Is Mr. Blackwood unwilling to divorce? Don't tell me you'd actually miss having me as Sophie's replacement?"

"You constantly talk about how much you loved Sophie, yet you end up with another woman pretending she's her... don't you find that pathetic?"

The veins on Ryan's hand bulged as his eyes trembled with rage. "Who do you think you are? You're not even worth missing!"

"Good to know," I said, pushing down the ache in my chest as I forced a brittle smile.

"So you should have no problem signing the divorce papers. Even if I die out there, it won't be your concern."

Ryan's nostrils flared, fury radiating off him in silent waves. "And what if I refuse?"

"Then I'll go public," I threatened. "I'll tell everyone how the great Ryan Blackwood treats his wife—how he lets her be kidnapped and beaten while he's busy taking another woman to hotel rooms."

Ryan's eyes flashed dangerously. "You wouldn't dare bring family business to the public."

"Try me," I whispered, surprising myself with the steel in my voice.

"I have nothing left to lose."

For a moment, I thought he might actually lunge at me—his body was coiled tight with rage, his eyes burning with a fury I'd never witnessed before.

But then, remarkably, he stepped back.

"Fine," he spat. "You want a divorce? You'll get one. But remember this, Serena—once you walk away from being my wife, you lose everything. My protection, my resources, your position. You'll be nothing but homeless without connections."

I smiled then, a small, sad smile. "I was never anything else to you anyway."

His jaw clenched so tight I could hear his teeth grinding.

Without another word, he turned and stormed from the room, the door slamming behind him with enough force to rattle the medical equipment.

"You've made a terrible mistake," she said at last, voice sharp but trembling at the edges. "No one walks away from Ryan Blackwood."

I let out a tired breath, meeting her eyes without flinching. "Isn't this what you wanted all along?"

She stiffened. "What are you talking about?"

"You wanted me gone. You wanted him. You've had both now."

Ivy opened her mouth, then closed it again, faltering. "I just—"

"I don't care." My voice was flat, final. "Get out, Ivy. And take your damn lilies with you."

When the door closed behind her, I finally allowed the tears I'd been holding back to fall.

Not tears of regret or sadness—but tears of relief, of release. For the first time in three years, I felt something stirring within me that I'd almost forgotten existed.

Hope.

Three days later, I was discharged from the hospital.

I had my lawyer draft divorce papers and send them to Ryan's office. Then I called Maya, my best friend from before my marriage.

"Hey, any chance I could crash at your place for a while?" I asked, trying to sound casual despite the way my hand trembled holding the phone.

"What?" Maya's surprise was evident even through the phone. "Doesn't that wealthy husband of yours own like a dozen properties? Why do you need to stay with me? Some kind of rich people roleplay thing?"

I bit my lip. "I'm divorcing him. Walking away with nothing but what's mine."

There was a shocked silence on the other end before Maya exclaimed, "Are you serious? I thought you said it was love at first sight with him!"

"Yeah, well... I married in the heat of the moment only to discover I was just a clown in his circus," I replied, forcing lightness into my voice. "If it's inconvenient, I can always find a hotel."

"No, no, no! You're absolutely staying with me!" Maya quickly responded. "But listen, Serena... since you're divorcing him and won't be spending all your time orbiting around a man anymore, would you consider coming back to work? To our business?"

"I really need you." She hesitated, then confessed, "Honestly, I'm desperate. Celeste—my most promising designer—is in serious trouble. "

"If I don't find someone to take over her pending orders, I'll be designing jewelry from a cardboard box on the street."

I frowned, caught off guard.

Maya and I had met four years ago, back when we were both junior designers at a small, cutthroat company.

I'd made waves early on, my instinct for jewelry design quickly gaining attention after a few standout pieces earned buzz in the industry.

Eventually, when the company became too restrictive—bleeding us dry without giving credit—we left together, we founded Dreamland Studio, where our creative spirits could truly flourish.

After marrying Ryan, I had transferred all my shares to Maya, and she had been running the business successfully for years. What could have happened so suddenly?

*Chapter 4: Chapter 4 I'm back*

Serena's POV

"How bad is it?" I asked, my brow furrowed with concern.

"It's a mess I can't even begin to explain over the phone," Maya sighed. "Can you come to the studio? I'll show you everything."

Two hours later, I pushed open the familiar glass doors of Dreamland Studio, breathing in the scent of creativity and possibility that had once been my whole world.

Maya spotted me immediately, her red-brown hair bobbing as she rushed toward me, wrapping me in a fierce hug.

"God, I've missed you," she whispered, squeezing me tight.

"Missed you too," I replied, feeling a lump form in my throat. The studio was quieter than I remembered, with several design stations conspicuously empty.

After catching up over coffee in her office, I finally asked the question that had been burning in my mind. "So what happened with Celeste? What's going on with the studio?" *freewebnovel.com*

Maya's expression darkened as she pulled up files on her computer. "It's Ivy Hart. She's destroying us."

She explained that our studio was being completely blacklisted by Blackwood Enterprises because Celeste had somehow offended Ivy at a gallery opening last month.

They were facing enormous penalty fees for broken contracts, and Ivy was using Mr.Blackwood's influence to spread rumors that Celeste had plagiarized her designs.

"Look at this," Maya said, turning her screen toward me. "Ivy's latest collection for Hart Creations. Does anything look familiar?"

My blood ran cold as I stared at the designs on screen—they were near-identical to Celeste's work from this month, with only minimal changes to avoid outright copyright infringement.

"I have no doubt Ivy stole them," I said, voice tight. "Celeste would never do something like this."

Maya sighed, glancing at me. "I know. But we don't have proof—and with Mr.Blackwood still protecting her, it won't be easy."

That two-faced bitch.

Just because I was divorcing Ryan didn't mean I'd let this slide.

I don't turn the other cheek.

Every debt would be paid in full. With interest.

Ivy thought she could get away with everything she did to me?

She has no idea who she's dealing with.

Looking at Maya's indignant expression, I gently placed my hand over hers. "Don't worry, I'll handle this. Today."

Maya stared at me in disbelief. "Today? Honey, are you serious? I have a pile of orders waiting for you...I know you are talented, but you aren't made of steel!"

Her concern touched me, it really did.

But what she didn't know was—I had a secret weapon. One she'd never see coming.

"Relax. I've got this. You'll see." I said, reaching for my luggage.

I pulled out a thick portfolio case I'd kept hidden for years—my private collection of designs created during my marriage, never shown to anyone. My secret escape.

As I laid sketch after sketch across Maya's desk, her eyes widened. She reached out as if the pages were made of glass.

"Serena... these are... oh my god, these are masterpieces. You designed all of these while living with him?"

I nodded once. "Whenever he was with Ivy or working late, I designed. These sketches got me through some of my darkest nights. They should be more than enough to keep the studio afloat."

Maya flipped through them again, her awe giving way to gleeful excitement. "Forget keeping us afloat—these could bring the entire industry to its knees. You have to enter the Asian Jewelry Design Competition next week. It's the perfect chance to humiliate Ivy. Publicly. Brutally."

A slow smile tugged at my lips. For the first time in years, I felt powerful. "I'm in. If we're doing this, we're doing it right. "

If I'm going to strike back, I'll make it hurt—she needs something permanent to remind her not to mess with me again.

I looked at her, steady and calm. "When you send the designs to our partners, tell them clearly: the designer is me. "

"And go ahead and update the studio website too—make it official. I'm back."

I paused, then added with a smirk, "it's time they all remembered who built this place from the ground up. Ivy's reign is over."

Maya's jaw dropped. "Wait—seriously?! You're really coming out of retirement?!"

She looked like she might cry from joy. "When you left the industry, people never stopped talking about your work. Some said your pieces felt like poetry in gold."

I arched an eyebrow. "Well, it's time I start writing again."

Maya hesitated, then blurted, "Then I should return all the studio shares to you—"

I waved her off. "Not now. We've got more urgent things to deal with."

I pulled her laptop toward me, fingers flying across the keys.

As soon as I opened the news page, a flood of headlines popped up—negative press surrounding Celeste’s incident and the studio’s involvement.

[So much for being a ‘genius designer’—guess it’s easy when you sleep your way to the top.]

[Heartbroken for Ivy—she earned the final design rights fair and square, and still got assaulted?]

[Time to boycott this trash. And while we’re at it, shut down Dreamland Studio too.]

[No! Dreamland was founded by the legendary Lazuli—just because she left doesn’t mean we’ll forget. Bring her back!]

[We miss Lazuli. The studio’s designs died the day she walked away.]

My eyes narrowed. Enough was enough.

Then I contacted an old associate who owed me a favor—a hacker who went by the name "Triton".

Me: I need everything on Ivy and the Celeste incident—real dirt. I want it public by the end of the day.

He responded instantly.

Triton: Holy shit—Serena? You just resurrected my whole damn system. I thought you were dead.

Me: Don’t get dramatic. I want this over in 12 hours.

Triton: Say less. Consider it done.

Once I finished, I logged into my long-dormant social media account under the name Lazuli—my identity as a jewelry designer.

I stared at the blinking cursor for a moment... then typed: Justice may be delayed, but it never fails to arrive.

P.S. I’m back.

*Chapter 5: Chapter 5 The Price of Disobedience*

Ryan’s POV

"How dare she!" I growled, staring at the divorce papers on my desk, my anger simmering like molten lava beneath the surface.

I'd built the Blackwood empire from a strong regional power into the dominant force in North America.

As CEO, I'd doubled our company's reach, expanded our business empire into new markets, and established our family's supremacy through both strength and strategy.

No one challenged my authority—no one.

Except, apparently, my wife. [freewebnovel.com](http://freewebnovel.com)

"Your morning coffee, sir," Simon, my assistant, announced as he entered. One look at my thunderous expression made him hesitate. "Bad time?"

The last time I'd been this angry, I'd crushed three competing CEOs who'd attempted to form a coalition against us.

"She wants a divorce," I said, each word clipped with barely contained rage.

Simon's eyes widened slightly. "Mrs. Blackwood? But you're—"

"Apparently something she's willing to walk away from," I growled, taking the coffee and downing it in one scorching gulp.

The divorce papers had arrived this morning, perfectly drafted, requiring only my signature to end our three-year union.

Three years of her being at my beck and call, three years of her desperate attempts to please me, three years of her being a placeholder for the woman I truly wanted.

Sophie.

Even thinking her name still brought that familiar pain.

Sophie Hart had been my first love, my college sweetheart and almost-fiancée before that tragic accident took her away five years ago.

We were supposed to merge our families' companies through marriage - a perfect blend of love and business, until that fatal car crash on a rainy night changed everything.

The day I lost her, I swore I'd never let anyone into my heart again. Instead, I channeled all my energy into building the Blackwood empire.



Sixty-hour workweeks, aggressive acquisitions, and ruthless business strategies became my only companions. The boardroom became my sanctuary, and profit margins my sole purpose.

The business world soon learned to fear my name - I became known as the 'Ice King' of Wall Street, the CEO who never smiled, the man who could destroy companies with a single signature.

Then Serena came into my life—a mysterious woman I met by chance, with no recollection of her past.

The resemblance to Sophie was striking, and coincidentally, she turned out to be a perfect match according to my family's standards.

My grandmother, ever the traditionalist and always concerned about our family's reputation in business circles, had practically orchestrated the whole thing.

She insisted that as the CEO of Blackwood Enterprises, I needed a suitable wife to maintain our social status and carry on the family legacy.

'A man in your position needs a proper wife,' she'd said. 'The merger with the Hart Group fell through after Sophie's accident. We can't afford any more setbacks.'

I'd married her, but I'd never truly accepted her. Sophie's ghost lingered between us, and I'd made sure Serena knew it.

"Sir," Simon ventured carefully, "perhaps this is just a negotiation tactic? Mrs. Blackwood has always been... devoted to you."

I scoffed. "Exactly. This is just another one of her little games. She thinks by threatening to leave, I'll suddenly start paying attention to her."

"And will you?" Simon asked, his tone carefully neutral.

I shot him a cold look. "She needs to understand her place. As my wife, her role is to support me, not challenge me."

Walking back to my desk, I picked up the divorce papers. She wanted nothing from me—no alimony, no property, nothing. It was almost insulting.

As if she could simply walk away from everything I'd built, everything I represented.

"Freeze all her accounts," I ordered abruptly. "Cancel her credit cards, restrict her access to any Blackwood assets. Let's see how serious she is about independence when she can't pay for a cup of coffee."

"She just survived a kidnapping—"

I clenched my jaw at the reminder.

The guilt was still raw, though I refused to acknowledge it.

"She needs to learn that defying me has consequences," I stated firmly.

As Simon left to carry out my orders, my phone vibrated with a text from Ivy Hart.

She was asking about our meeting later that day, suggesting we have dinner afterward. I sighed, running a hand through my hair.

Ivy Hart. Sophie's younger sister, with her golden waves and amber eyes that reminded me so much of her sister.

After my family rescued her from a business dispute three years ago, she'd attached herself to me like a barnacle, constantly seeking my attention and support.

She wasn't Sophie—she could never be Sophie—but she was a connection to the past I couldn't let go of.

I never understood why Serena seemed so threatened by Ivy.

There was nothing romantic between Ivy and me, never had been.

I tolerated her, supported her design career, met with her regularly... all because she was Sophie's sister. It was my way of honoring Sophie's memory, of keeping that connection alive.

I texted Ivy back with a quick no. I wasn't in the mood for her, or anyone, really.

Then my desk phone rang—it was my grandmother.

"Ryan," her voice was sharp with disapproval. "I just heard from my sources that Serena has filed for divorce. Tell me this isn't true."

I sighed. "It's just a tantrum, Grandmother. She'll come around."

"A tantrum?" she repeated, her tone dangerous.

"The girl was kidnapped, beaten, and when she woke up, you weren't by her side. And your response is to call her legitimate grievances a tantrum?"

I bristled. "I don't need relationship advice—"

"Clearly you do!" she cut in. "Do you have any idea what you're risking? The marriage contract is binding, Ryan. It's not something to be trifled with.

And Serena is not just any woman—she's extraordinary. I knew it the moment I met her. And a husband ought to recognize and return his wife's love and trust, not leave it unanswered."

The accusation stung more than I wanted to admit.

My grandmother had been the matriarch of our family business for forty years before my father took over.

When both my parents died in a car accident, she had stepped in to guide me, teaching me everything about business politics and corporate responsibilities.

I jaw tightening as I struggled to keep my voice steady. "But I didn't ask for this contract. It was shoved down my throat like everything else in this damn family.

You all expect me to play the part of the perfect husband without asking whether I was ever ready to be one."

I let out a bitter laugh, shaking my head. "What do you want me to do? Beg her to stay? Grovel?"

"I want you to grow up," she replied coldly. "Sophie is gone, Ryan. She's been gone for five years.

And while you've been clinging to a ghost, you've had a living, breathing wife who's been desperately trying to love you."

Before I could respond, she hung up.

I stood there, staring at the phone, feeling a smug satisfaction beginning to replace my anger.

Obviously, Serena had put Grandmother up to this call.

It was just another manipulation tactic, proof that she wasn't serious about leaving me at all.

Of course she wasn't. How could she be?

She was desperately in love with me—had been since the day we met.

This divorce nonsense was just her way of getting my attention, forcing me to chase after her.

I wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

When she came crawling back, acknowledging her mistake and begging for forgiveness, perhaps I'd consider taking her back.

My cell phone rang again. Ivy.

"Ryan?" Her voice was shaking, tearful.

"Something terrible has happened. I'm being attacked online—someone's accusing me of stealing designs, and—"

She sobbed dramatically "—they're saying I used your influence to blacklist other designers! You have to help me!"

I frowned, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Slow down, Ivy. What exactly is happening?"

*Chapter 6: Chapter 6 The Tables Have Turned*

Author's POV

Within hours, Serena's post—shared under her designer alias Lazuli—had garnered thousands of likes and comments, with fans and followers expressing their joy at her return.

"Queen is BACK!"

"We missed you so much!"

"Dreamland Studio rises again!"

But Serena's return did more than just excite her fans—it completely shifted the narrative surrounding the Celeste scandal.

The designer who had been accused of stealing designs from Ivy Hart was suddenly receiving support from all corners of the internet.

"If Lazuli supports Celeste, then I do too. #TeamCeleste"

"Wait, wasn't Ivy Hart the one who started all this drama? Something feels off..."

"I always thought there was more to this story than what we were told!"

The hashtag #CelesteInnocent began trending, and soon enough, a full-blown online war erupted between Ivy's supporters and Lazuli's defenders.

The tide had turned so quickly that Ivy was caught completely off guard.

In her luxurious apartment, Ivy Hart paced back and forth, her golden waves bouncing with each agitated step.

Her amber eyes blazed with fury as she scrolled through her phone.

What had been a decisive victory against Celeste—and by extension, Dreamland Studio—just yesterday was now unraveling at alarming speed.

"This can't be happening," she whispered, her golden waves falling across her face as she hunched over the device. "How did she manage to turn the tide so quickly?"

She dialed the number of Martin, the project lead who had been instrumental in spreading the story about Celeste's supposed design theft.

"Martin, you need to release the video now," she demanded without preamble. "The one showing Celeste trying to seduce you for the contract."

There was an uncomfortable silence on the other end of the line.

"Martin? Did you hear me?"

"I... I can't do that, Ivy," Martin finally responded, his voice small and hesitant.

"What do you mean you can't? We had a deal!"

"Someone's already leaked the full video."

"What?" Ivy's heart rate spiked. "What full video?"

"The unedited footage. It shows everything—me making advances on Celeste, her rejecting me, the whole thing. It completely contradicts the edited clip we released."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "#CelesteVindication is trending everywhere."

Ivy felt the blood drain from her face. "That's impossible. Nobody had access to that footage except you and me."

"Well, someone did," Martin said, voice tight. "And I only helped you because of Mr. Blackwood. If the company wants a scapegoat, it won't be me. I'll make sure they know where the idea really came from."

The call ended, leaving Ivy in panicked silence.

Her phone buzzed with notifications—brands that had been considering dropping Dreamland Studio were now publicly announcing their continued support and welcoming Serena back to the industry.

The momentum was building against her.

With shaking hands, Ivy called the one person she believed could fix this mess.

Ryan's deep voice answered after two rings, businesslike and cold. "What is it, Ivy? I'm in the middle of something."

Ivy's voice trembled as she forced the perfect mix of panic and fragility.

"Mr. Blackwood, something terrible is happening... They're accusing me of fabricating evidence. People are saying I used your influence to blacklist other designers."

She swallowed hard, adding a subtle sob. "I didn't do any of that. You have to help me... please."

"Slow down, Ivy. What exactly is happening?"

"I don't understand what's going on. This designer called Lazuli has fans attacking me, spreading lies about me. And I remember she works with Serena's friend Maya at that studio. Do you think—"

There was a pause before Ryan spoke, his voice measured. "And you think Serena is behind this?"

"I don't want to accuse her, but she was so angry before, even wanting a divorce from you. I just think if she's targeting me now, it makes sense."

After all, she's always misunderstood our relationship."

"Stay calm," Ryan commanded, his tone low and firm. "I'll handle everything. No one crosses me and gets away with it."

"How will you handle it? By exposing the truth—"

"No. You stay out of it. And don't say anything online these next few days."

She bit back the urge to argue. It was obvious he was trying to protect Serena. That realization settled like a stone in her stomach.

"...Of course, Ryan" she said smoothly, masking the heat in her voice. "Whatever you think is best."

The second the call ended, she threw her phone across the room. It hit the wall with a sharp crack and dropped to the floor.

Her fingers curled into fists as she stared ahead, her expression calm, but her eyes glinting with restrained fury.

"This isn't over, Serena," she whispered. "Not even close."

\* \* \*

### Serena's POV

Across town in Maya Carter's spacious loft apartment, I emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a plush towel, my damp hair clinging to my shoulders.

The hot shower had washed away the lingering scent of hospital antiseptic, but nothing could erase the memory of those terrifying hours in captivity.

"Feeling better?" Maya asked, looking up from her laptop where she'd been monitoring the online fallout from my post.

"Much," I replied with a small smile, accepting the cup of tea she offered. "What's happening out there in the digital wilderness?"

Maya grinned wickedly, turning the screen toward me. "Your Instagram post was like dropping a nuclear bomb in the family territories."

"Everyone's talking about you—and more importantly, they're all defending Celeste now."

I settled onto the couch beside my friend, scanning through the flood of social media updates.

The transformation was remarkable; brands that had distanced themselves from Celeste just days ago were now issuing apologies and demanding that the project executive who had harassed her be fired.

"It worked even better than I hoped," I murmured, scrolling through comment after comment.

"People respect power," Maya observed, twirling a strand of her red-brown hair.

"And right now, you're the most powerful voice in the industry. One word from you was all it took to change the tide."

"But this is only the beginning," I replied, my eyes hardening as I pulled up Ivy Hart's profile. "The fire hasn't reached her yet."

I knew deep down that Ryan was likely protecting her already. His blindness when it came to anything connected to Sophie Hart still hurt, even now.

Maya raised an eyebrow. "You're not planning to let her off easy, are you?"

"After what she did to Celeste? After using her designs without credit?" I shook my head firmly. "No, Ivy Hart doesn't get to walk away from this unscathed."

I reached for my phone, dialing a number few people had access to.

"Triton," I said when the call connected.

"I need you to dig deeper into the Celeste situation. Find out who at the partner company was involved in targeting her, and how Ivy manipulated them. I want everything—emails, texts, meetings, payments."

"Already on it," Triton replied. "I've traced some interesting communications between Ivy and a project director named Martin. You were right—this goes way beyond a simple design rejection."

"Send me everything you find," I instructed. "and thank you for helping with the video leak. The timing was perfect."

"Just doing my job, queen," he said with a hint of pride. "People always underestimate you—especially the ones who think they rule the world."

As the call ended, Maya studied me with curious admiration. "You know, for someone who just left a toxic wife bond and survived a kidnapping, you're incredibly strong and composed."

I felt a small smile form on my lips, more genuine than any I'd shown in the past three years of my marriage to Ryan.

"I spent three years being a doormat, Maya. Three years letting Ryan walk all over me while supporting Ivy and her schemes. I'm done letting it happen."

Maya raised her coffee mug in a toast. "To the queen's return."

I opened my mouth to respond, but just then, my phone buzzed.

A notification popped up on the screen—a text from my bank.

Credit card ending in 7281 has been frozen.



I stared at the number for half a second, and recognition hit. It was the card Ryan had given me.

A bitter smirk curled at my lips.

So, he must've gotten the divorce papers. Probably signed them too. Can't wait to be done with me, huh?

I mean, I get it. If he's planning to cut ties, there's no reason to keep me on his account.

I still had a few things left at his place, but whatever.

I'd head over tomorrow, get my stuff, and while I'm at it—drag him to the courthouse to make the divorce official.

### *Chapter 7: Chapter 7 Crimson Confrontation*

#### Serena's POV

The crisp morning air felt different against my skin as I stepped out of the taxi in front of the imposing Blackwood mansion.

Today I was Serena Blackwood—soon to be just Serena again—here to finalize what should have been done long ago.

I'd chosen my outfit deliberately: a crimson dress that hugged my curves without being provocative, paired with black stilettos that added three inches to my height.

My hair cascaded down my back in soft waves, and I'd applied just enough makeup to enhance my features without appearing overdone.

This wasn't about seduction. This was about power.

The security guard at the gate recognized me immediately.

His eyes widened slightly at my appearance—I was so different from the meek woman who had left the mansion just days ago.

"Mrs. Blackwood," he nodded, pressing the button to open the gates.

"Not for much longer," I replied with a smile that held no warmth.

The path to the front door seemed shorter than I remembered.

Perhaps because this time, I wasn't dragging my feet, dreading another cold encounter with my husband. Today, I was striding purposefully, eager to end this charade of a marriage.

Martha, the housekeeper, opened the door before I could knock. Her expression cycled rapidly through surprise, curiosity, and something that looked suspiciously like satisfaction.

"Mrs.Blackwood," she greeted, stepping aside. "Mr.Blackwood is in his study."

"Thank you, Martha," I replied, stepping into the grand foyer.

The familiar scent of the house—sandalwood, leather, and Ryan's distinct pine and amber cologne—hit me with unexpected force.

For three years, this had been my prison, decorated to look like a palace.

I made my way to Ryan's study, my heels clicking against the marble floor. When I reached the heavy oak door, I didn't bother knocking—a small but deliberate act of defiance.

Ryan was seated behind his massive desk, his attention focused on some document before him.

He didn't look up immediately, assuming it was a staff member who had entered.

"I said no interruptions—" he began, then stopped abruptly when he caught my eyes.

His gray-blue eyes widening slightly at the sight of me.

"Serena." My name sounded different on his lips today—uncertain, almost cautious.

"Ryan." I kept my voice neutral as I closed the door behind me.

He stood slowly, his tall frame unfolding like a predator preparing to pounce.

The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up to his elbows, revealing the strong forearms I had once admired so much.

His tie was loosened, and his normally perfectly coiffed brown hair was slightly disheveled, as if he'd been running his hands through it in frustration.

"You came back," he said, his voice a low rumble that once made my knees weak. "Finally realized your place?"

"Not in the way you're thinking," I replied, maintaining eye contact. "I'm here to get my things and to make sure you've signed the divorce papers."

His jaw tightened, a flicker of something—surprise? anger?—passing through his eyes. "Serena, this is ridiculous. There has to be a limit to your tantrums."

"I'm not throwing a tantrum. I mean every word." I cut him off, lifting an eyebrow with calm defiance.

"I'm just tired. Tired of wondering, every time you look at me, if you're really seeing me—or just seeing her through me."

I'm tired of pretending to enjoy every restaurant you take me to, knowing they were all her favorites, not mine.

I'm tired of smiling at the jewelry you give me, when every piece reflects her taste, not who I am.

And I'm especially tired of pretending not to notice how you always close your eyes when we make love—as if you need to shut out reality to picture someone else."

"That's enough," he growled, his Boss authority seeping into his voice.

I laughed, the sound hollow even to my own ears. "That doesn't work on me anymore, Ryan. I'm not your submissive little wife who jumps at your command."

His eyes narrowed as he studied me, really seeing me perhaps for the first time since we'd met. "What happened to you?"

"I woke up," I replied simply. "I stopped living in a fantasy where someday you might actually love me for who I am rather than who I remind you of."

He ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident in the gesture. "This isn't you talking. This is Maya, or that friend of yours—"

"Don't you dare," I hissed, taking a step toward him. "Don't you dare suggest that I can't think for myself. That I need other people to tell me when I'm being mistreated."

"Mistreated?" His voice rose slightly. "I gave you everything—this house, financial security, my name—"

"Everything except what actually mattered," I cut in. "Your time. Your attention. Your respect. Your love." The last word felt bitter on my tongue.

"Love has nothing to do with it," Ryan snapped. "We're married. That's supposed to be enough."

"It's not enough for me," I replied, my voice calm but resolute.

I want a husband who loves me—a wife who's with me because he chooses me, not because I'm someone's replacement.

He stiffened, but said nothing.

I reached into my purse and pulled out the folded divorce papers, placing them on the table between us.

"I've already signed," I said evenly. "All that's left is your signature."

Ryan stared at the papers but made no move to take them. "I'm not signing anything."

"Why not? You clearly don't want me as your wife."

"You don't get to decide what I want," he said, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper.

"And you don't get to decide whether I stay in this marriage," I countered. "I'm leaving you, Ryan. With or without your signature."

Something shifted in his expression—a flicker of uncertainty, perhaps even fear, quickly masked by anger. "You think it's that simple? Walking away from your husband?"

"Nothing about this is simple," I admitted. "But it's necessary."

Our standoff was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. Before either of us could respond, it opened to reveal Martha.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Blackwood, but Ms. Hart is here to see you. She says it's urgent."

Ryan's jaw tightened. "Tell her I'm busy."

But it was too late. Ivy Hart swept into the room like she owned it, her golden waves bouncing with each deliberate step. She wore a designer suit that hugged her petite frame, and her amber eyes widened in mock surprise when she saw me.

"Oh! Serena, I didn't expect to see you here." Her voice dripped with false sweetness. "Am I interrupting something between you two?"

I turned to face her fully, noticing how her gaze flickered briefly to my crimson dress before returning to my face.

"Ivy," I acknowledged coolly. "What an unexpected surprise. I was just discussing divorce proceedings with Ryan."

Her expression shifted minutely—a flash of calculation before she composed herself again. "Divorce? Oh, that's terrible!" She turned to Ryan, placing a hand on his arm. "Ryan, surely there's another way to resolve whatever disagreement you're having."

Ryan stiffened but didn't remove her hand. "This doesn't concern you, Ivy."

"Of course it does," she replied smoothly. "You're not just any Boss—you're the leader of the Blackwood family. Your personal life affects all of us, especially those of us who care about you." Her emphasis on the word "care" was subtle but unmistakable.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Remarkable performance, Ivy. Really. The concerned family member act is very convincing."

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't know what you mean."

"You're being dramatic, Serena," Ivy continued with feigned concern. "Everyone knows Ryan honored you by choosing you as his wife, despite your... background. Many women would be grateful for an opportunity like that."

Her words ignited the fire already burning inside me. I stepped forward, my patience completely exhausted.

"An opportunity? To be a glorified servant in my own home? To be compared daily to a ghost?" I spat, letting my fury show at last.

"Would you like that 'opportunity,' Ivy? I'm sure you would, considering you've been eyeing my husband from day one. It's pathetic how you're pretending to respect Sophie's memory while clearly trying to take her place!"

Ryan looked between us, confusion evident in his expression. "What are you talking about?!"

"Don't act innocent!" I laughed bitterly. "You enjoy having Ivy around too much, Ryan. "

"Who knows if you're really mourning Sophie or just using her memory as an excuse to keep her sister close? The two of you have quite the arrangement."

Ryan's face darkened with rage at my words. "What nonsense are you spouting?"

"Fine. Think whatever you want," I said, glancing at my watch with obvious impatience. "Can we make a decision about the divorce now? I'm on a tight schedule and don't have all day to waste."

"Enough!" Ryan slammed his fist on the desk, his voice thundering through the room.

"Serena, you want a divorce so badly? Fine! I'll give you exactly what you want!"

*Chapter 8: Chapter 8 Get Divorce Certificate*

Serena's POV

I scoffed, looking Ryan straight in the eyes. "You know, all this could've been avoided if you'd just agreed in the first place."

Without waiting for his response, I turned and walked out of the mansion with my head held high, the crimson fabric of my dress swishing against my legs with each confident step.

The morning air felt fresher somehow, like I could finally breathe freely after years of suffocation.

Ryan and Ivy followed me to the courthouse, where we'd complete the divorce proceedings. **freewebmovel.com**

While waiting for our turn, I pulled out my phone and began responding to several collaboration requests that had come in overnight.

In the past, I would have ignored these opportunities, knowing Ryan preferred me to focus solely on being his wife rather than pursuing my own career.

But things were different now.

I was determined to rebuild my professional life, starting with expanding my network in the design world.

I sent my contact information to several studios who had reached out, still using my designer pseudonym, Lazuli.

Within the few minutes we sat waiting, seven or eight design studios had already added me to their contacts.

The offers they presented were quite impressive—exclusive contracts, creative freedom, substantial compensation.

A small smile curved my lips as I scrolled through the messages.

Without Ryan, I wasn't helpless as he might have thought. I had my talents, my vision, my own path forward.

Ivy's voice broke through my concentration, her tone dripping with malice as she spoke to Ryan.

I could feel her challenging gaze on me, but I kept my eyes on my phone.

"Ryan, are you absolutely certain about this divorce? If Sophie knew about this, she'd probably be thrilled, wouldn't she?"

"After all, no matter how much Serena resembles my sister, she's nothing but a replacement anyway..."

I didn't bother acknowledging her pathetic attempt to provoke me.

In my eyes, Ivy had become nothing more than an annoying pest, desperately seeking attention.

Finally, our number was called, and we were directed to proceed with the divorce formalities.

The clerk, a middle-aged woman with kind eyes, reviewed our paperwork with professional efficiency until she noticed that the divorce agreement bore only my signature.

"Mr. Blackwood, you'll need to sign here," she said, pointing to the designated line.

Ryan's jaw tightened as he took the pen, his eyes scanning the document before landing on the financial settlement section where I had waived all rights to his assets.

His expression darkened as he signed with a forceful stroke.

"What the hell is this?" he growled, keeping his voice low but intense.

"You're taking nothing? Not even the legal minimum? Is this some kind of statement, Serena? Another way to shame me?"

"Your money has nothing to do with me, Ryan," I replied calmly. "I never wanted it in the first place. I can earn my own living."

"This is ridiculous," he continued, his pride clearly wounded. "You were my wife for three years. You're entitled to—"

"I'm entitled to my freedom," I cut him off, turning to the clerk. "Please continue with the process. We've both signed now."

The clerk glanced between us, sensing the tension but maintaining her professionalism. "Very well. Everything appears to be in order."

After a few more signatures and verifications, she handed us each a copy of the divorce certificate. Just like that, three years of marriage dissolved in a matter of minutes.

"Congratulations," Ivy said with mock sweetness as we exited the courthouse. "Now you can go back to being the nobody you were before Mr.Blackwood rescued you."

I didn't even spare her a glance as I walked straight to the waiting taxi.

Ryan stood on the courthouse steps, his expression unreadable as he watched me leave.

In the backseat of the taxi, I finally allowed myself to process what had just happened.

Three years of marriage—three years of trying to be someone I wasn't, of desperately seeking approval from a man who could never truly see me—all over in the blink of an eye.

Strange how something that took so long to build could crumble so quickly.

Yet instead of sadness, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief washing over me.

The divorce certificate in my hand wasn't a symbol of failure but of new beginnings.

When I arrived at the Dreamland Studio, Maya was waiting for me, pacing anxiously in the reception area. Her eyes widened when she saw me.

"Serena! Tell me you didn't actually go through with it!" she exclaimed, rushing over to me.

I held up the divorce certificate in response.

"Holy shit," she whispered, staring at the document in disbelief. "You actually did it. You left the CEO of Blackwood Enterprises, one of the most powerful men in the entire world."

"It was long overdue," I said with a small shrug, walking past her toward my office.

"Are you okay? You must be hurting," Maya followed closely, her voice full of concern. "You liked him so much..."

"Less than staying would have," I replied honestly.

Once inside my office, I placed my purse on the desk and turned to face her. "It's done, Maya. I'm free now."



She studied my face for a moment before pulling me into a tight hug. "I'm proud of you, girl. It took guts to walk away."

When she finally released me, her expression turned serious.

"But there's something else we need to discuss. Celeste hasn't left her apartment in days. The online harassment has gotten completely out of control since Ivy's accusations. "

"People are calling her a fraud, a thief... it's brutal out there."

I frowned, immediately feeling responsible. "Contact her and tell her that the studio will handle this completely. She should just stay home and wait for good news."

"How?" Maya asked. "The damage is already done."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it," I assured her.

"Thank goodness! Serena, you're truly my lifesaver!" Maya exclaimed, throwing her arms around me in excitement like she wanted to plant a kiss on my cheek.

"Alright, I need to get to work now. Doesn't the studio have orders to complete?" I reminded her.

"What would you like to eat? I'll go get it for you. Serena, I'm your loyal servant—command me as you wish!" My best friend clung to my arm playfully, making me laugh despite myself.

"Come on, you don't need to be so formal with me. If you hadn't taken me in, I wouldn't have had anywhere to go after the divorce."

My words made Maya's eyes well up with tears. Before she could launch into another emotional speech, I sent her away with a simple request.

"I want a vanilla latte, half sweet, with oat milk!"

"No problem, coming right up!" she called as she left.

After Maya left, I logged into my social media account on my computer. In my friends list was a user called "WhisperStream." I opened a chat window.

This person was a well-known internet influencer who always appeared wherever there was gossip.

His sharp commentary had earned him quite a following.

Now a famous figure in the gossip community, any news that came from him received maximum attention.

I organized the evidence I had about the design competition judges and typed a message.

[Are you there? I have solid dirt on Martin, one of the judges from the \*\*\* design competition.]

His response came almost instantly, jumping straight to business.

[How much to share it?]

I smiled, typing quickly.

[You don't need to pay for this information. Consider it a favor—just take these materials, find Martin, and get him to publicly clarify that Celeste didn't plagiarize anything. Otherwise, you can expose him with what I'm sending.]

There was a moment of silence as he presumably considered what he stood to gain.

[And if he refuses to make the clarification?]

[Then you can handle it however you want. If he does clarify the situation, I'll give you other exclusive scoops that I guarantee you'll find satisfying.]

Well, my counterattack has begun, Ivy.

*Chapter 9: Chapter 9 Her Counterattack*

Author's POV

WhisperStream opened the document Serena had sent and found himself completely captivated by its explosive contents. If this information went public, it would undoubtedly cause a massive scandal.

But even if he couldn't publish it, he had nothing to lose. After all, his livelihood depended on having a constant stream of juicy information to monetize.

The fact that Serena had managed to uncover such private details suggested she could easily dig up other valuable dirt as well.

[I'll handle this. You're a real one for this.] he typed.

[Just giving credit where it's due. I believe karma catches up to everyone eventually,] Serena replied.

She had deliberately used her main account rather than an anonymous one to demonstrate her sincerity.

If WhisperStream wanted to trace who owned the account, he could easily do so. Being straightforward was the better approach.

Her social media profile was already linked to Celeste's design studio, so WhisperStream would understand her motivation.

[Wait for my update, Lazuli. And congratulations on your comeback!] came his response.

Serena smiled at the screen. It seemed WhisperStream was actually a fan of her work.

Meanwhile, Martin, the renowned design competition judge, was living it up at a nightclub, completely intoxicated. His head rested on a woman's lap as he dozed off briefly.

His phone kept vibrating in his pocket, irritating him. Frowning, he pulled it out to check.

"Who could this be..." he muttered.

This was his private number, rarely called by strangers. There was only one possibility—perhaps it was that beautiful woman he'd been eyeing recently, finally unable to resist his charms.

A lecherous smile crossed his face as he pushed away the woman beside him and left the private room with his phone.

The hallway was considerably quieter. He cleared his throat with a couple of coughs before answering.

"Hello? Is this Bella?" he asked, his voice dripping with sleazy anticipation.

On the other end, WhisperStream shuddered in disgust. This man really was as predatory as rumored—acting respectable in public while being utterly sleazy in private.

"I'm afraid not, but don't hang up just yet. What I'm about to tell you is quite... stimulating. Better make sure no one overhears us," WhisperStream replied coolly.

The middle-aged man's face fell, thinking it was some prank call.

"If you've got nothing important to say, I'm hanging up."

"Remember when you coerced Jessica Thompson into sleeping with you?" WhisperStream asked pointedly.

Martin's gaze flickered nervously, his body suddenly tense as the alcohol haze cleared from his mind.

"If Jessica doesn't ring a bell, perhaps Emma Wilson or Clare Carter will? All three are prominent figures in the design world—previous winners of the design competition.

Though they only won because they slept with you, isn't that right?"

As WhisperStream continued, Martin's scalp began to tingle with fear. Despite this, he refused to admit anything.

"What nonsense are you spouting? Do you have any proof? I could sue you for defamation!"

"Why so defensive if it isn't true? Want to know if I have evidence? Martin, why don't you check the photos and videos I just sent you, then call me back."

WhisperStream hung up abruptly. Simultaneously, several videos and images arrived on Martin's phone.

When he opened them, he nearly blacked out. The footage was explicit but unmistakably showed him with the competition winners in hotel rooms.

Martin could see his carefully built career crumbling before his eyes. If this got out, the consequences would be devastating.

He called back immediately, without hesitation.

"How much money do you want? Name your price!"

"I don't want your money, Martin," WhisperStream replied calmly.

"Then what do you want?" Martin's expression darkened. People who didn't want money usually wanted something worse.

"It's simple. That plagiarism scandal from the design competition—you all fabricated it, didn't you? Help clear Celeste's name.

State publicly that she didn't plagiarize anything. End this charade."

The man sighed with initial relief, but then tensed again as he thought of Ivy.

"Don't you know who backs Ivy? You're asking me to cross Mr. Blackwood? "

Facing public disgrace was terrifying, but crossing Ryan Blackwood seemed equally dangerous.

"That's your problem to solve. Perhaps there's a way to satisfy both sides.

Figure it out yourself. You have one day—I want to see your public statement clearing Celeste's name by tomorrow evening."

With that, WhisperStream ended the call.

Martin kicked a nearby trash can in frustration before rushing off to find a solution.

Twenty-four hours to clear Celeste's name without offending Ivy and the powerful Boss behind her.

It felt like an impossible task—almost like asking for his life.

\* \* \*

Serena's POV

I put down my stylus after finishing the last design order, finally able to take a breather. I stretched my arms overhead, noticing my coffee cup was completely empty.

Maya had insisted on staying with me until I finished, declaring her unwavering support, but within minutes she'd fallen asleep on the studio couch.

"Maya, wake up. We can go home now," I said, gently shaking her shoulder.

She stood up groggily, blinking away sleep. "Serena, you finished everything? You're amazing."

"It's nothing. Let's head home."

We had just stepped out of the taxi when Maya's phone rang.

In the quiet of the night, the excited voice from the other end was clearly audible.

"Maya, the plagiarism accusations have been cleared!" Celeste's voice trembled with emotion.

Maya instantly became alert, her hand shaking slightly as she gripped the phone.

"What did you say?"

"Check the news! One of the design competition judges released a statement confirming I didn't plagiarize anything. My reputation is finally restored!"

"That's wonderful news, Celeste! If you're feeling up to it, come back to the studio whenever you're ready," Maya reassured her.

After a few more comforting words encouraging Celeste to rest, Maya ended the call and immediately grabbed my arm.

"Serena, was this really your doing? How did you make this happen so quickly?" she asked, her eyes wide with amazement.

Faced with her barrage of questions, I could only smile somewhat enigmatically.

"The process doesn't matter—only the results. Celeste has been vindicated, and the studio can get back to business. Consider it my way of thanking you for taking me in."

"Listen to yourself! Taking you in was my duty as your best friend. Serena, I'm so grateful to have you. Without your help, I don't know how we would have survived this crisis!"

What she didn't know was that I was even more grateful to have her by my side after the divorce.

*Chapter 10: Chapter 10 The Higher You Climb, the Harder You Fall*

Serena's POV

The exhaustion from my late night had caught up with me, leaving me to sleep in until nearly noon.

As I finally reached for my phone, I saw a stream of messages from WhisperStream.

[Mission accomplished, hey! How's that for efficiency?]

[You busy? Have you seen the news?]

[Hey, about that exclusive scoop you promised... You're not backing out, are you?]

I smacked my forehead—I'd completely forgotten about my promise to WhisperStream.

[Just woke up, sorry! Would you prefer celebrity gossip or some dirt on the business tycoons of the city?]

[Wait, I actually get to choose? Considering my stellar performance, any chance I could have both?]

I raised an eyebrow, considering his request. It wasn't entirely unreasonable.

I opened my private folder and quickly selected several explosive pieces of information that would make any gossip columnist salivate, then sent them his way.

His response was immediate—a series of "bowing to the goddess" emojis.

I could practically feel the shock radiating through the screen from the notorious leader of the online rumor mill.

[You're officially my only queen from now on!]

[No need for flattery. Thanks for your help with this situation—please keep my involvement confidential.]

[Absolutely. I take my professional ethics very seriously.]

He might have lost the scoop about one corrupt design judge, but WhisperStream had gained much juicier material instead. A profitable trade-off, by any measure.

I closed our chat and browsed the latest news updates.

The design competition judge had indeed cleared Celeste of the plagiarism accusations, but to avoid crossing Ivy, he'd taken all the blame upon himself.

"After careful investigation, I can confirm that Celeste's work was indeed original.

Ivy Hart's designs showcase a unique style that rightfully earned the highest praise in this competition, making her the undisputed champion!"

I scrolled down to the comments section, which was flooded with outrage:

"Are you kidding me? Celeste was crucified online and you're just NOW clearing her name?"

"Where exactly is Ivy's work superior? It looks like basic influencer trash. Are the judges blind?"

"This competition is clearly rigged. No technical standards whatsoever!"

"Exactly! It's all fixed! Ivy is such a manipulative bitch, probably slept her way to the top. Poor Celeste!"

The online tide could turn so quickly—one statement was all it took to completely shift public perception. Rather amusing, really.

I closed the social media app as a message from Maya came through.

[Serena, Celeste wants to treat you to dinner tonight. Are you free?]

After considering for a moment, I accepted but added:

[Why don't we invite the whole studio staff? We can celebrate getting through this crisis together. My treat.]

Maya responded instantly: [Where did you suddenly get all this money to spend?]

Before I could reply, she sent another message:

[Never mind, I'll cover it. Save your money for finding yourself a big dick.]

I couldn't help but laugh at her teasing.

While the internet was currently tearing into Ivy, I knew that all it would take was for her to play the victim to Ryan, and he would mobilize his resources to rehabilitate her image.

Rather than letting that happen, I decided to take the initiative—let the little manipulator experience what it feels like to rise quickly, only to fall even harder.

That would give Ivy a real taste of pain.

I reopened my phone and contacted WhisperStream again. **freewebnovel.com**

[I need another favor.]

[Anything for you—just name it and consider it done!]

Impressed by his loyalty, I explained my plan: work with Blackwood family to artificially boost Ivy's publicity.

[Why would you want to elevate her? She's just a social media designer right now. What if she actually becomes more famous than you?]

I was touched by his genuine concern for my position.

[Ever heard of building someone up just to watch them fall? Don't worry—I'm not threatened by someone without real talent.]

With that explanation, WhisperStream immediately understood my strategy and agreed without needing further instruction.

Author's POV



WhisperStream contacted Blackwood family's PR team directly with his proposal.

As the head of a major online influence network, his offer to collaborate on promoting Ivy's work was too valuable to pass up.

"I'll take the smaller cut of the profits—a 40/60 split. What do you say? The current online sentiment toward Ms. Hart isn't exactly favorable."

The representative from Blackwood family had been desperately searching for a solution to this very problem. WhisperStream's offer was like finding water in the desert.

"The money isn't important—what matters is making Ms. Hart the star she deserves to be!"

On the other end of the line, the man could barely contain his excitement.

If they successfully elevated Ivy's profile, Mr.Blackwood would certainly reward him handsomely.

"Brother, you can count on me. I'll show you the true power of online influence!"

Both parties ended the call with their own hidden agendas.

That very night, WhisperStream deployed his army of online commenters to promote Ivy's designs.

They even created a catchy label for her style—"Chameleon Design"—suggesting her versatility was the mark of true genius that others could only envy.

The sheer volume of positive comments quickly buried the negative ones.

Internet users, being the followers they typically are, soon began echoing these sentiments. Within days, a trend of imitating Ivy's design style swept across social media platforms.

As Ivy watched the flood of praise pouring in, her ego swelled dangerously.

"You've done excellent work with this," she told her male assistant, aware that Blackwood family's resources had made this happen.

"It's nothing, Ms. Hart. Just doing my job," he replied, privately pleased with the substantial bonus he'd earned from this project.

"I'm doubling your bonus this month. You can take the rest of the day off—I'm going to see Mr.Blackwood."

Ivy dismissed him with a wave, visibly pleased with herself.

"Thank you, Ms. Hart. I'll head out then."

After her assistant left, Ivy sat before her mirror, touching up her makeup carefully.

Today, she abandoned her usual innocent look for something more sophisticated—a style reminiscent of Sophie.

She deliberately applied bold red lipstick, adding a seductive edge to her normally sweet appearance.

This duality—innocent yet alluring—was exactly what had kept Ryan fixated on Sophie all these years.

And Ivy was determined to use every advantage to secure her position.