

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

- Chapter 11 His concern for her

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Ryan's POV

My fingers drummed restlessly against the polished mahogany desk as I reviewed the quarterly reports.

The numbers were solid, our company's assets growing steadily under my leadership, yet something felt... off.

I couldn't place this nagging sensation that had been haunting me for weeks.

A knock at my door interrupted my thoughts.

"Come in," I called without looking up, my focus still locked on the document before me.

The familiar scent of expensive perfume—too strong, too deliberate—filled the room as Ivy entered.

I didn't bother giving her more than a passing glance as she approached my desk, her heels clicking against the hardwood floor with calculated precision.

"Ryan," she purred.

"Have you seen the latest news? Everyone online is calling me a design genius! My career is finally reaching its peak!"

She thrust her phone in front of my face, displaying a social media post that had apparently been shared millions of times.

Her eyes shone with expectation, clearly waiting for praise.

I frowned slightly, annoyed by the interruption but, for Sophie's sake, still had to acknowledge her achievement..

"Yes, very impressive," I offered flatly, already returning my attention to my work.

Rather than taking the hint, Ivy set her phone aside and suddenly "stumbled," landing directly on my lap.

Her arms snaked around my neck like invasive vines, clinging despite my immediate tension.

She gazed up at me with deliberately hooded eyes, mimicking a seductive expression I'd seen before—on Sophie's face. The similarity momentarily stunned me.

"Ryan," she breathed, her voice dropping to a husky whisper, "don't you think I look beautiful today?"

For a split second, I froze.

The resemblance between the sisters was undeniable from certain angles—the same curve of the lips, the same tilt of the head.

But instead of seeing Sophie in that moment, my mind conjured an image of Serena—her genuine smile, her quiet strength, the way she moved through a room without demanding attention yet commanded it anyway.

I snapped back to reality, roughly unwinding Ivy's arms from my neck and pushing her firmly away from my body.

"Ivy, what the hell do you think you're doing?" My voice carried a dangerous edge.

Her lower lip jutted out in a practiced pout. "Ryan, don't you like me this way? Sophie once told me that you and I would make a good match!"

I slammed my fist against the desk, the sound reverberating through the office. "Enough! Do you even hear yourself?"

"Ryan, my sister really did say that," she insisted, leaning closer again. "She told me if she ever left, I should take care of you..."

I struck the desk again, harder this time. "I said ENOUGH! I never want to hear such nonsense again. Out of respect for Sophie being your sister, get out now!"

Ivy remained frozen in place, her mouth opening and closing as if trying to formulate another approach.

When she still didn't move, my patience evaporated completely.

"Simon!" I called sharply.

My assistant appeared in the doorway immediately. "Yes, boss?"

"Escort Ms. Hart out. From now on, she is not to enter my office without an appointment and proper business purpose."

After Ivy had been removed—still protesting weakly—I felt the tension headache beginning to form behind my eyes. The day's productivity was effectively ruined.

"Simon, bring me a coffee," I said, moving to the leather couch in the corner of my office.

"Right away, Boss."

I closed my eyes, trying to center myself. The coffee arrived quickly, and I took a sip before grimacing at the unfamiliar taste.

"What beans did you use? This doesn't taste right."

Simon glanced nervously at my expression. "The ones in the cabinet, sir. Would you like me to make another cup?"

"Forget it," I muttered, setting the cup aside. "Can't even get a simple coffee right."

As the words left my mouth, I suddenly remembered who used to ensure my coffee was always perfect—Serena.

She would personally grind the beans each morning and store them in my office.

Despite my cold treatment, she had silently anticipated my needs, creating a comfortable environment I'd taken entirely for granted.

The coffee's temperature, the subtle aromatherapy diffuser she would light during my rest periods—all little touches she never mentioned or sought praise for.

"Boss, would you like to use the rest area for a while?" Simon suggested, noticing my exhaustion.

"Yes. Go prepare it first."

Simon nodded and hurried to arrange the small adjoining room where I occasionally napped between meetings.

When I entered a few minutes later, I immediately noticed the unlit diffuser by the bed. Another flash of irritation surged through me.

"What's wrong with you? Can't you handle even basic tasks?" I snapped.

Simon looked genuinely distressed. "Boss, these things were always handled by Mrs. Blackwood herself. I—"

"That's your excuse? You couldn't ask her how it was done?"

Without hesitation, Simon pulled out his phone and dialed Serena's number, deliberately putting the call on speaker.

"Simon? Is something wrong?" Her voice—clear, composed, so achingly familiar—filled the room.

"I wanted to ask where Ryan keeps his office supplies. I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"Oh," she paused briefly before systematically listing every detail of the routines she'd perfected over years—the specific location of the premium coffee beans, which drawer held the aromatherapy oils I preferred, even the exact timing for brewing my afternoon tea.

"And please don't call me Mrs. Blackwood anymore," she added at the end. "Ryan and I are divorced now."

I felt my face darken at those words.

Simon glanced at me nervously but continued the conversation, clearly afraid to end the call prematurely.

"One more thing," Serena added, her voice softening slightly.

"His stomach is sensitive. After business dinners, make sure someone prepares a hangover soup with extra sugar. He hates bitter things."

"Is that everything? You can call if you have other questions."

The casual mention of this intimate knowledge—this care she still extended despite everything—felt like a knife between my ribs.

And yet, beneath the ache, something warm flickered. She remembered. She still cared.

"Yes, thank you, Mrs.—thank you, Ms. Serena."

She ended the call promptly, not lingering for a moment longer than necessary.

The finality of that simple action—the complete absence of attachment—twisted something painful inside me.

Simon pocketed his phone, the silence in the room thick with unspoken tension.

"Boss, I've noted everything she said. I'll handle these matters going forward."

I barely heard him, lost in my own thoughts. "She left with nothing," I murmured, more to myself than to Simon. "Is she even managing financially?"

Chapter 12: Chapter 12 Hot Dream

Ryan's POV

"Boss, should I check on Ms. Serena? Make sure she's doing alright?" Simon's voice cut through my thoughts, pulling me back to the present.

And he had picked up on my unspoken concerns, proving once again why he was my most trusted assistant.

I ran a hand through my hair, fighting against the urge to immediately agree. My pride battled with genuine worry.

"Transfer the downtown penthouse into her name," I decided finally. "And make sure she has sufficient funds. She shouldn't be struggling financially because of our... situation."

Simon nodded without hesitation. "I'll handle it right away, sir."

"Good. Now leave me," I ordered, needing solitude.

As soon as Simon closed the door behind him, I pulled out my lighter and lit the aromatherapy diffuser myself.

The familiar scent—sandalwood with hints of vanilla that Serena had always prepared—filled the room instantly. Only then did the tension in my shoulders begin to ease.

I stretched out on the leather couch, closing my eyes as the comforting fragrance enveloped me.

Despite my attempts to focus on tomorrow's meetings, my mind kept drifting back to Serena—her soft smile, the delicate curve of her neck, the way her eyes would light up when she was excited about a new design.

And the familiar scent carried me deeper into relaxation until sleep finally claimed me.

In my dreams, she came to me. ***freewebnovel.com***

"Ryan," dream-Serena whispered against my ear, her breath hot against my skin. Her body pressed against mine, soft curves fitting perfectly against my harder frame.

"You're soaked, sweetheart," I growled, my hands sliding beneath her silk nightgown to find her slick and ready. My cock hardened instantly at the evidence of her desire.

"Only for you," she breathed, her eyes darkening with need as she straddled my lap. "No one else makes me this wet."

I grabbed her hips roughly, positioning her above my throbbing shaft. "Because you belong to me," I snarled possessively. "Say it."

"I belong to you, daddy," she moaned, sinking down onto my length in one fluid motion.

The tight heat of her cunt nearly undid me. I gripped her ass hard enough to bruise, guiding her movements as she rode me with desperate abandon.

"Look at you, taking my cock so perfectly," I growled, watching her breasts bounce with each thrust. "Fucking made for me."

She threw her head back, exposing the delicate column of her throat. The sight of her—lost in pleasure, completely surrendered to me—ignited something primal within me.

"Faster," I commanded, slapping her ass sharply. "Show me how much you need it."

"Please," she begged, her inner walls clenching around me. "I need you to fill me up."

I flipped her onto her back without warning, driving into her with punishing force. "This pussy is mine," I snarled, marking her neck with my teeth. "No matter who tries to take you from me."

Her nails raked down my back as she wrapped her legs tighter around my waist. "Yes, yours," she gasped, each thrust pushing her closer to the edge. "Always yours."

I felt her beginning to tighten around me, her release approaching.

"Look at me when you come," I demanded, gripping her chin to force her gaze to mine. "I want to see exactly who's making you fall apart."

Her eyes—those beautiful eyes I'd spent days trying to forget—locked with mine as her orgasm crashed through her.

The raw vulnerability in her expression, the way she whispered my name like a prayer, pushed me over the edge.

I buried myself to the hilt as I emptied inside her, marking her as mine in the most primitive way possible.

As the pleasure receded, I pulled her against my chest, suddenly unwilling to break our connection.

In this dream world, she curled into me willingly, her body fitting perfectly against mine.

"Don't leave again," I whispered into her hair, my voice rough with emotion I never allowed myself to show when awake.

Dream-Serena looked up at me with eyes that saw straight through my carefully constructed walls. "Then give me a reason to stay."

I jolted awake, my body tense and uncomfortably aroused.

The dream had felt so real—her scent, her touch, the warmth of her skin against mine.

Now I was left with nothing but the lingering aroma of sandalwood and the cold realization of her absence.

Why the hell would I dream about her?

It wasn't because I missed her. No.

I probably just haven't had sex in a while. It's a normal biological reaction—nothing more.

That's all it is.

But as I sat up and looked around the lounge, I started noticing the little things.

The cushions on the couch, still arranged the way she used to do it.

The stash of vitamins she used to nag me about, still lined up neatly in the drawer.

I hadn't noticed before. Or maybe I just never paid attention.

Now, without her, the room felt... wrong. Like something essential was missing.

Still, it doesn't mean I miss her.

Then I checked my watch, surprised to find I'd slept for over three hours. The most restful sleep I'd had since she left.

Sitting up, I reached for my phone and pulled up her contact information.

My thumb hovered over the call button for several long moments before I finally tossed the device aside in frustration.

What would I even say?

That I missed her? That I suddenly realized she meant something to me? No. Ryan Blackwood doesn't beg. Not even for his wife.

I paced the room, battling with myself. The dream had shaken something loose inside me—desire mixed with a possessiveness I couldn't explain away as mere physical attraction.

After several minutes of internal struggle, I snatched up my phone again and decisively pressed the call button.

The automated message was immediate and jarring: "The number you have dialed is not available."

I frowned, trying again. Same result.

She had blocked me. Completely cut me out of her life.

The realization hit me like a physical blow.

She wasn't bluffing—she truly meant to leave me.

For the first time in years, I felt something dangerously close to panic.

Chapter 13: Chapter 13 "Unwitting" investors

Serena's POV

"To Serena, our creative genius who's finally back where she belongs!" Maya raised her glass, her eyes sparkling with genuine happiness.

Everyone at the table cheered, clinking glasses as we celebrated my return to Dreamland Studio.

The small restaurant buzzed with our laughter and excited chatter about upcoming projects.

For the first time in months, I felt truly light, surrounded by people who valued me for my talent rather than my last name.

"You should've seen the clients' faces when they realized you were back," Celeste gushed, her normally reserved demeanor animated by a few glasses of wine.

"They practically begged for your personal touch on their commissions!"

I smiled, warmth spreading through my chest. "I've missed this—missed all of you," I admitted, looking around at my team.

"These designs have been living in my head for too long. It's time they saw the light of day."

The evening continued with food, drinks, and endless discussions about our new collection.

By the time we finished, night had fallen completely, casting the city in a soft glow of streetlights and neon signs.

Maya and I stumbled out of the restaurant, arms linked and still giggling about some inside joke when I spotted him—Simon, Ryan's ever-loyal assistant, standing rigidly beside a sleek black car across the street.

"Oh hell no," Maya muttered under her breath, instantly sobering. "Want me to tell him to fuck off?"

I squeezed her arm. "It's fine. Let me handle this."

Simon approached us with measured steps, his expression professionally blank as always. "Ms. Quinn, I apologize for the interruption to your evening."

"What does he want now, Simon?" I asked directly, not bothering with pleasantries. The cool night air suddenly felt insufficient against the heat rising in my cheeks.

"Mr. Blackwood asked me to deliver these to you." He held out a large envelope and a small box.

"The deed to the downtown penthouse has been transferred to your name, along with some funds he believes you're entitled to."

I stared at the items without reaching for them. "I don't want anything from him."

"Take it, Serena," Maya interrupted, snatching the envelope from Simon's hand.

She peeked inside and whistled low. "This is definitely what you deserve after everything he put you through."

"Maya—"

"Mr. Blackwood was quite insistent," Simon added, his voice betraying a hint of discomfort. "He wanted to ensure your financial stability wasn't compromised by your... situation."

I laughed bitterly. "My situation? You mean my divorce from a man who never acknowledged my existence unless it was convenient? Tell Ryan he can keep his guilt money."

Maya grabbed my arm, pulling me slightly aside. "Are you crazy?" she whispered fiercely.

"This is a downtown penthouse we're talking about! Do you know how much that's worth? Take the damn money and property. It's the least he owes you!"

Simon stood awkwardly, pretending not to hear our heated exchange.

"Please inform Mr. Blackwood," Maya called over my shoulder, "that Serena accepts these items as the bare minimum compensation for her time and emotional labor. Also, tell him to stop bothering her. The divorce is final. She's moved on."

Simon nodded stiffly. "I'll relay your message, Ms. Carter." Then he returned to the waiting car.

I watched the sleek vehicle pull away, a complicated knot of emotions twisting in my stomach.

"I really don't want his money, Maya," I said quietly as we walked toward her car.

"Listen to me," she said, her tone gentler now. "That man put you through hell. You spent years of your life trying to be perfect for someone who couldn't be bothered to look at you twice. This isn't guilt money—it's what you rightfully earned."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "It feels like I'm still letting him control me somehow."

"No, sweetie. Taking what you deserve isn't letting him control you—it's using his resources to build your own empire."

A mischievous grin spread across her face. "Besides, just imagine how amazing it'll be when your brand outshines his company, and you did it partly with his own money."

That made me laugh, really laugh. "When you put it that way..."

"Exactly! Now, when can we start moving you in?"

The rest of the drive was filled with excited plans about furniture and decor for the new place.

For the first time since the divorce, I allowed myself to feel genuinely hopeful about the future.

Two weeks later, I was fully settled into the penthouse.

The floor-to-ceiling windows offered breathtaking views of the city skyline, and I'd transformed the spare bedroom into a design studio filled with natural light.

Despite my initial reluctance, I had to admit it made working much more efficient.

I invested a significant portion of Ryan's "compensation" into Dreamland Studio's expansion.

The designs I'd kept hidden away for years—ideas I'd been too insecure to share while married to Ryan—were now being developed into a comprehensive jewelry collection.

My vision was taking shape, piece by exquisite piece.

Our studio's official social media account posted daily updates, steadily building hype for the brand launch.

The strategy was spot-on—just enough mystery to hook people without giving the whole game away.

Meanwhile, Ivy was practically gloating around town, selling her stolen designs for increasingly outrageous prices. Her confidence grew with each transaction, completely oblivious to the trap slowly closing around her.

"We're still short on funding for the production phase," Maya noted one evening as we reviewed our business plan.

"Even with Ryan's money, launching a jewelry brand requires serious capital."

I smiled, closing my laptop with a decisive click. "Don't worry. I've got a plan."

"That's your 'I'm about to destroy someone' smile," Maya observed, raising an eyebrow. "What are you cooking up?"

"Remember all those designs Ivy stole?" I leaned forward, my voice dropping conspiratorially. "It's time we use her theft to our advantage."

"You're going to expose her?" Maya's eyes widened with delight.

"WhisperStream and I have everything prepared. The timing has to be perfect."

I felt a surge of satisfaction as I outlined the plan. "Ivy thinks she's won, that she's untouchable. But she's about to become the most valuable asset in launching our brand."

Maya raised her wine glass in a toast. "To turning thieves into unwitting investors."
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I clinked my glass against hers, savoring the sweet anticipation of justice. "She'll never see it coming."

Chapter 14: Chapter 14 The Perfect Setup

Author's POV

Serena watched her phone screen with intense satisfaction as the notification popped up.

WhisperStream had just confirmed that their plan was unfolding exactly as intended.

Over the past week, she and Maya had been meticulously building a case against Ivy—gathering evidence of her plagiarism and quietly coordinating with the designers she had stolen from.

"Six designers on board now," Serena said, glancing toward Maya, who was sprawled across the living room sofa, casually sketching new ideas.

"WhisperStream really delivered. These industry folks were surprisingly eager to help once they realized they could remain anonymous."

Maya snorted, not bothering to look up. "Not surprising at all. Everyone knows Ivy's a fraud—they just didn't want to risk Blackwood's wrath. Anonymity is a beautiful thing."

Serena nodded, scrolling through the neatly organized folders of evidence.

There were side-by-side comparisons of the original designs and Ivy's so-called 'inspirations,' timestamps proving the originals had existed long before hers, and statements from artisans who had worked on both versions and were finally ready to speak out.

It was damning. Precise. Undeniable.

"Think she's seen it yet?" Maya asked, finally glancing up.

Serena's lips curved into a slow, satisfied smile. "Should be hitting her inbox right... about... now."

She could almost picture Ivy's face as the truth began to unravel.

Ivy's scream echoed through her luxury apartment as dozens of images loaded on her phone screen.

Side-by-side comparisons, original sketches, production timelines—all clearly showing she'd stolen every single design she claimed as her own.

"What the FUCK is this?" she shrieked, hurling her phone across the room. It bounced off an expensive throw pillow and landed on the carpet.

Her assistant winced, taking an instinctive step backward.

"Someone's clearly gathered evidence of your..." he hesitated, searching for a diplomatic word, "inspirations."

"Don't just stand there!" Ivy snapped, pacing frantically. "Find out who sent this! Trace the email! Do something useful for once!"

The assistant retrieved her phone, scrolling through the damning evidence with growing alarm. "This is... extensive. Maybe we should inform Mr. Blackwood—"

"ARE YOU INSANE?" Ivy whirled on him, face contorted with rage. "Tell Ryan I've been stealing designs? You complete idiot! I need to maintain my image as a creative genius! He can't know about any of this!"

The assistant pressed his lips together, wisely choosing silence as Ivy continued her tirade.

"All this time crafting the perfect persona, getting closer to Ryan... I will NOT let some anonymous whistleblower destroy everything I've worked for!"

Her phone dinged with a new message. The color drained from her face as she read:

"1,000,000 transferred to the offshore account below within 48 hours, or these documents go public. Your career and relationship with Ryan Blackwood ends immediately."

Followed by banking details.

"One million dollars?" she whispered, collapsing onto her couch. "Where am I supposed to get that kind of money?"

Her assistant remained silent, watching her internal struggle play out.

She'd been cornered masterfully. If Ryan discovered her fraud, any chance of winning his affection would evaporate instantly.

Her reputation in the design world would be destroyed. But one million dollars...

"I'll need to liquidate some assets," she finally muttered, defeat evident in her voice. "And take out a loan. Maybe sell some of the jewelry Ryan gave me."

Serena's POV

Back at my penthouse, WhisperStream's message lit up my screen: "She's panicking. Already calling her bank to arrange transfers."

I couldn't help the satisfied smile spreading across my face. "She's taking the bait," I told Maya. "Already arranging the money."

"God, I wish I could see her face," Maya laughed, setting aside her sketchbook. "Miss High-and-Mighty scrambling to save her fake reputation."

I poured us each a glass of wine, feeling lighter than I had in months. "The best part? She can't go to Ryan for help without admitting everything."

"To blackmail and justice," Maya raised her glass, eyes twinkling with mischief.

We clinked glasses, and I savored both the wine and the sweet taste of long-awaited revenge. "The money will be perfect seed funding for our launch." *freewebnovel.com*

"You're splitting it with WhisperStream, right?"

"Sixty-forty," I confirmed. "They get forty percent. Worth every penny for their expertise."

Maya whistled. "That's still a significant chunk for our startup costs. When do you think she'll transfer it?"

"Within forty-eight hours," I said confidently. "Ivy might be a thief, but she's not stupid. She knows what exposure would cost her."

My phone buzzed again with a message from WhisperStream: "Looking forward to our partnership. Your trap was brilliantly designed."

I smiled, typing back my thanks.

The next day, I woke to confirmation that Ivy had transferred the full amount.

Six hundred thousand dollars had been deposited into our business account—enough to cover production costs for our first collection and a strategic marketing campaign.

"You're not feeling guilty, are you?" Maya asked when she noticed me staring at the account balance.

I looked up, surprised by the question. "Guilty? For making her pay for stealing other's work? Not even slightly."

"Good," she nodded approvingly. "Because we're just getting started. Next phase is the launch, and trust me, when your collection drops alongside hers..."

"Everyone will see her fall," I finished, a renewed fire burning in my chest. "And they'll know I'm the one who brought her down."

Maya grinned as she pulled out her tablet and tilted it toward me, showing off the finalized marketing materials.

"Blogs are already picking up the scent," she said proudly. "Lazuli is officially generating buzz—exactly on schedule."

I leaned in, letting my eyes scan the sleek visuals and teaser posts she'd put together.

The campaign was subtle but effective, offering just enough intrigue to spark curiosity without revealing too much of our overall strategy.

Everything—from the color palette to the tagline—was deliberate. Elegant. Disruptive in all the right ways.

"Now, are you ready to become the talk of the design world?" Maya asked with a grin.

I closed the tablet, feeling the weight of years of suppression and self-doubt finally lifting from my shoulders. "I've been ready my whole life."

As I returned to my workstation to finalize the last details of my collection, I couldn't help thinking about Ryan's reaction when he discovered the truth. Would he connect the dots back to me? Would he finally recognize what he'd dismissed for so long?

Part of me hoped he would. The other part—the stronger, newer part of me—no longer cared what Ryan Blackwood thought at all.

Chapter 15: Chapter 15 The Fall of a Fraud

Author's POV

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?" Ivy screamed, hurling her tablet across the luxurious penthouse suite. The device crashed against the wall, its screen shattering on impact - much like her reputation was doing online.

Just days ago, she'd been the "design genius" everyone talked about. Now? The internet buzzed with nothing but praise for someone called "Lady Lazuli" and her Dreamland jewelry collection.

Ivy scrolled frantically through the comments section of the latest design blog, her perfectly manicured nails trembling with rage.

"Ivy Hart is just another influencer pretending to be a designer. Anyone with eyes can see Lady Lazuli is the real deal!"

"Comparing Hart Jewelry to Dreamland? Are you kidding me? They're not even in the same league!"

"Can Hart Jewelry stop trying to ride coattails? We haven't forgotten about the plagiarism scandal! Even Celeste's work was better than Ivy's stolen designs."
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"Exactly! If she couldn't even compete with Celeste, how dare she compare herself to Lady Lazuli? It's like comparing elementary math to advanced calculus - completely different levels!"

The comments continued in the same vein - unanimous, brutal, and devastatingly accurate. Ivy's perfectly contoured face contorted with rage as she threw her phone aside.

"Six hundred thousand dollars gone AND my reputation in tatters?" she hissed through clenched teeth. "All in less than a week?"

Her assistant cowered by the door, clutching a stack of magazines featuring the mysterious Lady Lazuli's designs on their covers. The young woman had already faced Ivy's wrath three times that morning and was clearly terrified of triggering another explosion.

"Find out who this Lady Lazuli really is," Ivy snarled, pacing the room like a caged animal. "Get me everything - her real name, where she works, who funds her, her weaknesses. EVERYTHING! Anyone who dares challenge me is challenging the Blackwood family, and they'll pay dearly for it."

The assistant nodded quickly, backing toward the door. "Yes, Miss Hart. Right away."

"And get me Ryan on the phone!"

"But Miss, after what happened last time you were—"

"Did I ask for your opinion?" Ivy shrieked, snatching a crystal paperweight from her desk and hurling it across the room.

The assistant ducked just in time, the heavy object shattering against the doorframe inches from her head.

"Just do what I told you!"

Left alone, Ivy dropped onto her designer sofa, snatching up her phone and scrolling through yet another article about Lady Lazuli.

Each glowing review felt like a slap to the face. Every side-by-side comparison only emphasized how flat and uninspired her own designs now looked in contrast.

Then her phone buzzed.

A message from Ryan's assistant:

"Mr. Blackwood is in meetings all day and asks that you direct any design concerns through the proper channels."

Ryan was avoiding her?

The realization hit harder than she expected.

Ever since the day she'd been thrown out of his office, Ryan had grown increasingly cold. First, he stopped taking her calls. Then he stopped replying altogether.

No more intimate dinners. No more special treatment. Just cold, professional correspondence through assistants.

Ivy poured herself a generous glass of scotch, not caring that it was barely noon.

Her perfectly curated life was unraveling at an alarming rate, and she couldn't shake the feeling that somehow, somewhere, Serena was laughing at her downfall.

"It has to be her," Ivy whispered, a dangerous gleam in her eye. "Lady Lazuli... Serena... they must be connected."

Ivy drained her glass and stared out at the city skyline.

She hadn't clawed her way to the top just to be dethroned by some mysterious newcomer.

If Lady Lazuli thought she could destroy Ivy Hart's career and walk away unscathed, she was about to learn just how dangerous an enemy Ivy could be.

"When I'm done with you," Ivy whispered to the empty room, "no one will even remember your name."

Serena's POV

The moment I stepped out of Dreamland Studio, exhaustion weighing heavy on my shoulders, I spotted his car. That sleek black Mercedes I once knew so well, parked right in front of my building like he still had every right to be there. My heart skipped—not from excitement, but from irritation.

Ryan emerged from the driver's seat, his eyes slowly traveling over my designer outfit with that judgmental look I'd grown to hate. The audacity of this man, showing up unannounced after everything.

"Where have you been? Why are you coming home so late?" His voice carried that familiar controlling tone, like I still answered to him.

I almost laughed. "That's really none of your business anymore, is it?"

Without giving him the satisfaction of further engagement, I walked past his car, heading straight for my front door. The last thing I needed after finalizing details for our jewelry showcase was dealing with Ryan's entitled attitude.

"Stop. You haven't answered my question," he called after me.

Did he seriously expect me to obey? Like we weren't divorced? Like he hadn't thrown me away the moment something better came along? I kept walking, treating his words like the meaningless air they were.

"Serena! Are you even listening to me?"

His footsteps quickened behind me, and before I could reach my door, his hand clamped down on my arm—hard enough to hurt. I winced, looking down at where his fingers dug into my skin.

"Mr. Blackwood," I said coldly, using his formal title deliberately. "Is harassing me at night your new hobby? Sorry, but I'm exhausted and have zero interest in whatever drama you're bringing. Let. Go."

I yanked my arm free, feeling a rush of satisfaction at his surprised expression. He wasn't used to this version of me—the one who didn't cower or apologize for existing.

"What do you want?" I finally asked, rubbing my arm where his grip had left red marks.

His expression hardened, that familiar cold mask sliding into place. "Grandmother wants to see you. She asked me to bring you for dinner."

I stood frozen, caught off guard. His grandmother had always been kind to me, one of the few people in Ryan's family who had treated me with genuine warmth.

"So you want me to pretend we're still married?" I couldn't keep the incredulity from my voice. "That's what you came here for?"

"It's just one dinner," he said, his tone softening slightly. "It won't take long. I'll drive you there and bring you back afterward."

I stared at him, trying to process this bizarre request. After everything that had happened between us—the coldness, the dismissal, the divorce—he expected me to play happy wife for his grandmother's benefit?

"Please," he added, the word sounding foreign coming from him. Ryan Blackwood rarely said "please" to anyone.

Against my better judgment, I found myself nodding. Not for Ryan—never for him again—but for his grandmother who had shown me kindness when the rest of his family had looked down on me.

"Fine," I agreed reluctantly. "But just dinner, and then you bring me straight back."

The drive to the Blackwood old estate was painfully silent. When we arrived at the grand entrance I once called home, Ryan's arm slid around my waist as we walked toward the door.

I stiffened immediately. "What are you doing?"

"Grandmother doesn't know about the divorce," he murmured close to my ear, his breath warm against my skin. "I haven't found the right moment to tell her."

Of course he hadn't. Ryan Blackwood, CEO of a global empire, suddenly couldn't handle a simple conversation with his grandmother. More likely, he was avoiding her disappointment—or worse, her questions about why he'd failed at marriage.

I didn't pull away, though every cell in my body wanted to. This charade wasn't for him; it was for the elderly woman who had welcomed me into her home years ago.

The moment we entered, Ryan's grandmother greeted us with warm enthusiasm that made my heart ache with guilt.

"My dears!" she exclaimed, embracing me first, then Ryan. "It's been too long since you've visited together."

I forced a smile, accepting her embrace. "It's wonderful to see you, Mrs. Blackwood."

"You look thin," she scolded, examining me with critical eyes. "Is my grandson not feeding you properly? Ryan, what have I told you about taking care of your wife?"

Ryan cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Serena's been busy with her work, Grandmother."

"Work? What work?" She led us toward the dining room, her jeweled hand still holding mine. "I thought you were focusing on giving me great-grandchildren. That's a full-time job, isn't it?"

I nearly choked on air. The awkwardness was suffocating.

"Grandmother," Ryan smoothly intercepted, "why don't we eat first? Things like children... they can't be rushed."

Evelyn's eyebrows shot up, surprised but not displeased. "Is that so? Well, I suppose a woman should have something to keep herself occupied. Just don't let it distract you from what truly matters, dear."

There was no malice in her voice—but the old-fashioned way she spoke reminded me exactly why I'd felt so worthless in this family.

My career, my passion, my talent—just pretty embellishments, really.

What truly mattered was fulfilling my duty as the Blackwood wife—and producing heirs.

Ryan's hand squeezed mine in warning as he noticed my expression darkening. I forced a smile instead, swallowing the retort that threatened to escape.

This would be a very long dinner indeed.

Chapter 16: Chapter 16 Bitter Medicine

Serena's POV

The dinner dragged on forever. Every bite stuck in my throat as I forced polite smiles, pretending to be the happy daughter-in-law Evelyn wanted to see.

Ryan played his part perfectly—the attentive husband, occasionally touching my hand or shoulder like we were still madly in love. What a joke.

When dessert finally arrived, I thought salvation was near. Just a little longer and I'd be free from this charade.

Then Evelyn dropped her bombshell.

"It's getting quite late. You two should stay the night," she announced, not a question but a statement. "Your old room is prepared—just as you left it."

My mind raced for excuses. Work deadline? Early meeting? Sick pet?

Before I could open my mouth, Ryan squeezed my hand under the table. "Thank you, Grandmother. That would be lovely."

I shot him a murderous glare. The audacity! He had no right to answer for me.

"Wonderful!" Evelyn beamed, clapping her hands together. "I've missed having you both here."

The guilt hit me again. She genuinely cared for me—maybe the only one in this family who ever did. I couldn't bring myself to disappoint her, not tonight.

"I have some work to finish," I said, standing abruptly. "Is it alright if I use the study for a while?"

Evelyn waved her hand dismissively. "Of course, dear. Though I don't know why Ryan keeps you working so hard. A woman needs rest if she wants to conceive."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from saying something I'd regret. Ryan, noticing my tension, smoothly changed the subject.

In the study, I threw myself into revising designs for the upcoming showcase.

Work always centered me, pulled me back from emotional precipices. Time melted away as I refined the pieces that would appear under Lady Lazuli's brand.

I'd been so absorbed that I hadn't noticed Ryan leaning against the doorframe, silently watching me.

He never came to check on me. In fact, he usually didn't care whether I was up late—or up at all.

"It's past midnight," he said quietly. "Grandmother's gone to bed."

I didn't look up. "I'm not finished."

"I'm not here to rush you."

That made me pause, fingers stalling over my sketchpad. The Ryan I knew wouldn't have bothered with any of this. He wouldn't send someone, let alone come himself.

"I'll be in the room when you're ready," he added, then turned and walked away without another word.

I stared after him, unsettled.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Was he expecting me to sleep in the same bed as him?

When I finally dragged myself upstairs an hour later, exhaustion weighing my limbs, I found our old bedroom exactly as I remembered.

The king-sized bed where I'd spent so many lonely nights. The elegant furnishings that never felt like mine.

A soft knock interrupted my thoughts. A maid entered, carrying a steaming cup on a silver tray.

"Mrs. Blackwood asked me to bring this for you," she explained, placing it on the nightstand. "It's her special fertility blend. She says you should drink it while it's hot."

My stomach turned as I recognized the familiar herbal smell.

For three years, I'd choked down similar concoctions—ginseng, royal jelly, weird herbs I couldn't pronounce—all promising to "enhance fertility" and "strengthen the womb."

"Thank you," I managed, waiting for her to leave before glaring at the offensive cup.

The bathroom door opened, and Ryan emerged, hair damp from the shower, wearing only pajama bottoms. He stopped when he saw the steaming cup.

"What's that?"

"Your grandmother's baby-making potion," I said bitterly. "Apparently I'm still defective and need fixing."

His brow furrowed as he approached, picking up the cup to examine its contents. "She's been making you drink this?"

"For three years," I laughed without humor. "Every month like clockwork. This and about a dozen other 'miracle remedies.' Sometimes it was pills. Sometimes it was teas so bitter I'd gag. Once it was some kind of fish oil that made me throw up for two days."

Ryan's expression changed, something like realization dawning.

"You didn't know?" I asked, seeing his shock. "Of course you didn't. You were too busy with your precious company—and Ivy—to notice what was happening in your own home."

I grabbed the cup from his hands. "You know what's truly ironic? We barely even slept together! Three, maybe four times in three years. Yet somehow it was still my fault we didn't have children."

His face paled. "Serena—"

"Maybe you should try it," I snapped, shoving the cup toward him. "Since your grandmother is so convinced one of us has fertility issues."

Ryan stared at the cup, then back at me.

"I want you out," I declared suddenly. "Go sleep in the study attached to this bedroom. I'm done pretending."

"Grandmother will—"

"I don't give a damn what she'll think anymore," I cut him off. "Either you leave, or I'm walking out right now and calling a cab."

To my surprise, Ryan didn't argue. He simply nodded, took the cup with him, and headed toward the adjoining study.

"And take that disgusting brew with you!" I called after him.

Once alone, I collapsed onto the bed, anger and old humiliations washing over me. How many nights had I endured those treatments? How many times had I silently suffered while Ryan remained completely oblivious to my struggles?

The memory of it all made my blood boil.

Let him deal with his grandmother's disappointment for once. I was done carrying that burden alone.

Ryan's POV

I closed the study door behind me, staring down at the steaming cup in my hand. Had Serena really been drinking these concoctions for three years? At my grandmother's insistence?

The guilt hit unexpectedly. While I had been keeping Serena at arm's length, she'd been subjected to endless fertility remedies for a pregnancy that couldn't possibly happen when we barely shared a bed.

Curiosity got the better of me. I took a cautious sip and immediately grimaced at the bitter, earthy taste. How had she managed to drink these regularly without complaint? The mixture was revolting—like licking a tree root covered in dirt.

I forced down another swallow, newfound respect growing for the woman in the next room. She'd endured this silently while I'd offered nothing but coldness in return.

During our marriage, I'd touched her so rarely, yet Grandmother had apparently been pressuring her constantly about producing heirs. The realization left a bitter taste in my mouth that had nothing to do with the tonic.

Setting the now-empty cup aside, I prepared for bed, stripping down to my boxers in the stifling heat of the small study.

Sleep refused to come. I tossed and turned on the narrow cot as the minutes dragged by—one hour, then another.

My body felt strangely warm, restless. The room seemed too hot despite the air conditioning.

I sat up, wiping sweat from my forehead. What was happening? My heart raced, and a strange, almost desperate energy coursed through my veins.

The fertility brew. Of course.

I'd never considered what was actually in Grandmother's "special blend." Clearly, it contained strong aphrodisiacs alongside whatever fertility supplements she believed in.

Poor Serena. Month after month, drinking this while I ignored her.

(This was, in fact, the only time the fertility tonic contained an aphrodisiac—apparently, Grandmother considered their joint arrival a rare opportunity worth seizing.)

I paced the small room, trying to walk off the uncomfortable heat building in my body. It wasn't working. My skin felt too tight, my thoughts increasingly unfocused.

A cold shower. That's what I needed.

I opened the study door, intending to use the bathroom attached to the main bedroom. In the dim light, I could see Serena's sleeping form on the bed, the thin sheet draped over her curves, highlighting rather than concealing.

I froze, unable to look away.

Had she always been this beautiful?

The moonlight through the window cast a silver glow across her exposed shoulder, her hair spilling across the pillow like dark silk.

Her chest rose and fell with each breath, the thin fabric of her nightgown leaving little to imagination.

My body responded instantly, desire flooding through me with an intensity that stole my rational thought.

Before I could stop myself, I was moving toward the bed, drawn by a need more powerful than any I'd felt before.

The tonic had ignited something primal—something raw and uncontrollable.

My hand moved before I could stop it, fingers hovering just inches above her sleeping form.

And then—she stirred.

Chapter 17: Chapter 17 Unexpected Surrender

Serena's POV

I jolted awake at the distinct sensation of being watched.

There he was—Ryan—looming over my bed, his hand suspended inches from my face.

"What the hell are you doing?" I hissed, clutching the thin sheet to my chest.

He didn't answer.

But then I really looked at him—his dilated pupils, the fine sheen of sweat glistening on his bare chest, the unmistakable bulge straining against his boxers.

Recognition hit me instantly.

"Shit," I muttered. "She drugged you."

Evelyn's innocent "fertility tonic" suddenly made perfect sense. The old witch hadn't given up on getting her great-grandchildren after all. She'd resorted to pharmaceutical intervention.

"You need to go back to the study," I said firmly, keeping the sheet between us as a barrier. "Right now, Ryan."

Instead of retreating, he sank onto the edge of my bed, his weight creating a dip that rolled me slightly toward him. The proximity sent an unwelcome jolt of awareness through my body.

"I can't think straight," he admitted, his gaze dropping to my lips. "Everything's burning."

"That's because your grandmother slipped you an aphrodisiac, you idiot."

Despite the danger of the situation, I couldn't help the bitterness in my voice. "Three years of marriage, and she has to drug you to get you into my bed. Irony, isn't it?"

Ryan's hand found my ankle beneath the sheet, and even that innocent touch sent electricity racing up my leg. "I need you, Serena."

"No, you need someone," I corrected him, trying to ignore the heat building in my core. "It's the drug talking, not you."

His fingers traced a slow path up my calf, and when his fingers found the damp evidence of my arousal, he groaned triumphantly. "You still want to pretend you don't want this?"

"Yes," I warned, though my voice lacked conviction. "You made your choice every single night for three years when you turned your back to me."

"Liar," he accused, voice rough with desire.

"This is wrong," I whispered, even as my treacherous body arched toward him. "We're divorced. This isn't real."

His lips brushed against my neck, and I couldn't suppress the small gasp that escaped me.

"This feels real," he murmured against my skin. "You still respond to me, Serena. Your body remembers mine."

I should have said it. Should have pushed him away. But three years of rejection and longing made me hesitate just long enough for him to lower his head and brush his lips against mine.

The contact was electric. My hands flew to his chest, intending to push him away, but instead curled against the hard planes of muscle there.

"Stop," I whispered unconvincingly as his mouth traveled down my neck.

"Your mouth says stop," he murmured against my skin, "but your body is begging me for more."

The possessive declaration should have infuriated me. Instead, it sent another wave of heat through my body.

"I hate you," I whispered as he lowered his head to my breast.

"I know," he acknowledged, his palm hot against my thigh. "Hate me tomorrow. Need me tonight." freewebnovel.com

"This doesn't change anything," I should have stopped him.

Should have remembered all the nights I'd cried myself to sleep, desperate for the very attention he was now lavishing on me.

But my resistance crumbled beneath his touch as he cupped my breasts, thumbs circling my hardened nipples with practiced precision.

"I won't be Sophie's replacement," I warned, the words puncturing the heated moment.

His response was to lower his head, taking one sensitive peak into his mouth. The wet heat of his tongue sent shockwaves through me, and I couldn't contain the moan that escaped my lips.

"Not another word about the past," Ryan commanded, his voice rough with desire as he shifted between my thighs. "Tonight, you're mine again."

"I'm not yours," I protested weakly, gasping as his fingers found the dampness between my legs. "I'll never be yours again."

The smirk that curved his lips was dangerous, predatory. "Your body disagrees."

I wanted to argue, to maintain some semblance of dignity, but when his thumb circled my most sensitive spot, all coherent thought fled.

My hips bucked involuntarily against his hand, seeking more of the pleasure only he could provide.

"That's it, baby," he encouraged, sliding one finger inside me, then another. "Let me make you feel good."

The endearment - something he'd never used during our marriage - struck a chord somewhere deep inside me.

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, the emotional pain mingling with physical pleasure in a confusing, overwhelming cocktail.

"Don't cry," Ryan murmured, his free hand brushing a tear from my cheek. "I'll take care of you."

Without warning, he moved down my body, replacing his fingers with his mouth in one swift motion.

The sensation of his tongue against my core tore a strangled cry from my throat.

This, too, was something he'd rarely done during our marriage. Now he devoured me like a man starved, his hands gripping my thighs to keep them spread wide for his assault.

"Ryan," I gasped, fingers tangling in his hair as pleasure built to unbearable heights. "Please..."

He looked up the length of my body, his eyes dark with possession. "Say it again. My name."

"Ryan," I repeated, past caring about pride or pretense. "Don't stop."

His answering smile was triumphant as he returned to his task, tongue and fingers working in tandem until I shattered, back arching off the bed as waves of pleasure crashed over me.

Before I could recover, he was positioning himself above me, the hard length of him pressing insistently against my entrance. For one brief moment, sanity returned.

"Wait," I gasped. "Protection."

Ryan paused, the muscles in his arms trembling with restraint. "Do you have anything?"

I shook my head. "No, but we can't risk—"

"I'm clean," he cut me off. "And you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then let me feel you," he demanded, his voice dropping to that commanding tone that always sent shivers down my spine. "Just this once. No barriers between us."

The recklessness of it appealed to some primal part of me. One night of foolishness couldn't undo all the caution of the past years, could it?

Before I could overthink it, I nodded once, and Ryan needed no further invitation. He pushed forward in one powerful thrust, filling me completely.

"Fuck," he growled, forehead pressed against mine as he remained perfectly still. "So tight. So perfect."

The familiar fullness coupled with the unfamiliar intensity of his desire overwhelmed me. I wrapped my legs around his waist, urging him deeper.

"Move," I commanded, and for once, Ryan Blackwood obeyed without question.

His hips established a punishing rhythm, each thrust driving me further into the mattress.

This wasn't the mechanical fulfillment of marital duty I remembered. This was primal, desperate - a claiming.

"Mine," he growled against my ear, his pace increasing. "Always mine."

I should have corrected him, should have maintained the boundaries between us. Instead, I surrendered to the moment, nails scratching down his back as pleasure built once more.

"Ryan," I cried out as my second climax approached, stronger than the first. "God, yes!"

His rhythm faltered, becoming erratic as he neared his own release. "Come with me, Serena," he demanded, one hand slipping between our joined bodies to circle my sensitive bud. "Let me feel you."

The dual stimulation pushed me over the edge. I came with his name on my lips, inner muscles clenching around him as wave after wave of pleasure washed through me.

With a guttural groan, Ryan followed, burying himself deep inside me as his release claimed him. I felt the hot pulse of him, marking me from within in the most primitive way possible.

For several long moments, we remained locked together, bodies trembling with aftershocks, breath mingling in the small space between us.

Reality hovered just beyond the edges of this stolen moment, waiting to rush back in.

As the fog of desire began to lift from Ryan's eyes, I braced myself—for regret, for awkwardness, for anything that might come next.

But before any of it arrived, fatigue crashed over me, the emotional and physical toll of the night dragging me toward unconsciousness.

The last thing I remembered was Ryan pulling me gently against his chest, his steady heartbeat thrumming beneath my cheek as the darkness closed in.

Tomorrow's regrets could wait.

Tonight, I would allow myself this one weakness.

Chapter 18: Chapter 18 Morning Aftermath

Serena's POV

I woke up to sunlight streaming through unfamiliar curtains, momentarily disoriented until the memories of last night came flooding back.

Ryan's drugged state. His unexpected passion. My embarrassing surrender.

"Shit," I muttered, sitting up abruptly. The space beside me was empty, the sheets cool to the touch. Of course he'd left. What had I expected?

A quick glance at the clock showed it was already past eight.

Evelyn would be expecting me for breakfast - her morning ritual that no one in the household dared to miss.

I groaned, knowing she'd be insufferably smug if she suspected what had transpired between her grandson and me.

After a hasty shower to wash away the evidence of last night's weakness, I dressed in a simple white blouse and pencil skirt.

"Good morning, dear!" Evelyn chirped as I entered the dining room. Her eyes gleamed with expectation, scanning me from head to toe as if looking for visible signs of her plan's success.

Ryan sat at the opposite end of the table, hidden behind a financial newspaper. The coward couldn't even face me.

"Sleep well?" Evelyn asked innocently, pouring me a cup of tea.

"Like the dead," I replied flatly, taking my seat. "Must have been something in that special tea you served last night."

The newspaper lowered slightly, revealing Ryan's tense expression. Our eyes met briefly before he retreated behind his paper fortress.

"I'm so pleased to hear it," Evelyn continued, oblivious to my sarcasm. "Ryan, darling, you look particularly refreshed this morning as well."

Ryan merely grunted in response, which only widened Evelyn's smile.

"I was just telling Ryan that I've scheduled an appointment with Dr. Richardson next week," she announced, placing a plate of fresh fruit before me. "He's the best fertility specialist in the city."

I nearly choked on my tea. "Excuse me?"

"Well, if you two are trying for a baby, we should ensure everything is in perfect working order."

She explained, as if discussing the weather. "Your diet will need adjustments too. More folic acid, less caffeine."

Ryan finally lowered his newspaper completely. "Grandmother, that's enough."

"Nonsense! Family planning is nothing to be ashamed of," Evelyn insisted. "Why, your grandfather and I consulted specialists when—"

"I have meetings all morning," Ryan interrupted sharply. "Serena, didn't you mention needing a ride to your studio?"

I hadn't, but I seized the lifeline. "Yes, actually. We should go now if you're to make your first appointment."

Evelyn looked disappointed but didn't protest as Ryan and I made our hasty exit. The silence in the car was deafening as we pulled away from the mansion.

"About last night," Ryan finally began, his knuckles white against the steering wheel.

"Let's not," I cut him off. "It was a mistake facilitated by whatever your grandmother put in your drink."

His jaw tightened. "Is that what you think? That it was just the drug?"

"What else would it be?" I laughed bitterly. "Three years of marriage and you barely touched me. One drugged night and suddenly you can't keep your hands off me? Please."

Ryan took a sharp turn, pulling into an empty parking lot before slamming the car into park. "It wasn't just the drug, Serena."

"Don't," I warned, staring straight ahead. "Don't you dare try to rewrite our history now."

"I'm not," he insisted, turning to face me. "The drug lowered my inhibitions, yes, but the desire was already there."

"Save it," I snapped. "When are you telling your grandmother about our divorce? She's planning our fertility treatments, for God's sake!"

Ryan ran a hand through his hair, a rare gesture of frustration. "I'll tell her soon. But there's no rush, is there? Unless..." His eyes narrowed. "Unless you've met someone."

The accusation caught me off guard. "What?"

"Is that it? You're seeing someone new?"

"That's none of your business," I replied automatically, though there was no one.

Ryan's expression darkened. "So there is someone."

"I didn't say that," I argued, irritated by his assumption. "But even if there were, we're divorced, Ryan. You have no claim on me anymore."

Before he could respond, my phone chimed with a text notification. I glanced down, momentarily distracted.

From: Triton

Just landed in town. Dinner tonight? I've missed your face.

I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face.

Most people knew him by his hacker handle—Triton. That was how I knew him, too.

We'd met by pure chance. He came across some of my designs online and reached out, saying he saw real potential in them.

To my surprise, he not only appreciated my work but seemed to understand my creative vision better than anyone else ever had.

We hit it off almost immediately—especially when it came to design. He had an eye for detail and a mind that worked in sync with mine.

Whenever I was stuck, he always knew just the right thing to say—or the perfect reference to send.

Over time, I found myself turning to him not only for creative input, but also for comfort, especially during the lowest points of my failed marriage.

We'd never met in person, never even exchanged photos.

Our entire friendship played out through a secure, encrypted app. And yet, somehow, he became one of the few people I truly trusted. One of the few who got me.

Not that I wasn't curious. I mean, who wouldn't wonder what the infamous "Triton" looked like in real life?

"Who's that?" Ryan demanded, craning his neck to see my screen.

I tilted the phone away instinctively. "Just a friend. And again, none of your business."

"A friend who makes you smile like that?"

"Just drive, Ryan," I sighed. "Take me back to my apartment. I have work to do."

He started the engine with more force than necessary, merging back into traffic. "Is it serious?"

"Oh my God," I groaned. "Are you serious right now? You spend three years ignoring me, divorce me, and now you're interrogating me about my social life?"

"I have a right to know—"

"You have no rights where I'm concerned," I interrupted coldly. "Not anymore."

We drove the rest of the way in tense silence. When we reached my apartment building, I couldn't get out of the car fast enough.

"Serena," Ryan called as I stepped out. "Last night meant something."

I leaned down, meeting his gaze directly. "Last night was a drug-induced mistake that we'll both pretend never happened. Goodbye, Ryan."

I quickly typed a response to Triton as I walked away:

To: Triton

Yes! Harvest & Hearth at 8? Can't wait to see you too.

The studio was buzzing with activity when I arrived. My assistant, Lucy, intercepted me before I could reach my office.

"There's a drop-dead gorgeous guy asking for you," she whispered conspiratorially. "He's been waiting in the reception area for twenty minutes."

Maya appeared from around the corner, grinning like a cat. "When were you going to tell us about this mystery man? He's sex on legs, Serena!"

"What are you talking about?" I frowned, peering toward reception.

And there he was - Triton, tall and lean in dark jeans and a charcoal button-down, his usual mischievous smile in place. He'd cut his hair since I'd last seen him, the shorter style emphasizing his sharp cheekbones and jawline.

"Triton!" I exclaimed, hurrying over to embrace him. "I thought we were meeting tonight!"

He lifted me off my feet in a bear hug. "Couldn't wait. Plus, I wanted to see this famous studio of yours."

"You should have called ahead," I scolded, though I couldn't stop smiling. "I would have cleared my schedule."

"And ruin the surprise?" He raised an eyebrow. "Not a chance."

I turned to find Maya and Celeste watching us with undisguised curiosity.

"Ladies, this is..." I hesitated, realizing I didn't actually know his name.

He offered them a charming smile and smoothly stepped in. "Julian," he said. "I'm an old friend."

I blinked, then recovered quickly. "Right. Julian, meet my business partner Maya and our design coordinator Celeste."

"The infamous Dreamland crew," Julian nodded, flashing them a charming smile. "Serena's told me all about you."

"Funny, she's never mentioned you," Maya replied, giving me a look that clearly said 'we'll discuss this later.'

"That's because Julian values his privacy," I explained, shooting him a meaningful glance. "He's in cybersecurity."

Julian laughed. "What she means is I'm a professional paranoid who changes phones every month and uses encrypted everything."

"How mysterious," Celeste commented, obviously impressed.

"And completely necessary in my line of work," he added with a wink. "You wouldn't believe the security vulnerabilities most people live with."

Maya sidled up to me while Celeste continued chatting with Julian. "He's hot. Why haven't you jumped on that?"

"It's not like that," I whispered back. "We're just friends."

"Uh-huh," she smirked. "The way he looks at you says otherwise."

I rolled my eyes. "You're imagining things."

"Am I?" Maya challenged. "Because that man has 'interested' written all over his face."

Before I could argue further, Julian turned back to me. "So, still on for dinner? Or can I convince you to play hooky for lunch instead?"

"Lunch sounds perfect," I agreed, grateful for the excuse to escape Maya's inquisition. "Just let me grab my purse."

"Take the whole day," Maya called after me. "God knows you need a break."

Ten minutes later, Julian was holding the door of a sleek black Aston Martin open for me.

"Seriously?" I laughed, eyeing the luxury vehicle. "This is your car?"

He slid into the driver's seat with easy grace. "Who says it's mine? It's just a rental."

"Now that sounds more like the Julian I know who lived on ramen noodles and caffeine," I teased.

His smile turned enigmatic. "So where are you taking me to eat?"

I gave him a mischievous grin. "You'll see. I've got a place in mind that I think you'll love."

When we arrived at the restaurant, it was already bustling despite being before the typical lunch rush.

Harvest & Hearth was clearly living up to its reputation as the hottest new place in town.

We were quickly seated, and Julian looked around appreciatively at the lively atmosphere.

"This place must be hard to get a reservation at," he commented.

"Not too bad," I shrugged, playing it cool despite having called in three favors to secure our table.

As I reached for my menu, a familiar figure caught my eye across the restaurant. My stomach dropped.

Ivy Hart was sitting at a corner table, her golden curls unmistakable even from this distance. And she was staring directly at us.

Chapter 19: Chapter 19 Unwanted Intrusion

Ryan's POV

I stared at the quarterly reports without really seeing them, my mind replaying this morning's scene with Serena on endless loop.

That dismissive tone in her voice when she called last night a "mistake." The way she practically fled from my car. And that goddamn smile when she read that text message.

"Mr. Blackwood?" Simon's voice broke through my thoughts. "The board members are waiting in the conference room."

"Cancel it," I snapped, surprising even myself.

Simon blinked. "Sir, this meeting has been scheduled for weeks. The Singapore merger—"

"I said cancel it." I loosened my tie, suddenly feeling like I couldn't breathe. "Reschedule for tomorrow. Tell them I'm dealing with an urgent personal matter."

As Simon retreated, looking concerned, my phone buzzed. A text from a number I recognized immediately, though I'd never saved it to my contacts.

From: Ivy Hart

Thought you might want to see this. Your ex-wife moves on quickly, doesn't she?

Attached was a photo of Serena sitting across from a dark-haired man at Harvest & Hearth, one of the most exclusive restaurants downtown.

They were leaning toward each other, and Serena was laughing—really laughing—in a way I hadn't seen in... had I ever seen her laugh like that?

The man was good-looking in that intellectual, artist way. Well-dressed, confident posture. His hand was stretched across the table, not quite touching hers, but clearly heading in that direction.

"Who the fuck is he?" I muttered, zooming in on the stranger's face.

My chest tightened painfully. Last night, Serena had been in my arms, responding to my touch with undeniable passion.

And now, barely twelve hours later, she was cozying up to another man?

Had it really meant nothing to her? Was our entire marriage just a lengthy inconvenience she couldn't wait to escape?

I grabbed my keys and jacket, barking orders to Simon as I stormed past his desk.

"Cancel everything for the rest of the day. Forward any emergencies to my cell."

"But the investors from—"

"Handle it," I cut him off, jabbing the elevator button repeatedly as if that would make it arrive faster.

The drive to Harvest & Hearth was a blur of red lights I barely stopped for and horns blaring at my reckless lane changes.

All I could think about was Serena—my wife, divorce papers be damned—sitting there with another man, probably telling him all about our failed marriage, and the ex-husband who couldn't give her what she needed—emotionally, of course.

Was she laughing about me? About us? Had anything between us ever been real?

For three years, I'd held myself back, convinced I wasn't capable of loving anyone after Sophie.

I'd built walls, kept Serena at arm's length, told myself it was better this way.

But last night had shattered that illusion. With her in my arms, I'd felt something I hadn't expected—something that terrified me with its intensity.

And now this.

I valeted the car with enough force to make the attendant jump, then strode into the restaurant like I owned the place. The hostess recognized me immediately.

"Mr. Blackwood! We weren't expecting you today. Would you like your usual table?"

"No," I said curtly, scanning the dining room. "I'm joining someone who's already here."

And then I saw them. In a corner booth, heads close together, sharing what looked like an intimate conversation.

Serena was gesturing animatedly, her face lit up with excitement about whatever she was explaining. The man watched her with undisguised admiration, hanging on her every word.

Something primal and possessive clawed its way up my throat.

I approached their table, not bothering to announce myself.

Serena spotted me first, her animated expression freezing mid-sentence. The smile died on her lips, replaced by something between shock and annoyance.

Her companion noticed her sudden change and turned to follow her gaze.

When he saw me, his relaxed demeanor didn't change—if anything, his smile widened slightly, as if my arrival was somehow amusing.

"Ryan," Serena's voice was flat. "What are you doing here?"

"So this is the infamous Ryan Blackwood," the man said, standing and extending his hand. "Julian Clarke."

I ignored his hand. "You're interrupting a private lunch," I said coldly.

Serena's face flushed with anger. "No, YOU'RE interrupting. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," I responded, glaring at Julian. "Moving on rather quickly, aren't you?"

Julian raised an eyebrow. "I'm an old friend of Serena's. We were catching up."

"Old friend?" I scoffed. "Strange, she's never mentioned you."

"Perhaps because you never bothered to ask about her life," he replied smoothly.

I felt my hands curl into fists at my sides. "I'd like a word with my wife. Alone."

"Ex-wife," Serena corrected sharply, her voice cutting through the tension. "And no, you may not have a word with me. I'm having lunch with Julian."

Several diners were now openly watching our exchange. I could see waitstaff hovering nervously nearby.

"Serena," I said, lowering my voice. "Five minutes. That's all I'm asking."

She shook her head. "Whatever you have to say can wait until I'm not in the middle of lunch with a friend."

"Friend," I repeated, contempt dripping from the word. "Is that what you're calling it?"

Julian stepped forward. "Look, man, I think you should leave. You're causing a scene, and clearly Serena isn't interested in talking right now."

Something in me snapped. Who was this guy to tell me what to do? To act like he knew Serena better than I did?

"Stay out of this," I growled, getting in his face. "This is between me and my wife."

"Ex-wife," both Serena and Julian said in unison, which only infuriated me more.

Serena stood abruptly. "That's enough. Ryan, either sit down and join us civilly, or leave. Those are your only options."

The restaurant had gone eerily quiet. I could feel eyes on us from every direction.

"Fine," I said through gritted teeth, pulling out a chair and sitting down with more force than necessary. "I'll join you."

Julian looked at Serena questioningly. She gave him a slight nod, and he reluctantly returned to his seat.

"So, Julian," I said with false civility, "how exactly do you know my... Serena?"

"We met online," he answered, watching me carefully. "Through a design forum. I've been following her work for years."

"Online," I repeated flatly. "And you just happened to be in town?"

Julian smiled. "Business trip. When I realized I'd be in the area, I reached out."

"How convenient."

Serena glared at me. "Ryan, either be civil or leave."

A waiter approached cautiously. "Can I get anything for the gentleman who just joined?"

"Scotch. Neat," I said without looking at him.

"It's barely noon," Serena commented disapprovingly.

"I'm celebrating," I replied sarcastically. "My ex-wife's new relationship."

Julian looked amused, which only stoked my anger. "We're not in a relationship," he clarified. "Though I certainly wouldn't complain if we were."

I stared at him, imagining all the ways I could wipe that smug smile off his face.

Serena rubbed her temples. "This was a mistake. Julian, I'm so sorry about this."

"Don't apologize for me," I snapped.

"I'm not," she shot back. "I'm apologizing for subjecting him to you."

The waiter returned with my drink. I downed it in one gulp.

"Tell me, Julian," I said, setting the glass down hard. "What exactly are your intentions with Serena?"

Julian laughed outright. "Are you serious right now? What is this, the 1950s?"

"Ryan," Serena hissed, "you lost any right to question who I spend time with when you signed those divorce papers."

"Did I?" I leaned forward. "Then why did you come to my bed last night?"

The color drained from Serena's face. Julian's eyes narrowed.

"That was low," she whispered. "Even for you."

"But true," I insisted. "Last night meant something, Serena. You know it did."

Julian stood. "I think I should give you two some space."

As Julian walked away, I turned on Ryan, fury bubbling up so fast it was almost dizzying.

Chapter 20: Chapter 20 The Fall

Serena's POV

I just wanted to have lunch with a friend. A simple, fucking lunch. Was that too much to ask for after everything I'd been through?

But no—there he was, Ryan fucking Blackwood, standing at our table looking like someone had stolen his favorite toy.

A toy he'd thrown away himself.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" As Julian walked away, I kept my voice low but couldn't hide the razor edge. My hands trembled slightly under the table. "Following me? Spying on me?"

His jaw muscle twitched—that familiar tension I'd seen a thousand times—but he didn't back down. Those steel-blue eyes just drilled into mine, unapologetic.

"And you came running like some jealous husband," I continued, shaking my head. My chest felt tight, like something was squeezing my lungs. "Newsflash, Ryan—you divorced me. You don't get to play that role anymore."

"Do you love him?" The question burst from his mouth, raw and unfiltered.

I blinked, knocked completely off-balance. "What?"

"This Julian." His gaze burned into me, something wild behind those eyes. "Are you in love with him?"

My stomach twisted into knots. Was he fucking serious? After tossing me aside like yesterday's newspaper, after making me feel invisible for three goddamn years, he had the nerve to ask about my feelings?

"That's none of your business," I snapped, crossing my arms tight against my chest, building a wall between us.

His voice dropped lower, almost a growl. "It is if you were seeing him during our marriage."

The accusation hit me like a slap. Heat surged through my body so fast I thought I might combust right there in this overpriced restaurant.

"Is that what you think? That I was unfaithful?" My voice cracked embarrassingly, not from guilt but from the sheer fucking audacity of it. "After everything—after all I did trying to make you see me—you think I was cheating?"

"What am I supposed to think?" His voice rose slightly, that careful control slipping. "Some guy I've never even heard of suddenly appears, calling himself your long-time friend. And you're smiling at him like—"

He stopped abruptly, but I heard the rest anyway. Like you never smiled at me.

Well, maybe if he'd given me something to smile about during those three years of emotional starvation, I would have.

"Julian has been a friend and professional contact for years," I said, ice forming around each word. "Which you'd know if you'd ever bothered to take five minutes to ask about my work—or my life."

Something flickered across Ryan's face—a crack in that perfect mask—but it vanished just as quickly.

"I'm sorry to interrupt." Julian's smooth voice slid between us like a lifeline. "But Serena, we should probably head out."

Thank god for Julian. "You're right. We should go."

I grabbed my purse, painfully aware of Ryan's gaze burning holes in my back. My hands weren't as steady as I wanted them to be. Damn it.

"Serena..." Ryan's voice had softened now, almost pleading.

"Goodbye, Ryan." I stood taller, channeling every ounce of strength I had. "Please don't do this again."

Julian moved closer to me, ready to escape this disaster, but something in Ryan's eyes told me this wasn't over. There was a desperate intensity there that made my stupid heart skip despite everything.

And then—

"Well, well, look what we have here." That voice—sugary-sweet poison wrapped in designer clothes.

My entire body tensed before I even turned around.

"The divorce papers are barely dry and already with another man?" Ivy's fake concern dripped with satisfaction. "I always knew you weren't good enough for Ryan."

I faced her, keeping my expression cold and blank. "Ivy. Still showing up uninvited where you're not wanted, I see."

She was dressed to kill—literally, if looks could murder. Her emerald-green dress probably cost more than most people's monthly rent, clinging to her body like she'd been poured into it. Those golden waves bounced with each exaggerated tilt of her head.

"Oh, please," she scoffed, stepping closer, the scent of her expensive perfume assaulting my nose. "I was just telling Ryan what everyone already knows. You were probably sleeping with this guy"—she flicked her hand dismissively at Julian—"the whole time you were married. No wonder Ryan was miserable."

Something snapped inside me. For years, I'd swallowed her venom, endured her snide remarks and petty sabotage because that's what good wives did. Be gracious. Don't make a scene. Rise above it.

But that doormat version of me was dead and buried.

"You know what, Ivy?" I stepped forward, dropping my voice to something quiet and dangerous. "Your pathetic obsession with Ryan was sad enough when I was his wife. Now it's just embarrassing."

Her eyes widened slightly; Little Miss Perfect wasn't used to me pushing back.

"How dare you—" she started, mouth twisting in anger.

"No. How dare you?" I cut her off, my voice sharpening. "You've been circling Ryan like a vulture for years, just waiting for scraps. And here you still are, throwing yourself at a man who doesn't want you."

Ryan moved forward. "Serena—"

"Don't defend her," I snapped, whipping around to face him. "She's been undermining me since day one, and you've let her. Honestly? You two deserve each other."

Ivy's cheeks flushed crimson. "You think you're special? You're nothing! Just some nobody he married out of pity. I heard you couldn't even keep his interest in bed."

Julian started toward her, protective anger radiating off him, but I lifted my hand to stop him. This was my fight.

"That's enough," Ryan said, his voice suddenly ice cold.

But Ivy was too far gone, her jealousy spilling out like toxic waste. "I always knew she was nothing but a gold-digging slut! Ryan, I've been telling you all along—"

"I said ENOUGH!" Ryan's roar silenced the entire restaurant. Forks froze mid-air, conversations died, and every head turned our way.

Ivy went still for a moment, blinking in shock, before her gaze snapped back to me with pure hatred.

"You bitch," she hissed—and before I could react, she lunged.

Her hands slammed against my shoulders, the force shocking me backward. We were standing near the staircase that led down from the restaurant's elevated dining area.

Everything slowed down. My heel slipped on the polished wood. My arms windmilled desperately, grasping for something—anything—but my fingers closed on empty air.

Ryan's face was the last thing I saw—his expression transforming from anger to horror in slow motion, his body lunging toward me—too late.

Then gravity took over.

The world spun violently as I tumbled backward down the stairs.

Pain exploded through my body in disjointed bursts, but it was the sharp crack at the back of my skull that stole my breath.

The restaurant ceiling blurred above me, voices fading into distant echoes.

And then—nothing but darkness.