

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

- Chapter 21 Pregnant -

Chapter 21: Chapter 21 Pregnant

Ryan's POV

I couldn't breathe. My lungs felt frozen as I watched Serena's body crumple at the bottom of the staircase, her hair splayed across the marble floor like spilled ink. Everything around me blurred into meaningless shapes—the restaurant, the gawking patrons, everything except her still form.

"SERENA!" My voice sounded foreign to my own ears as I lunged forward, taking the stairs two at a time.

But Julian was already there, kneeling beside her, his fingers pressed against her neck. "She's breathing," he announced, his voice tight with controlled panic. "Call an ambulance, now!"

Someone—a waiter maybe—was already on the phone, rattling off the restaurant's address.

"Don't move her," I ordered, crouching down beside them, my hand hovering over her pale face. "She could have spinal injuries." The words tasted like acid in my mouth.

Serena lay unconscious, a thin trickle of blood running from somewhere beneath her head. Her skin had taken on an ashen quality that made my stomach twist into knots. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening.

"This is your fault," Julian hissed at me, his eyes blazing. "You and that psychotic woman."

I couldn't even argue with him. He was right.

Ivy's heels clacked against the stairs as she descended, her face a strange mix of shock and something else—something that made my blood boil.

"Ryan," she sobbed, reaching for me. "I'm so sorry—I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt!"

I stepped away from her touch. "What did you think would happen when you pushed her? She was standing at the top of a staircase!"

"She was insulting me! You heard her!" Ivy grabbed at my sleeve desperately. "She called me pathetic! She—"

"Ivy, enough." My voice was firm but controlled. I needed to focus on Serena, not this ridiculous drama.

Julian had already gathered Serena in his arms, cradling her with a tenderness that made something dark twist in my chest. He was lifting her up while I stood here arguing.

"Where are you taking her?" I demanded, moving toward them.

"Hospital. We can't wait for the ambulance," Julian replied curtly, already carrying Serena toward the exit.

I watched helplessly as another man carried away my ex-wife's unconscious body.

My legs moved before I could think—I had to go after her.

But Ivy's hand shot out, clutching my sleeve in a panic. "Ryan!"

Tears streaming down her perfectly made-up face. "Don't leave me here alone! Everyone's staring!"

"Ivy, Serena is seriously injured. Your reputation isn't my priority right now."

Her expression changed instantly, calculation replacing distress. "Sophie would be so disappointed in you," she whispered. "If she could see how you're treating me after her death... her own sister."

I froze at the mention of Sophie's name. That old ache bloomed in my chest—duller than it once was, but still sharp enough to sting.

"She always told me you'd take care of me," Ivy went on, her voice softening into something almost pitiful. "That you'd protect me if anything ever happened to her. What would she think, seeing you abandon me when I need you?"

I rubbed my forehead, the pressure behind my eyes growing heavier. For a split second, Sophie's face flashed in my mind, pulling at that part of me that still felt bound to her memory.

But then I saw Serena again—in my mind—falling backward down those stairs.

My jaw tightened. "Ivy," I said, my voice low but edged with steel, "don't twist this. I'm not abandoning you. But someone is in the hospital right now because of what you just did."

Her eyes widened. "It was an accident!" she said quickly, clutching my arm. "I wish Sophie was still here. She'd understand me."

I shook my head, my patience thinning. "If Sophie were here, she'd be ashamed of the scene you just caused. You think she'd want me cleaning up after something like this?"

Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

"This is the last time I'm cleaning up your mess, Ivy," I said, my tone flat and final. "Whatever excuse you come up with next time, don't expect me to be there."

Her face paled, but I didn't give her a chance to respond.

"Let's go," I added curtly, already steering her toward the side exit. "Simon will handle the restaurant and whatever comes of this."

Once Ivy was dealt with, I was going back to Serena—whether she wanted to see me or not.

Serena's POV

I was floating in darkness. Voices drifted around me—distant, distorted, like I was underwater. Something cold pressed against my forehead. Pain radiated from the back of my skull, throbbing in time with my heartbeat.

"Serena? Can you hear me?"

Julian's voice. Worried. Close.

My eyelids felt impossibly heavy, but I forced them open anyway. Bright light stabbed my retinas, making me wince. Everything was blurry at first—just shapes and colors swimming together.

"She's waking up," someone said.

As my vision cleared, I made out Julian's concerned face hovering above me. Hospital. I was in a hospital room. The antiseptic smell hit me next, that unmistakable clinical scent that always made my stomach turn.

"What happened?" My voice came out as a rasp.

Julian reached for a cup of water with a straw, helping me take small sips. "You fell down the stairs. That psychotic woman pushed you."

The memory crashed back—Ivy's furious face, the sickening feeling of falling backward, Ryan's horrified expression as I tumbled down. Ryan...

"Where's—" I stopped myself. Why was I asking about him? He wasn't my concern anymore.

"The doctors say you have a concussion," Julian continued, his eyes never leaving my face. "You've been unconscious for about three hours."

I tried to sit up but immediately regretted it. The room spun violently, and nausea surged through me.

"Easy," Julian warned, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Don't try to move too quickly."

"I feel sick," I mumbled, closing my eyes against the spinning room.

A doctor walked in—middle-aged with kind eyes and salt-and-pepper hair. He introduced himself as Dr. Chen, asking me basic questions while shining a penlight in my eyes.

"You're experiencing a moderate concussion, Mrs. Blackwood."

"Ms. Quinn," I corrected automatically. The divorce might be fresh, but I'd shed that name like an old skin.

"My apologies, Ms. Quinn. You'll need to take it easy for the next few weeks. No screens, limited reading, plenty of rest. You're experiencing nausea?"

I nodded slightly, which was a mistake. Even that tiny movement sent pain shooting through my skull.

"That's common with concussions, but I'd like to run a few additional tests to be thorough. Any other symptoms? Dizziness, blurred vision?"

"Both," I admitted. "And I feel like I might throw up any second."

Dr. Chen made some notes on his tablet. "I'm going to refer you to our neurologist for follow-up, but first I'd like to run some bloodwork just to be safe."

An hour later, after being poked and prodded and scanned, I was lying back in the hospital bed with Julian scrolling through his phone beside me when Dr. Chen returned with another doctor.

"Ms. Quinn, this is Dr. Rivera from our obstetrics department."

Obstetrics? Why would they...?

"Hello, Ms. Quinn," the female doctor said with a professional smile. "Your blood work showed elevated hCG levels, which prompted us to run additional tests."

My heart stuttered in my chest. No. No, this couldn't be happening.

"You're approximately six weeks pregnant."

The words hit me like another fall down the stairs. Pregnant? How could I be pregnant? Ryan and I had barely touched each other in the final months of our marriage.

Except...

That night.

He came home late from a company banquet, the faint scent of alcohol clinging to him.

His tie was loose, steps uneven, but when he looked at me, there was a softness I hadn't seen in ages.

Without a word, I warmed some sobering soup and brought it to him.

Our fingers brushed briefly as I set the bowl down—and in that moment, he actually looked at me—really looked at me—for the first time in what felt like forever.

We'd fallen into bed like we used to, before everything went cold. I'd foolishly thought maybe, just maybe, things were changing.

What a fucking joke that turned out to be.

"I need to terminate," I heard myself saying, my voice oddly calm despite the tornado in my head. "I'm divorced. I can't—I won't have this baby."

Dr. Rivera's expression remained neutral. "I understand this must be shocking news. However, given your concussion, we can't perform any procedure immediately. And there's something else you should know."

She explained that my bloodwork showed unusual hormone levels that could indicate a condition affecting my reproductive system.

"If you choose to terminate this pregnancy, there's a significant chance you may not be able to conceive again. We'd need to run more comprehensive tests to confirm, but I wanted you to have all the information before making any decisions."

The room seemed to shrink around me. Tears burned behind my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. After everything—the loveless marriage, the betrayal, the divorce—this was the universe’s sick joke? A baby with the man who couldn’t even see me when I was standing right in front of him?

"I need some time," I whispered, turning my face toward the wall.

Julian’s hand found mine, squeezing gently. The doctors left with promises to check on me later, leaving me alone with this impossible weight on my chest.

"Whatever you decide," Julian said softly, "I’m here."

I gave him a faint smile, then gently pulled my hand away.

"Thank you," I murmured. "But I need a moment... alone."

For a second, he didn’t move. Then he nodded.

"I’ll be right outside," he said quietly.

I couldn’t answer him.

My mind was racing through scenarios, each more overwhelming than the last. A single mother. A child tied forever to Ryan.

Going through pregnancy alone. Never being able to have children if I chose differently.

A soft knock interrupted my spiraling thoughts.

Chapter 22: Chapter 22 Impossible Choice

Serena’s POV

The door opened, and there he was—Ryan.

His usually perfect appearance was disheveled, hair messy like he’d been running his hands through it repeatedly. Dark circles under his eyes. Tie loosened.

"Serena," he breathed, relief washing over his face when he saw me awake. "Thank God."

"You’re actually the last person I want to see right now," I cut him off, my voice surprisingly steady despite the storm raging inside me.

Ryan stopped mid-step, looking like I’d just slapped him. Good. Maybe now he knew how it felt to be blindsided.

"Serena, please. I just wanted to make sure you're okay," he said, his voice dropping lower. "When I saw you fall..."

"When you saw me get pushed, you mean," I corrected, wincing as pain shot through my skull. "By your girlfriend." *freewebnovel.com*

His jaw tightened. "Ivy is not my girlfriend. She never was."

"Could've fooled me." I turned my face away, eyes fixed on the bland hospital wall.

"This time, I'm not going to let it slide just because of you," I said, voice steady but cold. "I'm going to sue Ivy. I'm done letting her get away with this."

The silence that followed was heavier than I expected. When I glanced back at Ryan, his face had hardened into that familiar CEO mask I knew too well.

"That's not necessary," he said carefully. "The situation can be handled privately."

I couldn't believe my ears. "Handled privately? Like everything else in your life? She pushed me down a flight of stairs, Ryan! I have a concussion!"

"And I'll make sure she faces consequences," he insisted, taking another step closer. "But a public lawsuit will only create a media circus. It won't help you heal."

"Oh, I get it now." I let out a bitter laugh that made my head throb. "You're worried about the Blackwood name being dragged through the mud. God forbid Sophie's precious little sister gets exposed as the psychopath she is."

Ryan's eyes flashed dangerously. "This isn't about protecting Ivy—"

"Bullshit!" I tried to sit up straighter, ignoring the wave of dizziness. "It's always about protecting someone else. Sophie. Ivy. The company. Everyone except me!"

His eyes darkened, voice heavy with regret. "I made a promise to Sophie. I had no choice—"

My voice cracked, tears threatening to spill over. "Sophie, Sophie, always Sophie in our marriage. Always because of Sophie, I was ignored. We're divorced—so why is it still like this?"

I looked at him, pain and fury burning in my eyes. "Tell me, Ryan, when have you ever truly been there for me?"

For once, the mighty Ryan Blackwood was speechless, his face paling as if struck.

"You need to leave," I said, my chest heaving with emotion. "Now."

"Serena, please—"

"GET OUT!" I shouted, then immediately regretted it as pain exploded behind my eyes.

The door burst open, and Maya rushed in, her fiery red-brown hair flying behind her like a battle flag.

"What the hell is going on?" she demanded, taking in my tears and Ryan's tense posture. "Is he bothering you?"

"Yes," I whispered, suddenly exhausted.

Maya drew herself up, pointing toward the door. "You heard her. Out."

Ryan's gaze moved between us, his expression darkening. "This isn't over, Serena."

"Yes, it is," Maya snapped. "You've done enough damage. Security's right outside if you need help finding the exit."

Ryan's jaw worked silently for a moment. Then, with one last unreadable look at me, he turned and walked out.

The moment the door closed behind him, I collapsed back against the pillows, tears finally streaming down my face.

"That asshole," Maya muttered, rushing to my side. "Are you okay? Should I call the nurse?"

I shook my head slightly, wiping at my tears. "No, I'm fine. Well, not fine, but... God, Maya, everything is so messed up."

She sat on the edge of my bed, taking my hand in hers. "Julian called me. He told me what happened at the restaurant." Her eyes darkened. "I always knew that Ivy was a snake."

"It gets worse," I whispered, my free hand unconsciously moving to rest on my stomach.

Maya's sharp eyes caught the movement immediately. Her expression shifted from anger to something else—concern, confusion.

"Serena," she said slowly, "what's going on?"

I took a deep, shuddering breath. "I'm pregnant."

Her mouth dropped open. "Holy shit," she breathed after a moment. "Ryan's?"

I nodded miserably. "Six weeks. The one night I foolishly thought things were changing between us?"

"Oh, sweetie." Maya squeezed my hand tighter.

"I can't do this, Maya," I whispered, fresh tears spilling over. "I can't have his baby. Not after everything."

"So don't," she said simply. "It's your body, your choice."

I swallowed hard. "The doctors say I might not be able to have children again if I terminate. Something about my hormone levels..."

Maya's eyes widened. "What?"

"They need to run more tests, but..." I couldn't finish the sentence. The weight of this choice was crushing me.

Maya was quiet for a long moment, her thumb tracing soothing circles on my hand. When she spoke again, her voice was gentler than I'd ever heard it.

"Listen to me," she said. "This baby isn't Ryan's. I mean, biologically, sure. But this baby is yours, Serena. Yours. You don't need him to have this child. You don't need anyone."

I stared at her, tears blurring my vision.

"And you wouldn't be alone," she continued fiercely. "You'd have me. And Julian, though God knows he's already halfway in love with you."

"I don't know if I can do it," I admitted, my voice small. "Single motherhood? After everything else?"

"You rebuilt your entire life after that sham of a marriage," Maya reminded me. "You started Dreamland from nothing. You're the strongest person I know, Serena Quinn."

I closed my eyes, trying to imagine it—a baby with my eyes, maybe Ryan's jawline. A life growing inside me. My child.

"What if the baby looks like him?" I whispered. "What if every time I look at my own child, I'm reminded of everything I lost?"

Maya's hand tightened around mine. "Then you'll see all the things you gained instead. A piece of yourself that no one can take away. Not even Ryan Blackwood."

I didn't answer. I couldn't. My heart was too full of fear and possibility and grief and hope—all tangled together into a knot I couldn't begin to unravel.

"You don't have to decide right now," Maya said gently. "The doctors said you need rest for your concussion anyway, right? Take some time. Think about what you want—not what Ryan would want, not what I would do—what you want."

I nodded slightly, careful not to jostle my aching head.

"And no matter what you choose," she said softly, her eyes steady, "I'm with you. Every step of the way."

After a moment, she gave me a gentle smile. "Now, please—get some rest. You need it."

As the door closed behind her, I sank onto the bed, one hand instinctively resting over my still-flat stomach.

Finally, the tears I'd been holding back spilled freely down my cheeks.

What the hell was I going to do now?

Chapter 23: Chapter 23 Revenge1

Serena's POV

After four days in the hospital, I finally got to leave that sterile hell. The doctors had cleared me, saying my concussion was healing well, though I still needed to take it easy. Not that I had much choice with Maya hovering around me like an overprotective mother hen.

"Easy does it," she warned as I slipped my feet into my flats. "No rushing."

"I'm fine," I insisted, though the dull throb in my head suggested otherwise.

The hospital discharge papers felt heavy in my hands—almost as heavy as the news I'd received yesterday. My lawyer had called with the update I'd been dreading: we couldn't proceed with charges against Ivy.

"All the security footage from that section of the restaurant has mysteriously disappeared," he'd explained, frustration evident in his voice. "And without witnesses willing to come forward..."

I knew exactly who was behind the vanishing evidence.

Simon Graves, Ryan's ever-loyal assistant, would have moved heaven and earth to protect the Blackwood name.

Even if it meant letting that psychopath Ivy walk free after she'd nearly killed me—and my unborn child.

The thought made my hand unconsciously drift to my stomach. My decision about the pregnancy still hung in limbo, but the idea that Ivy had almost taken that choice away from me entirely made my blood boil.

"You okay?" Maya asked, noticing my expression darkening.

"Just thinking about how convenient it is that all the evidence against Ivy has magically disappeared," I muttered.

Maya's lips thinned. "Ryan's doing?"

"More likely Simon's, but same difference."

As if summoned by his name, my phone pinged with a notification. A transfer of \$500,000 had just been deposited into my account. From Ryan Blackwood. The accompanying message read simply: "Medical expenses and compensation. Non-negotiable."

I showed the phone to Maya, who let out a low whistle.

"Well, that's one way to say 'sorry my ex's sister tried to murder you,'" she remarked dryly.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Half a million dollars.

As if money could fix anything that had happened between us. As if it could make up for the fact that he'd chosen to protect Ivy instead of standing by me.

As if it could erase the impossible choice I now faced about our baby.

"Should I send it back?" I asked, already knowing Maya's answer.

"Hell no," she replied instantly. "Take his money. Use it to build something beautiful. That's the best revenge."

I nodded slowly, tucking my phone away. She was right, of course. But it still felt like blood money.

As we walked out of the hospital, I couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

Author's POV

Ivy Hart paced back and forth in her designer apartment, rage radiating from every pore. Her pale skin was flushed with anger, making the fading bruise on her cheekbone—courtesy of Serena—stand out even more starkly.

"She actually tried to press charges against ME?" she seethed, gripping her phone so tightly her knuckles turned white. "After SHE attacked ME first?"

Simon had taken care of it, of course. The evidence was already gone. Serena's complaint would go nowhere.

But that wasn't enough.

Not for Ivy.

"She humiliated me," she hissed, staring out at the city skyline. "In front of Ryan. In front of everyone. She needs to pay for that."

She turned away from the window and walked to her desk, where her laptop was already open. Her expression hardened as she clicked into the folder she'd compiled over the past few days—screenshots, images, background checks.

It had taken some digging, but she'd finally confirmed it.

Julian Clarke.

No wonder he looked so familiar.

He wasn't just some local designer with a pretty face. He had been gaining recognition overseas for years—as an actor. Nothing A-list, but enough to build a name for himself in certain international circles. Film festivals. Indie features. A few magazine covers.

She even found an old university alumni profile. Of course—he'd studied at one of the top design schools in Europe before pivoting to acting.

Same name. Same face. Same charming smile.

And now, he was back, playing the role of Serena's quiet little confidant.

Her red lips curled into a cruel smile as she began composing an email to several tabloid contacts.

Subject line: EXCLUSIVE: International Star Julian Clarke Caught as Homewrecker in Blackwood Drama.

The story practically wrote itself.

Poor Ryan Blackwood, betrayed again—his ex-wife carrying on with a secret celebrity lover right under everyone's noses.

She attached the restaurant photos, carefully edited to make them look just a little more intimate than they were.

"Let's see how your precious design career survives this, Serena," Ivy murmured, hitting send with a triumphant flourish.

Within hours, the story exploded across social media. #HomewreckerJulian started trending, followed closely by #SerenaTheCheat. Thousands of Julian's fans felt betrayed, flooding the internet with hate.

By midnight, Serena Quinn and Julian Clarke—now outed as Julian Clarke—were at the center of the biggest celebrity scandal of the month.

Exactly how Ivy wanted it.

Julian was jolted awake by the incessant ringing of his phone. Groggily, he reached for it, squinting at the bright screen showing twenty-seven missed calls from his former manager, Alexandra.

"Alex? It's three in the morning," he mumbled, his British accent thicker with sleep.

"Turn on your bloody phone!" Alexandra's voice was frantic. "You're trending worldwide, and not in a good way!"

Suddenly fully awake, Julian sat up and opened his social media. His stomach dropped as he scrolled through hashtag after hashtag, seeing his face plastered across entertainment sites alongside Serena's, their innocent dinner twisted into something sordid and scandalous.

"Bloody hell," he breathed, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "Who did this?"

"My guess? Someone with a grudge against either you or Serena," Alexandra replied. "But that's not important right now. We need damage control."

Julian's thoughts immediately went to Serena. She'd just been released from the hospital after a traumatic injury, and now this? He couldn't let her face this alone.

"I'll handle it," he said firmly.

Despite Alexandra's protests, he opened his long-dormant official social media account and began typing:

"To my fans and the public: The recent stories circulating about myself and Serena Quinn are completely false. We are friends and colleagues only. I have never 'inserted myself' into anyone's marriage, nor would I ever do so. Ms. Quinn is a talented designer who deserves respect, not harassment. Please stop spreading these harmful lies.

On a personal note, I stepped away from acting last year to pursue my passion for design. After this invasion of privacy, I am formally announcing my retirement from the entertainment industry. I ask that you respect both my decision and Ms. Quinn's privacy during this time."

He hit post, then immediately called his lawyer to issue cease and desist letters to the publications that had run the story. Finally, he texted Alexandra: "Protect Serena at all costs. Whatever it takes."

As dawn broke, Julian stared out his window at the city skyline, wondering how he would face Serena after this mess. He'd come to America for a fresh start, leaving behind the suffocating spotlight of fame. Now his past had not only caught up with him but threatened to drag down someone he cared about deeply.

Chapter 24: Chapter 24 Revenge2

Serena's POV

I woke up to my phone practically vibrating off the nightstand. Seventeen missed calls, over fifty text messages, and hundreds of notifications across all my social media accounts.

What the hell?

Groggily, I unlocked my phone, only to feel like I'd been punched in the stomach.

There I was, plastered across gossip sites and trending topics, photos of Julian and me at dinner manipulated to look intimate, scandalous. The headlines were brutal:

"HIGH SOCIETY SCANDAL: SERENA QUINN'S AFFAIR WITH BRITISH HEARTTHROB"

"EXCLUSIVE: HOW SERENA QUINN STOLE Julian Clarke FROM HOLLYWOOD"

"BLACKWOOD EX-WIFE CAUGHT WITH FAMOUS ACTOR—IS THIS WHY THEY DIVORCED?"

My hands shook as I scrolled through the vicious comments. People I'd never met were calling me a slut, a homewrecker, a gold-digger. Julian apparently was being labeled a predator and a cheat.

It took me approximately three seconds to figure out who was behind this.

"Ivy," I whispered, rage building inside me. This was her revenge for the restaurant confrontation. For trying to press charges against her.

My phone rang again. It was Maya.

"Are you seeing this shit?" she demanded without greeting.

"Yeah," I managed, my throat tight. "I'm seeing it."

"Julian just called me. He's been trying to reach you. He's already posted a statement denying everything."

I quickly found Julian's post, feeling a rush of gratitude for his swift defense of my character. But the damage was already done. The comments under his statement were still vicious, many accusing him of lying to cover up our "affair."

"I need to call WhisperStream," I said, the social media specialist who'd helped me with online crises before.

Maya replied. "OK. But Serena... maybe you should lay low for a few days? At least until your concussion is fully healed."

I wanted to argue, to insist on going to the studio and facing this head-on. But the throbbing in my skull reminded me that I wasn't at full strength yet.

"Fine," I conceded reluctantly. "But keep me updated on everything."

After hanging up with Maya, I spent the next hour working with WhisperStream to strategize our response.

Unlike Julian, I couldn't just announce retirement from public life. Dreamland Studio was my livelihood, my passion, my redemption after my failed marriage. I refused to let Ivy take that from me too.

As I was drafting a careful statement with WhisperStream's help, my phone rang again. It was Julian.

"Serena," he said when I answered, his British accent more pronounced with stress. "I'm so sorry about all this. I never wanted my past to affect you."

"This isn't your fault," I insisted. "It's Ivy's. She's retaliating because I tried to press charges."

Julian was quiet for a moment. "I've spoken with my team. We've issued takedown notices to the major sites, but..."

"But the internet is forever," I finished for him.

"Something like that, yes." He sighed heavily. "I've also made a decision. I can't continue in the public eye after this."

The scrutiny, the invasion of privacy—I left acting to escape all that."

My heart sank. "So you're leaving? Going back to England?" The thought of losing Julian's friendship and support made my chest tighten painfully.

"Actually," he said slowly, "I was wondering if your offer still stands. To join Dreamland Studio officially? I'd rather keep designing, just... away from cameras and reporters."

Relief flooded through me. "Of course it still stands. Julian, you're one of the most talented designers I know. Dreamland would be lucky to have you."

"It's me who's lucky," he said softly. "Not many would stand by someone whose past just created a PR nightmare."

I thought of Ryan, how quickly he'd abandoned me when things got difficult. How different Julian was, standing firm despite everything crashing down around us.

"We'll weather this together," I promised him. "As friends and colleagues."

As I hung up, I placed a protective hand over my stomach, a gesture that was becoming instinctive. Another complication in my already complicated life. Between the scandal, the pregnancy decision, and rebuilding after my divorce, I felt like I was juggling flaming torches while walking a tightrope.

But strangely, I wasn't as terrified as I should have been. freewebnovel.com

Maybe because for the first time in years, I was surrounded by people who actually had my back. Maya. Julian. Even WhisperStream.

Whatever Ivy threw at me next, I wouldn't be facing it alone.

Ryan's POV

I stood in the shadows across from the hospital entrance, watching as Serena walked out with Maya hovering protectively at her side.

She looked pale, fragile—so different from the fiery woman who'd confronted Ivy at the restaurant.

My fingers itched to reach for her, to help her into the waiting car, but I stayed where I was.

What right did I have to approach her now? After everything?

The memory of her lying unconscious on that restaurant floor still haunted me. The blood pooling beneath her head.

The way her body had looked so small, so broken. And worse—the knowledge that I had caused this.

I waited until her car pulled away before heading to my own. Simon was already waiting, his face carefully blank as he held the door open.

"How is she?" he asked cautiously.

"Walking. That's something," I answered tersely, sliding into the backseat.

The drive back to Blackwood headquarters was silent.

I stared out the window, my mind replaying Serena's parting words at the courthouse after our divorce.

"I'll be fine without you." At the time, I'd dismissed it as bravado. Now, I wasn't so sure.

When we reached the office, Simon cleared his throat. "Sir, there's something you should see."

He handed me his tablet, open to a gossip site.

My stomach clenched as I saw Serena's face plastered across the screen alongside some guy—the same one from the restaurant.

The headline screamed about an affair, complete with doctored photos making them look intimate.

"What the hell is this?" I growled, scrolling through the vicious article.

"It started circulating about an hour ago," Simon explained. "It's everywhere now."

I felt a flash of something hot and dangerous in my chest. Jealousy? Possessiveness? Whatever it was, I pushed it aside. This wasn't about me.

"Shut it down," I ordered. "All of it. Contact our lawyers, issue cease and desist letters to every publication running this garbage. And find out who started it."

Simon nodded, already making notes on his phone. "And if it's... someone we know?"

"Especially if it's someone we know," I said coldly. "No one gets to do this. Not even family."

Back in my office, I paced restlessly, unable to concentrate on work.

Serena's words from the courthouse kept echoing in my head. What exactly had she meant by "being fine" without me? What was she doing now?

I realized with a jolt that I had no idea what her life looked like after our divorce.

I called Simon back in.

"I want everything you can find on what Serena has been doing professionally since the divorce," I said.

Simon's eyebrow twitched slightly—the closest he ever came to showing surprise—but he nodded. "Right away, sir."

The next day, Simon placed a thick folder on my study. "Everything on Ms. Quinn's current professional activities, as requested."

I flipped it open, and immediately felt like I'd been punched in the gut.

Dreamland Studio. Award-winning designs. The "Lazuli" collection that had taken the design world by storm last season.

"This can't be right," I muttered, flipping through page after page of press clippings and industry accolades.

"It's all verified, sir," Simon said quietly. "Ms. Quinn is the founder and creative director of Dreamland Studio. She also designs under the pseudonym 'Lazuli'."

I stared at the photos of exquisite jewelry pieces—elegant, innovative designs that somehow managed to look both timeless and completely fresh.

The Blackwood Group had actually tried to partner with this "Lazuli" designer last year, offering a substantial contract.

The designer had declined.

"She turned us down," I said, more to myself than to Simon. "She knew exactly who we were, and she turned us down."

"It appears so, sir."

I felt a complicated mix of emotions—shock, embarrassment, and oddly, pride.

For three years of marriage, I'd barely registered Serena's presence in my life.

I'd never bothered to ask about her interests, her talents, her dreams. She'd been nothing more than a convenient arrangement to me.

And all that time, she'd been this—brilliant, creative, successful.

"Three years," I murmured, running my fingers over a photo of Serena at some design award ceremony, looking radiant and confident. "Three years and I never knew her at all."

Simon shifted uncomfortably. "If that will be all, sir..."

"Wait." I looked up at him, suddenly determined.

"Contact our jewelry division. I want all our supplier and distributor contacts sent to Dreamland Studio. The good ones—not the standard list."

Simon blinked, genuinely surprised now. "You want to give Ms. Quinn access to our exclusive supplier network?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "And make it anonymous. I don't want her knowing it came from me."

After Simon left, I sat back in my chair, staring at Serena's photo.

The mansion had felt empty since she left—not that I'd ever admit that to anyone.

I'd gotten used to her quiet presence, the faint scent of her perfume, the soft sound of her footsteps.

I wondered if she'd spent those three years waiting for something from me—some acknowledgment, some affection, some basic human decency.

The thought made me wince.

For the first time, I could see what I'd done to her. Or rather, what I hadn't done. I hadn't seen her. Hadn't valued her. Hadn't given her even a fraction of what she deserved.

And now she was thriving without me, just as she'd promised.

There was something bitter lodged in my throat, and no matter how hard I swallowed, it wouldn't go away.

God. I was such a fucking bastard.

How did I not see it before?

How could I have looked her in the eye, day after day, and still let her slip through the cracks like that?

Chapter 25: Chapter 25 The Game Changes

Serena's POV

I watched the gossip explode across social media from my office chair, scrolling through the increasingly wild accusations against Ivy. WhisperStream had done his job well—very well. Every dirt-filled detail I'd collected on her was now spreading like wildfire.

"If she wants to play dirty," I muttered to myself, tapping my fingernail against the desk, "then we'll all get muddy together."

I didn't feel bad. Not even a little. After what she'd done at the restaurant—after I'd ended up in the hospital with my head split open—Ivy deserved every bit of this karma.

She couldn't just sit back and watch the show anymore. Now she was the main attraction.

Early the next morning, I headed to Dreamland Studio, my sanctuary away from all the chaos.

The office hummed with creative energy as designers sketched and collaborated, exactly how I'd always envisioned it. Maya was waiting for me with coffee and that knowing smirk of hers.

"Interesting development," she said, nodding toward her phone. "Looks like someone took care of Julian's social media problem overnight."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"His accounts are completely gone. Wiped clean. All those nasty comments—poof!" She made an exploding gesture with her fingers. "Like it never happened."

That was unexpected. I hadn't asked WhisperStream to do that. But before I could think too deeply about it, Maya continued.

"Speaking of your knight in shining armor, when's he starting?"

"Should be here around noon," I replied, trying to sound casual. "And he's not my knight in anything."

Maya rolled her eyes dramatically. "Sure, sure. The super-hot celebrity star just happens to give up his glamorous life to work in our humble studio because... what? The coffee's good?"

I was saved from answering when footsteps echoed outside the office door.

Every female head in the studio snapped up like meerkats spotting a predator—or in this case, prey.

Julian walked into the workspace, clearly dialing down the movie-star energy. He was dressed in simple black jeans and a gray button-down—though it all still looked ridiculously expensive.

Maya's eyes went comically wide. "Are you sure about letting Mr. Hollywood work here?" she whispered. "The girls are practically drooling already."

"His design skills are solid," I replied. "I've seen his portfolio."

"Uh-huh," Maya said, not bothering to hide her amusement. "I'm sure his 'portfolio' is very impressive."

"Maya!" I hissed, elbowing her. "He'll be here any second. Pull yourself together!"

"Fine, fine," she said, quickly wiping an imaginary string of drool from her mouth. "I promise I won't hire him just for his pretty face. Dreamland has standards—no freeloaders allowed."

"I certainly hope I'm not considered a freeloader," came Julian's smooth voice from the doorway.

He was leaning against the frame, looking like he'd just stepped off a fashion magazine cover without even trying.

Maya's professional facade crumbled instantly. Her eyes went straight to his face, then down his body, then back to his face again.

"You? A freeloader? Never!" she blurted, before composing herself. "Please, come in. Let's discuss your expectations regarding compensation."

Julian strode in confidently, pulling out a portfolio from his messenger bag. "These are some of my previous designs. I'd appreciate your professional opinion."

Maya flipped through them, her eyes widening with each page. I could almost see the dollar signs reflecting in her pupils. She'd expected a pretty face with mediocre talent, not actual skill.

"Serena, can I assume you approve now?" I asked, amused by her reaction.

"As if I ever disapproved!" she protested, grinning ear to ear. "We've struck gold here!"

When the topic of salary came up, Julian simply waved it off, saying he'd accept whatever was fair based on the projects he completed.

Maya happily agreed to a commission-based arrangement and then directed her assistant to prepare a workstation for him—right in the middle of the main floor where everyone could get a good view.

Julian glanced at the designated space, then turned back to us. "Actually, Ms. Carter, may I make a small request?"

"Of course," Maya replied, instantly accommodating.

"I'd prefer to work in this office."

I froze. Wait, what?

"Ms. Carter, would that be possible?" he asked, all innocent charm.

Maya looked at me, clearly passing the decision.

"That's fine," I said, thinking quickly. "You can have this office, Maya and I can share—"

"Actually," Julian interrupted smoothly, "I meant I'd like to share with you, Serena."

Before I could process what was happening, Maya jumped in with a knowing smile. "My office is tiny anyway. You two sharing makes perfect sense."

"Wonderful," she continued, not giving me a chance to object. "I'll have another desk moved in right away."

Julian nodded appreciatively. "Thank you, Ms. Carter."

I sighed internally but decided not to make a fuss. "What supplies do you need? I can help you get set up."

"I've brought everything necessary," he replied with a smile that was just a touch too warm. "Serena, we're colleagues now."

"Welcome to Dreamland Studio," I said professionally, extending my hand.

He took it, holding just a moment longer than strictly necessary.

The rest of the day flew by in a whirlwind of productivity. Having Julian in the studio actually accelerated our new jewelry line development—he had a keen eye and fresh perspective that complemented our existing team perfectly.

Just before closing time, Maya burst into our shared office with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"You won't believe who just reached out to us," she said, waving her phone. "Blackwood Enterprises. They're offering us access to their jewelry resource network."

I felt my stomach tighten. "Blackwood?"

"Ryan's assistant called personally. Said there are no strings attached—we can set all the terms." Maya studied my face carefully. "What do you think?"

I laughed bitterly. "Looks like Ryan's trying to clean up Ivy's mess with money. He knows she caused the trouble at the restaurant, and now he's trying to buy our silence."

Maya's expression hardened. "Should I tell them to take a hike?"

"Absolutely," I said without hesitation. "I don't want anything to do with Blackwood Enterprises anymore. If we accept, we'll inevitably have to deal with Ryan in person, and I'm not interested in letting Ivy off the hook so easily for what she did."

Maya nodded firmly and went to make the call, declining the offer in no uncertain terms.

The days flew by as we prepared for our upcoming jewelry launch. I felt confident and energized—until the day I arrived at the venue.

Pushing open the doors, I immediately spotted Ivy's display set up directly across from mine, brightly lit and impeccably arranged, openly challenging me face to face.

I stared at her setup and muttered, "This can't be a coincidence."

But instead of anxiety, a slow, cold smile spread across my lips.

If Ivy wanted a direct showdown, she was about to get exactly that.

The game was changing. And I was ready to play.

Chapter 26: Chapter 26 Clash of Designs

Serena's POV

I arrived at the venue three hours before our scheduled launch, determined to make sure everything was perfect.

The elegant exhibition hall had been transformed with our minimalist aesthetic—soft lighting highlighting glass display cases where our jewelry pieces waited to make their debut.

"They're setting up right across the hall," Maya muttered, glancing through the doorway. "Ivy's people look frantic."

I smiled coolly. "Let them panic. We've got this."

Walking through our display area, I adjusted the positioning of a few pieces, making sure each creation caught the light just right.

Our centerpiece—a stunning sapphire necklace with my signature flowing lines—commanded attention at the heart of the collection.

Julian stood nearby, making final adjustments to his contributions—intricate cuff bracelets that complemented my designs perfectly.

We'd worked night and day to perfect this collection, and seeing it displayed so beautifully made all the sleepless nights worth it.

"The press is starting to arrive," he noted, checking his watch. "And I've spotted at least three major fashion editors."

"Good. The more witnesses to this showdown, the better."

By the time our doors officially opened, the contrast between the two events was impossible to ignore.

Our side of the hall filled quickly with excited guests, champagne flowing as critics and buyers alike marveled over our collection.

The buzz was electric, with phones constantly out as people captured images of our pieces.

Across the way, Ivy's launch seemed oddly subdued, with scattered attendees moving without enthusiasm between displays.

Despite her aggressive marketing campaign leading up to this event, the reality was falling painfully short of expectations.

"She's staring daggers at you," Maya whispered, nodding toward the entrance where Ivy stood, arms crossed tightly across her chest.

She'd dressed in an overly dramatic black gown that seemed desperate for attention—all feathers and sequins, like she was attending an awards ceremony rather than a professional launch.

I pretended not to notice, focusing instead on explaining my design philosophy to an influential jewelry blogger.

"The essence of true luxury isn't ostentation," I explained, guiding her toward our showcase. "It's about emotional resonance—creating pieces that feel like they've always belonged to the wearer."

Just as the blogger was photographing our signature sapphire piece, a commotion erupted near the entrance.

Ivy was marching directly toward us, her face flushed with fury, two nervous assistants trailing behind her.

"You did this on purpose, didn't you?" she demanded, her voice carrying across the now-quieting room. "Scheduled your pathetic little launch at the exact same time as mine?"

I turned slowly, keeping my expression neutral despite the scene she was creating. "Ivy. How nice of you to visit our exhibition."

"Don't play innocent with me," she hissed, stepping closer. "You knew my launch was today. You deliberately set this up to steal my spotlight!"

The room had gone silent, everyone watching this unexpected drama unfold. I could see phones discreetly recording the confrontation.

"Actually," I replied calmly, "we booked this venue three months ago. Perhaps you should check your calendar more carefully."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "You've been jealous of me from day one. Jealous that Ryan sees my talent while he couldn't care less about yours."

That struck a nerve, but I refused to let it show. "Is that what this is about? Ryan?"

"He believes in me," she sneered, glancing around at our displays. "Unlike this derivative garbage you're passing off as design."

Julian stepped forward protectively, but I placed a hand on his arm, stopping him. This was my battle. freewebnovel.com

"If you're so confident in your designs," I said, voice steady, "why are you over here causing a scene instead of attending to your own guests?"

"Because you stole them!" she shrieked, voice cracking slightly. "You've been sabotaging me from the beginning!"

I raised an eyebrow. "Interesting accusation from someone who tried to destroy Julian's reputation just last week."

Her eyes widened slightly—she hadn't expected me to know about that.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she stammered, but her confidence was visibly faltering.

"Don't you?" I stepped closer, dropping my voice. "The fake photos? The fabricated scandals? Did you really think no one would trace that back to you?"

A flash of panic crossed her face, quickly replaced by rage. She suddenly lunged forward, grabbing our centerpiece sapphire necklace from its display.

"You call this design?" Ivy spat, dangling my creation disrespectfully between her fingers. "This basic, uninspired piece? It's amateur work at best!"

The crowd gasped as she swung the delicate necklace carelessly. My heart raced—that piece represented countless hours of meticulous craftsmanship.

"My worst sketches have more originality than your entire collection," she continued, voice rising hysterically. "Ryan was right about you—all packaging, no substance!"

Just as she raised her arm, seemingly ready to throw my precious creation to the floor, a commanding voice cut through the tension.

"Put that down. Now."

The crowd parted like the Red Sea as Ryan Blackwood strode into the space, his tall figure imposing in a perfectly tailored charcoal suit. His face was a mask of controlled fury.

Ivy's expression shifted instantly from rage to triumphant smugness. "Ryan! Perfect timing. I was just showing everyone how mediocre—"

"I said," he repeated, voice dangerously quiet, "put it down."

Her smile faltered. "But I was just—"

"Now, Ivy." The ice in his tone was unmistakable.

Confusion flickered across her face as she reluctantly placed the necklace back in its case. "Ryan, you don't understand. She deliberately scheduled this against my launch to—"

"Did you?" Ryan turned to me, his gray-blue eyes unreadable. "Did you deliberately schedule your launch to coincide with Ivy's?"

The entire room seemed to hold its breath. I could feel everyone watching us. Maya edged closer protectively. Julian's stance shifted subtly, ready to intervene if needed.

I met Ryan's gaze unflinchingly. "Would it matter if I did or didn't? Is that what you're here to determine? Who deserves punishment this time?"

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "I'm simply asking a question."

Before I could answer, Ivy's face lit up with vindictive satisfaction.

"She's admitting it! She's actually admitting she did this deliberately! Ryan, you can't let her get away with this kind of sabotage—"

"Sabotage?" I laughed, the sound brittle even to my own ears.

"Look around, Ivy. Our launch was planned months ago. Your designs are failing on their own merit, or lack thereof. I didn't need to sabotage anything."

Ryan's expression darkened as he surveyed the room—the crowd clearly gathered around our displays, the phones capturing every moment of this confrontation, the uncomfortable truth evident to everyone.

"So this is what it's going to be now?" I continued, addressing Ryan directly. "Every time your precious protégé fails, you'll show up to accuse me?"

Are you going to demand I apologize for my success? Make me take care of her wounded ego too?"

Chapter 27: Chapter 27 We're trending!

Serena's POV

A flash of something—regret? recognition?—crossed Ryan's face.

Ivy sensed her advantage slipping. "Ryan, she's twisting everything! You know I'm the victim here. She—"

"That's enough, Ivy," Ryan snapped, his voice cutting through her whining like a blade. "You're embarrassing yourself. We're leaving. Now."

Ivy's mouth fell open in shock, but Ryan had already grabbed her elbow, steering her toward the exit. She twisted back toward me, her face contorted with rage.

"This isn't over!" she hissed, stumbling in her ridiculous heels as Ryan practically dragged her away.

I watched them go, keeping my expression neutral despite the triumph bubbling inside me.

The crowd immediately erupted into hushed whispers, phones still recording every delicious moment of Ivy's humiliation.

"Well," Maya whispered beside me, "that was certainly dramatic."

A subtle smile playing at Julian's lips. "Nothing sells jewelry quite like a public meltdown from the competition."

He was right. After the spectacle, guests flocked to our displays with renewed interest, while Ivy's launch across the hall grew even more deserted.

I caught glimpses of her team frantically trying to lure people in, offering extra champagne and gift bags, but the damage was done.

Around nine, Maya grabbed my arm, practically vibrating with excitement.

"Check your phone," she hissed. "We're trending!"

I pulled out my phone to find social media exploding with comparisons between the two launches:

【This is Hart Jewelry's new design? All that hype for THIS?】

【My eyes are literally offended.】

【I was actually looking forward to this, but compared to Lazuli's work? Yikes. No comparison equals no mercy.】

【Don't even mention Hart in the same breath as Lazuli, thanks!】

Photos of our pieces were being shared everywhere, while Ivy's designs were becoming instant meme material. The industry verdict was unanimous—Dreamland Studio had delivered innovation, while Hart Jewelry had produced derivative disappointment.

"Holy shit," I breathed, scrolling through the endless comments. "This is better than I imagined."

By midnight, we'd secured three major distribution deals and a feature spread in Vogue.

I stood near our centerpiece display, savoring the moment when Ivy stormed out of her own launch party, face twisted with fury, her assistant scrambling after her with unsold sample pieces.

"That," Maya said, clinking her glass against mine as we surveyed our triumph, "was the most satisfying business victory I've ever witnessed."

"Cheers to that," I replied, feeling lighter than I had in months.

Back at the studio the next morning, orders were pouring in. Our team worked frantically to meet demand, the atmosphere electric with success.

Julian joined me in my—our—office, bringing coffee and a stack of industry reviews.

"You've created something extraordinary here," he said, settling into his desk. "Dreamland is becoming a force to be reckoned with."

"We're just getting started," I replied, scrolling through sales figures that made even Maya's ambitious projections look conservative.

With the launch's overwhelming success, I knew timing was everything. This was the perfect moment to continue my offensive against Ivy.

I messaged WhisperStream, our friendly neighborhood internet manipulator.

"It's time for phase two," I typed. "Release the portfolio."

WhisperStream didn't disappoint. By lunchtime, a collection of Ivy's early design work had mysteriously appeared online.

These weren't her polished professional pieces—these were her stumbling attempts from design school.

Awkward proportions, derivative concepts, technical flaws that any trained eye could spot immediately.

Within hours, #IvyHartFraudExposed was trending. The internet feeding frenzy was brutal:

【She calls THESE designs? My eight-year-old niece draws better!】

【Zero originality. Just copied concepts with bad execution.】

【Now we know why she needed to sabotage others—she has no actual talent herself.】

Maya burst into the office, waving her tablet. "Have you seen this? Her career is imploding in real-time!"

I allowed myself a small, satisfied smile. "Social media can be so ruthless."

"Should we feel bad?" Maya asked, though her grin suggested she didn't feel bad at all.

"After what she tried to do to Julian? After she stole my designs?" I shook my head slowly. "No, I don't think so."

By evening, a few sympathetic voices had emerged in the chaos:

【Come on, everyone has early work they're not proud of. Who judges a designer by their student sketches?】

But they were quickly drowned out by an avalanche of comparisons:

【Go look at Lazuli's early work—pure genius from day one. Some people have real talent, and some just fake it.】

I watched the comments flood in with satisfaction, sipping my tea as Ivy's carefully crafted image crumbled in real time. Her "born genius" persona was being dismantled piece by piece.

And this was just the beginning.

Julian called around midnight. I was still up, watching the disaster unfold from my apartment.

"Have you seen what's happening online?" His voice was soft, almost cautious.

"I might have noticed," I replied, keeping my voice neutral.

"This seems... targeted," he observed carefully. "Almost like someone with insider knowledge decided to take her down."

I remained silent for a moment, swirling the wine in my glass. "The design world can be ruthless. One day you're celebrated, the next you're exposed."

"True," he agreed, though I could hear the curiosity in his voice. "Just remember, Serena—when you go after someone, make sure they can never recover enough to strike back."

His words surprised me. The gentle, refined Julian apparently had a strategic mind for warfare.

"And what makes you think I had anything to do with this?" I asked, unable to keep a slight edge from my voice.

"Nothing concrete," he chuckled softly. "Just a hunch that you're not someone who forgives being crossed. Sleep well, Serena."

As I ended the call, I gazed out my window at the city lights. This was just the beginning. Ivy had tried to destroy what I'd built, thinking I wouldn't fight back.

She'd learn soon enough—I wasn't just fighting back. I was obliterating her from the industry completely.

And as for Ryan supporting her? He'd made his choice. Now he could watch as his little protégé crashed and burned. I took another sip of wine, savoring the taste of revenge.

Chapter 28: Chapter 28 Unexpected Negotiations

Ryan's POV

I woke up to my phone buzzing non-stop. Overnight, Ivy had become the internet's favorite punching bag.

Beyond the design plagiarism, people were digging up everything - her fake credentials, tax evasion rumors, even allegations about buying her way into design competitions.

"Shit," I muttered, scrolling through the chaos. This was spreading to Blackwood's reputation faster than I'd anticipated.

Simon appeared at my office door by 8 AM, looking like he hadn't slept. "Sir, we need to activate crisis management. The Hart Jewelry situation is affecting our stock prices."

I nodded grimly, "Get the PR team in here. Now."

The emergency meeting was tense.

Our investigation confirmed what I'd suspected but refused to believe - Ivy had genuinely committed all these ethical violations. She wasn't just spoiled; she was rotten to the core.

"These documents confirm she falsified her design portfolio for the partnership application," my head of legal said, sliding over a folder.

"And there's evidence suggesting she attempted to bribe several industry critics."

I rubbed my temples, feeling a migraine building. For Sophie's sake, I'd turned a blind eye to Ivy's smaller transgressions. Now that decision was threatening everything I'd built.

"Sir," Simon said quietly, "Ms. Hart is waiting outside. She's been calling non-stop since dawn."

"Fine. Send her in."

Ivy rushed in looking nothing like the polished woman from the launch.

Her eyes were puffy, makeup hastily applied, clothes wrinkled. She collapsed dramatically into the chair across from me.

"Ryan, you have to help me!" She sobbed, hands trembling. "My career is being destroyed! Someone's orchestrating this whole thing!"

I stared at her coldly. "Is any of it untrue?"

She faltered, her crying act momentarily disrupted. "I... that's not the point! People are digging up ancient history. It's that bitch Serena, I know it is!"

"Watch your language," I snapped. "And take some responsibility. These aren't rumors, Ivy. These are documented facts."

Ivy quickly switched tactics, her voice softening. "Please, Sophie would be devastated if she knew her little sister's career was ruined. You know how much she loved me."

The mention of Sophie hit its mark. I exhaled slowly, anger subsiding.

"Fine," I said finally. "For Sophie's memory, I'll help you this once. But this is the last time."

Relief washed over her face as she wiped away tears. "Thank you, Ryan. I knew you wouldn't abandon me."

"Don't thank me yet. There will be conditions," I gestured toward the door. "Now go home and wait for instructions. And avoid the press."

As soon as she left, practically skipping out despite the reporters waiting to ambush her outside, I felt a weight in my stomach.

Something about her reaction didn't sit right with me. The way she'd invoked Sophie's name felt... calculated.

My security team escorted her through the media gauntlet to her car. Even from my office window, I could see the frenzy of cameras and shouted questions about plagiarism and tax fraud.

Ivy kept her head down, suddenly playing the victim again, shepherded by my men through what looked like an excruciating walk of shame.

Once she was gone, I sat at my desk, contemplating my next move. There was only one real option.

I had to talk to Serena.

I dialed her number from memory, only to hear an automated message: "The number you have dialed is no longer in service."

Of course. She'd changed her number after our divorce. She'd erased me from her life just as thoroughly as I'd once erased her from mine.

The realization stung more than it should have.

"Simon," I called again. "Contact Dreamland Studio. Set up a meeting with Serena... with Ms. Quinn. Tonight."

By eight o'clock, Hours later, I sat waiting in a private dining room at Argent, one of the city's most exclusive restaurants. I'd arrived early, rehearsing what I'd say, how I'd approach this. Business-like. Professional. Detached.

All my preparation evaporated the moment she walked in.

Serena entered precisely at eight, wearing a crisp white suit that accentuated her slender frame. Her hair was swept up in an elegant knot, exposing the graceful line of her neck. No elaborate makeup, no flashy accessories—just pure, undiluted confidence.

I found myself standing, staring like an idiot.

This wasn't the woman I'd been married to—the quiet, accommodating wife who'd decorated our house and organized charity events.

This was someone entirely different.

Someone commanding.

Powerful. Breathtaking.

"Mr. Blackwood," she said coolly. "It's been a while."

Her voice snapped me back to reality. "I wasn't sure you'd come."

"Curiosity got the better of me." She settled into the chair across from me, a slight smirk playing on her lips. "Surprised it's me? Were you expecting someone else?"

I regained my composure. "No, I knew it was you behind all this. And... congratulations. The launch was impressive—clearly a success."

Her brows lifted ever so slightly. "So you called me here to celebrate my victory? How strange." The faint curl of her lips didn't reach her eyes.

"you suddenly care about me more than you ever did when we were married."

Her words hit harder than I expected.

The jab wasn't just sharp—it pierced deeper than I cared to admit, twisting into a faint knot that settled uneasily in my chest.

I leaned back, keeping my tone even. "No. I'm here because of Ivy's situation—I want to discuss how we resolve it."

Serena laughed, the sound both musical and sharp. "You're still protecting your little girlfriend? Willing to grovel to me on her behalf? How touching."

"I'm here for Blackwood's reputation," I said firmly, though even I could hear how hollow that sounded.

"Of course you are." She swirled the wine in her glass, eyes never leaving mine. "Well then, Mr. CEO, what's your proposal?"

Her red lips were more intoxicating than the wine between us. I caught myself staring again, noticing how different she was from Sophie. They shared similar features, yes, but Serena radiated a fierce intelligence and self-possession that Sophie had never possessed.

Had I really never noticed before?

Serena rapped her knuckles against the table, breaking my trance. "Mr. Blackwood, it's considered poor form to zone out during negotiations. It's getting late—I'd like to finish this conversation so I can go home for dinner." *freewebnovel.com*

I cleared my throat, embarrassed to be caught daydreaming like a schoolboy. "Serena, is it really necessary for things to get to this point?"

Chapter 29: Chapter 29 Power Play

Serena's POV

"Is all this really necessary, Serena?" Ryan's deep voice carried a hint of exasperation across the table.

I nearly laughed at his audacity. Just sitting across from Ryan Blackwood in this private dining room was irritating enough, and now he was questioning my methods? The nerve of this man.

"Isn't it necessary?" I shot back, my voice cool and controlled despite the anger simmering beneath.

"Do you honestly think I don't know how Ivy has been systematically targeting me for years? That incident with Julian and me—I haven't even begun to settle that score yet."

I straightened my posture, adjusting the crisp collar of my white suit. "Enough small talk. I have three conditions. If you don't agree to them, there's no point continuing this conversation."

Before meeting Ryan tonight, Maya and I had carefully strategized these demands. If he was so determined to protect that snake Ivy, I wouldn't be showing any mercy either.

"First, Dreamland Studio gets thirty percent of Blackwood's jewelry collaborations."

The moment I stated my first condition, Ryan's expression darkened. I could practically see the calculations running behind those stormy gray eyes.

"Your appetite seems rather excessive, Serena," he said, his voice tight.

"Whether I can handle it isn't your concern, Mr. Blackwood," I replied calmly, swirling the untouched wine in my glass. "You just need to answer yes or no."

This number wasn't arbitrary. Maya and I had calculated it carefully over endless cups of coffee last night.

Ask for too much, and Ryan would flat-out refuse.

Ask for too little, and Dreamland wouldn't secure the financial stability we needed.

Thirty percent was perfect - painful enough to make him flinch but not impossible for a company of Blackwood's size.

I watched his expression shift as he processed the request, those calculating eyes I once found intimidating now just revealing his mental arithmetic. The tension in his shoulders eased slightly, telling me he'd already decided this was manageable.

"What else?" he asked, voice deliberately neutral.

"Third condition," I continued, skipping past my second demand to the most important one. "Ivy Hart is fired, and the Hart Jewelry line is completely eliminated. She never gets another chance to rebuild her career."

I delivered these words with cold precision. After everything Ivy had put me through over the past three years, this punishment was actually quite merciful.

"These three conditions are non-negotiable, Ryan. Would you like some time to consider them?"

After a moment of loaded silence, Ryan's gaze grew more intense, almost penetrating.

"During our three years of marriage, Serena, exactly how much were you hiding from me?"

I blinked, momentarily caught off-guard before letting out a bitter laugh.

"That's rich coming from you, Ryan. I wasn't hiding anything—you simply never cared enough to notice." I couldn't keep the pain from bleeding into my voice despite my best efforts. "Let's not drag up the past in this setting. Just tell me—can you meet these conditions or not?"

"Is that all you want?" he asked, his tone unreadable.

I frowned, confused by his tone. "Are you suggesting I'm asking for too little? I can certainly add more demands if you'd prefer."

"I can meet all three conditions," he replied with unexpected ease, picking up his chopsticks as if we were just having a normal dinner. "Shall we eat now?"

I sat frozen, momentarily thrown off balance. I'd prepared for a negotiation battle, not immediate surrender. Something wasn't right.

"Since you've agreed, I'll be leaving," I said, standing up smoothly. "Enjoy your meal, Mr. Blackwood."

I needed to get out of there. The way he was looking at me - like he was trying to solve a puzzle - was making my skin prickle uncomfortably.

"Wait." I paused mid-step but didn't turn around. "Something else, Mr. Blackwood?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ryan's expression shift, like he wanted to say something but couldn't quite form the words. His usual commanding presence seemed somehow vulnerable.

"It's... getting late. Let me drive you home. We're heading the same direction."

My hand instinctively drifted to my stomach before I caught myself. "That won't be necessary. I don't believe we're headed the same way at all."

"Serena," his voice softened, "how have you been since the divorce?"

The question caught me off guard, stirring unwanted emotions. I turned, meeting his gaze with a practiced smirk that hid the storm inside.

"I've been thriving, actually. But we're divorced now, Ryan. We're not the kind of exes who sit around catching up on each other's lives. I'm leaving."

This time, I walked out without looking back, my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

Ryan's POV freewebnovel.com

She walked away with such finality that I hesitated only briefly before following. Something inside me couldn't let her leave like this.

Simon was waiting outside the private room, his expression faltering when he saw both of us emerge with tense faces.

"Sir, did the meeting not go well?" he asked quietly.

"Where's Serena?" I demanded, ignoring his question.

"Ms. Serena is heading toward the front entrance."

Without another word, I strode after her, my long legs carrying me quickly through the restaurant. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to say—just that I needed to say something.

As I reached the entrance, the words died in my throat.

Julian Clarke was holding the passenger door open for Serena, and she was smiling at him—genuinely smiling—as she slid into his car.

They looked comfortable together, intimate even. But she hadn't smiled once during our entire meeting, maintaining that cold, professional facade throughout.

A bitter wave washed over me, mixing envy with a hollow ache I wasn't ready to admit.

I stood frozen, watching until Julian's car disappeared into the night traffic. Only then did I unclench my fists, struggling to maintain my composure.

"Fire Ivy Hart immediately. Clear out her studio too," I instructed, my voice terrifyingly calm.

Simon's eyes widened in shock. "Tonight? But sir, she's Sophie's sister—"

"Did you not hear what I said?" I cut him off sharply.

"I heard you, sir. I'll handle it first thing tomorrow."

"No. Do it now. And make sure Ivy doesn't try to contact me again."

I turned and walked toward my car, anger and something that felt uncomfortably like jealousy churning in my stomach.

The image of Serena smiling up at Julian kept replaying in my mind. When was the last time she had smiled at me like that? Had she ever?

For the first time, I wondered if I had truly known my wife at all during our marriage—or if I had simply been too blinded by ghosts to see the extraordinary woman right in front of me.

Chapter 30: Chapter 30 Rising Tides

Serena's POV

With the new funding and resources secured, Dreamland Studio reached heights I'd never imagined possible.

Maya and I were working around the clock, signing new designers and moving into a significantly larger office space.

We even gave Julian his own private office—though strangely, he didn't seem particularly thrilled about it.

When moving day came, he almost seemed reluctant to leave our shared workspace.

Dreamland was finally making waves in the industry. Resources and opportunities that had once been pipe dreams were now flowing toward us like a tide that wouldn't ebb.

Maya was practically giddy just from handling the contracts and partnerships—she joked about getting calluses from counting all the money.

Julian had been with us for about two weeks when he finally unveiled his first original piece for the studio.

It was selected as the opening showcase for our inaugural jewelry exhibition, drawing everyone's attention exactly as I'd hoped.

Standing on stage under the spotlights, microphone in hand, Julian captivated the audience as he explained his creative process.

"When I was younger and more foolish, I entered the entertainment industry simply because I was told I had the face for it," he said with a self-deprecating smile that had several women in the front row sighing audibly.

"But that world clearly wasn't for me. Deep down, I always harbored a passion for design."

He gestured elegantly toward his creation, the lights catching on its delicate curves.

"Perhaps it was fate, but I discovered I had some natural talent for design. And despite being a late-blooming amateur, I was fortunate enough to catch Lazuli's attention."

"When my entertainment career collapsed, Lazuli was the one who reached out and offered me sanctuary at Dreamland Studio. Everything I've accomplished today, I owe to her."

Under the stage lights, Julian was absolutely magnetic.

The confidence radiating from him was something I'd never seen before—the women in attendance were practically swooning.

"To me, Lazuli is family, a sister, and my closest friend," he continued, then extended his hand toward me, his eyes burning with an intensity that caught me off guard.

The cameras captured this moment perfectly, and it instantly became viral online.

Before I knew it, social media was buzzing with speculation about our relationship, fans insisting we were "meant to be."

I brushed off these rumors as nothing more than internet gossip. WhisperStream even messaged me directly to ask if there was any truth to them.

"You're into shipping people too?" I texted back.

"Why not? You two look perfect together! Gorgeous man, beautiful woman—it's eye candy!" came the enthusiastic reply.

I shook my head and closed the chat.

My hand instinctively moved to my stomach, where my pregnancy wasn't yet showing.

The relentless pace of work was beginning to take its toll, and exhaustion was becoming my constant companion.

After the jewelry showcase, I still needed to leverage our momentum by hosting several networking events to cement our studio's reputation.

The to-do list seemed endless, but I couldn't afford to slow down now.

Rubbing my temples, I decided to rest on the office sofa for just a moment.

Maya had bought this couch specifically for me, knowing my workaholic tendencies—she insisted that comfortable furniture might encourage me to take occasional breaks.

As night deepened, I drifted off without realizing. When I woke, I found a man's jacket draped carefully over me—Julian's, by the scent of it.

I sat up just as he entered with a steaming mug.

"If you're this exhausted, shouldn't you be resting at home instead of working yourself to death?" His tone was gentle despite the bluntness of his words.

"Here," he said, passing me the mug. "Drink this."

I thanked him and took a sip. The water was pleasantly sweetened.

"I added some honey. Your voice has been sounding raspy these past few days."

"It's nothing," I assured him. "Just the sudden change in weather making my throat dry."

Julian nodded and settled into the chair across from me, his eyes scanning my face with concern.

"If you need help with anything, just ask. You don't have to shoulder everything alone. You'll collapse at this rate."

I started to decline, but Julian's frown stopped me mid-sentence.

"Don't you trust my abilities?" he asked, sounding genuinely hurt.

"Of course I do," I said quickly. "I'm just... cautious. The studio's profile is growing so rapidly—I feel like I need to oversee everything personally."

"I understand your concern," he said. "But what if I promise to consult you before making any decisions? Would that help you feel more at ease?"

Faced with his persistence, I reluctantly agreed. I handed over the responsibility for organizing our next two networking events to him.

With half my workload lifted, I managed to get some decent rest over the following days.

Tonight was our final event—the most important one, with influential figures from various industries attending. I needed to make a strong impression.

I went shopping for a new gown, planning to dress formally for the occasion.

Maya and Julian were still tied up with preparations, so they wouldn't be attending. Tonight, I would be representing Dreamland solo.

Taking a deep breath, I made sure to eat something substantial before heading out.

This event needed to go perfectly—we'd sent invitations to elite professionals across industries, including several from Blackwood Enterprises.

Julian had carefully avoided sending one directly to Ryan, choosing instead to invite various Blackwood executives.

I was browsing through the evening gowns at an upscale boutique when a familiar voice made me freeze.

"Well, well, if it isn't the almighty Lazuli," Ivy Hart drawled, stepping into view from behind a rack of designer dresses. "Shopping for something to make yourself look important?"

I turned slowly, genuinely surprised. "Ivy. I didn't expect to see you shopping so... carefree. Shouldn't you be updating your résumé? Or did you forget you've already been fired by Ryan?"

Her smug smile twitched. "What are you talking about?"

I raised a brow. "Come on. Hart Jewelry is done. Dissolved. And as for your position at Blackwood Global? I believe the term was 'terminated immediately.'"

Ivy scoffed, but the flicker of panic in her eyes betrayed her. "That's ridiculous. Baseless rumors. Ryan would never fire me. I'm family."

I could see she was barely keeping it together.

I took a step closer and said quietly, "Let's not pretend, Ivy. You know what's funny, Ivy? Ryan only fired you because I asked him to."

Ivy grabbed my arm, her nails digging in. "What did you do? What lies did you tell Ryan?"

I looked pointedly at her hand until she released me. "I didn't need to lie, Ivy. Your own actions did all the talking. The evidence of you stealing Julian's designs was quite compelling."

"You bitch," she hissed, drawing curious glances from nearby shoppers. "You think you've won? This isn't over."

"Actually, it is," I said, keeping my voice level despite the satisfaction bubbling inside me. "Your career is finished. No design house will touch you now that word is spreading about your plagiarism."

Ivy's face contorted with rage. "Ryan won't let this stand. I'm Sophie's sister—I'm all he has left of her!"

"Yet he fired you anyway," I pointed out, unable to resist twisting the knife. "What does that tell you about your importance to him?"

She raised her hand as if to slap me, but I caught her wrist easily.

"Careful," I warned. "Assault charges won't look good on top of everything else."

A store attendant approached cautiously. "Is everything alright, ladies?"

"Perfect timing," I smiled at the young woman. "Could you show me to a fitting room? And perhaps Ms. Hart would like to see herself out before security gets involved."

Ivy's eyes darted between us before she snatched her purse from a nearby chair. "You'll regret this, Serena. I swear you will."

I didn't even blink.

"And the only thing I regret," I said coolly, "is not exposing you sooner."

I watched her storm out, shoulders shaking with fury. Only when she disappeared did I release the breath I'd been holding.

"Are you sure you're okay, ma'am?" the attendant asked.

"I'm fine," I assured her, though my heart was racing. "Just an unfortunate professional disagreement."

Slipping into the champagne-colored gown—which hugged every curve just right—I caught my own smile in the mirror.

Ivy's face when I told her she'd been fired? Absolutely priceless.

The woman who had caused me so much grief was finally getting her comeuppance, and I hadn't even needed to lift a finger.

Ryan had kept his word after all.

Part of me wondered why he'd so readily abandoned Ivy after years of protecting her, but I quickly dismissed the thought.

His motivations didn't matter anymore—only the results did.

Tonight's gala would be my moment to shine, and now nothing could spoil my mood.