

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

- Chapter 31 Unexpected Guest

Chapter 31: Chapter 31 Unexpected Guest

Ryan's POV

WHERE IS SHE? That was the only thought racing through my mind as I walked into Dreamland Studio's gala.

After overhearing my executives discussing Lazuli's invitation—an invitation I'd never received—I couldn't focus on anything else.

I was supposed to be finalizing a critical deal with Thomas Industries tonight, a negotiation I'd been stubbornly holding my ground on for weeks.

Yet the moment I heard those managers whispering about Lazuli's gala, everything else became secondary.

"Dreamland Jewelry has been making waves recently. All the big players will be at tonight's event. Would be a shame to miss it," one of them had said.

Another lowered his voice. "But things got messy between us and them. If Mr. Blackwood finds out we went..."

"Who's gonna tell him? He didn't even get an invitation. No way he'd show up."

They froze when they noticed me standing there, faces pale as sheets. I could practically see their careers flashing before their eyes.

"Mr. Blackwood... we... we weren't planning to go," one stammered.

"Just curious about it, that's all," another added quickly.

"We've worked at Blackwood for years, sir. Our loyalty is absolute."

I cut them off with a cold glare. "Shut up. Where's the invitation?"

They scrambled to hand over the envelopes, desperate to prove their innocence.

"Get out," I muttered, and they scattered like startled pigeons.

Once alone, I examined the invitation. Dreamland Studio's logo gleamed on the heavy cardstock. Would Serena be there? Of course she would. It was her company's event.

"Mr. Blackwood, we need to leave for the meeting with Mr. Thomas," Simon reminded me hesitantly. "We're running late."

I nodded, slipping the invitation into my pocket where it pressed against my chest like a constant reminder.

Throughout dinner, the card's stiff edge kept jabbing me while Thomas droned on about percentages and profit margins.

My mind was elsewhere, calculating how quickly I could wrap this up and make it to the gala.

"Mr. Thomas, that's enough," I finally interrupted his lengthy proposal.

He paused mid-sentence, clearly mistaking my impatience for anger at his terms. Before he could backpedal, I surprised everyone in the room—including myself.

"We'll proceed with your terms. I'll have my team contact yours with the details tomorrow. I need to leave."

I stood abruptly, ignoring Simon's bewildered expression.

In three years of negotiations with Thomas's company, I'd never conceded a single point without exhaustive debate.

Tonight, I'd given him everything he wanted without a fight—all because of a party invitation burning a hole in my pocket.

"Driver, faster," I instructed as we pulled away from the restaurant. My knee bounced impatiently, a nervous habit I thought I'd abandoned years ago.

The gala had already started. Would she still be there? Would she even speak to me if I showed up uninvited?

Relief washed over me when I arrived to find the event in full swing.

Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over the crowded ballroom, champagne flutes clinked, and business cards exchanged hands amid polite laughter and strategic conversations. *freewe&novel.com*

My eyes scanned the room, finding her immediately, as if there were a spotlight following her movements.

She wore a champagne-colored gown that caught the light with every step, her hair falling in soft waves around her shoulders. She looked different—confident, radiant, completely in her element.

She was surrounded by men—industry executives, investors, designers—all vying for her attention like moths drawn to flame.

She laughed at something one of them said, and I felt an unfamiliar twist in my gut. Was that... jealousy?

Several people noticed my arrival, moving toward me with practiced smiles and rehearsed greetings.

I dismissed them with a single cold glance. Tonight, I had only one purpose.

I walked deliberately toward Serena, my eyes never leaving her face. She was mid-conversation, her voice carrying an authority I'd never heard before.

"Looking forward to our collaboration, Mr. Mason."

"The pleasure is all mine."

"Ms. Quinn, perhaps we could meet for coffee sometime? Or tea, if you prefer."

These men—these vultures—were practically falling over themselves for her attention.

She handled them with graceful diplomacy, neither encouraging nor dismissing anyone outright. She'd become a masterful businesswoman, single-handedly commanding the room.

This woman—confident, charismatic, commanding—seemed like a stranger compared to the wife I remembered.

I pushed through her admirers and positioned myself directly in front of her. Her smile disappeared instantly.

The men around her quickly found excuses to be elsewhere, sensing the tension crackling between us.

Serena set down her untouched champagne flute, the weariness of maintaining her public persona briefly visible in the slight droop of her shoulders before she straightened again.

"How did you get in, Mr. Blackwood? I don't believe Julian sent you an invitation."

The way my last name rolled off her tongue felt like a slap. Gone was any warmth, any familiarity. She'd put up walls I'd never seen before.

"You're quite familiar with him, aren't you?" I couldn't keep the edge from my voice, my mood darkening further. Was it the way she said Julian's name? Or was it the memory of all these men surrounding her, hanging on her every word?

"If there's nothing specific you need, I should continue greeting my other guests."

When she turned to leave, something inside me snapped. My hand shot out, grasping her wrist. Her skin felt warm under my fingers, a sensation I'd almost forgotten.

"Do you have to be like this?" The words came out softer than I'd intended, almost pleading.

Her eyes flashed dangerously. "Mr. Blackwood, release my hand. People are watching. Do you intend to cause a scene?"

She yanked her arm free with surprising strength and took two deliberate steps back, creating distance between us. Her voice dropped to a threatening whisper.

"Ryan Blackwood, enough. This is Dreamland's business gala. If you ruin tonight, I swear I'll make you regret it."

This wasn't the woman I'd married. The docile, accommodating Serena was gone. In her place stood someone fierce and formidable—a lioness protecting her territory.

Had she always been this person beneath the surface? Had I been too blind to see it?

My pulse quickened as I studied her—the fire in her eyes, the determined set of her jaw, the confident way she held herself. She was magnificent.

Captivating. Impossible to ignore.

Is this who she really is? This vibrant, fierce creature who commands attention without even trying?

I can't look away. I don't want to.

Chapter 32: Chapter 32 Let's get remarried

Serena's POV

I watch Ryan's eyes widen slightly at my threat. Good. Let him be surprised. I'm not the doormat he married anymore.

When he doesn't make another move, I force a smile back onto my face and walk toward another group of potential clients.

Throughout the evening, I notice him lurking in the corner, drinking steadily.

I instinctively reach for my phone, almost texting him to stop—his stomach can't handle that much alcohol. Then I catch myself.

We're divorced. If he wants to drink himself sick, that's his problem now. I deliberately turn my back and focus on the investors in front of me.

By the time the gala ends and I've seen off the last guest, he's nowhere in sight. I assume he's finally gone home.

The venue is only a short walk from my apartment. Rather than call a car, I decide to enjoy the night air and clear my head.

My feet are killing me after hours in heels, but I came prepared. I swap my stilettos for the flats I stashed in my clutch and feel instantly revitalized.

Taking a deep breath of cool evening air, I make a mental note to call Maya later to share tonight's success.

We received no fewer than seven serious partnership offers. The thought makes me smile. I've already forgotten Ryan's unwelcome appearance.

As I walk, I hear footsteps behind me. My neighborhood is generally safe, but instinct makes me quicken my pace. My apartment building is just ahead.

Suddenly, a strong hand grabs my wrist. The grip is firm, and the unmistakable smell of alcohol hits me. For a terrifying moment, I think I'm being attacked by some drunk stranger.

"Serena, it's me."

That voice. My fear immediately transforms into anger as I recognize Ryan. I yank my arm away forcefully.

"What the hell? Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

His eyes are unfocused, his normally perfect appearance disheveled.

His cheeks are flushed from alcohol. I've never seen Ryan Blackwood drunk before—he's always prided himself on his control.

"Serena, do you hate me that much?" His words slur slightly.

I frown and turn away, walking faster toward my building. He follows, somehow managing to outpace me despite his intoxicated state. He blocks my path again.

"Why are you running from me? Are you afraid?"

"Ryan, you're drunk. Call Simon to take you home."

"I'm not going home!" he shouts, his voice carrying a childish stubbornness I've never heard from him before.

"Then what do you want? Why are you acting crazy?"

My disgust seems to anger him further. His eyes narrow as he sways slightly.

"You can smile at every other man in that room, but you look at me like I'm dirt. Didn't you used to beg me to come home every night?"

"Enough! That's ancient history!"

I push past him, furious at the reminder of how pathetic I'd once been. I don't care if he gets home safely—he's a grown man. Let him figure it out.

Back in my apartment, I finally relax. The familiar surroundings calm me as I shower off the evening's tension and change into comfortable pajamas.

While blow-drying my hair, I hear shouting from outside. Someone is calling my name, each repetition louder than the last. I open my window and look down.

Ryan is standing in the street below, still there, still drunk, and now yelling my name like a madman.

Neighbors are poking their heads out, threatening to call the police for disturbing the peace.

Ryan ignores them completely, focused only on getting my attention. I bite my lip in frustration and head downstairs. This has gone far enough.

"Ryan! Stop it! Go home!" I hiss as I approach him.

"Serena... Serena, let's talk," he slurs, stumbling toward me.

Before I can step back, his head drops heavily onto my shoulder. The unexpected weight nearly knocks me off balance.

"Ryan? Hey! Are you still conscious?"

He mumbles something incoherent against my neck, his breath hot on my skin. The sensation sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine.

I swear under my breath.

Where is Simon when you need him? Ryan's assistant usually shadows him everywhere, prepared for any situation. Of course tonight he's nowhere to be found.

By the time I manage to drag Ryan's deadweight into my apartment, I'm breathing heavily from the exertion. I deposit him on my sofa where he slumps back, eyes closed, still mumbling.

"Serena... Serena..."

I look down at him, a bitter smile tugging at my lips.

How ironic that my name only crosses his lips when he's too drunk to know what he's saying. Anyone watching might mistake this for genuine affection.

What a joke.

Despite my thoughts, I find myself preparing honey water for him—an old remedy for drunkenness. I guide the cup to his lips, supporting his head as he drinks.

The warm liquid seems to help. His eyes become more focused, the haze of alcohol beginning to lift. I sit across from him, arms crossed, watching him coldly.

"Mr. Blackwood, what exactly was the purpose of your performance tonight?"

He doesn't answer immediately, and I don't push. The silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken words.

Ryan rubs his forehead, wincing slightly as reality returns to him. The realization of his behavior seems to dawn gradually on his face.

"Serena, did you... help me up here?" His voice is raspy, uncertain.

"Who else? You were making such a scene downstairs. If you'd continued much longer, the police would have been called."

I pause, an unexpected burst of dark humor rising in me. "Can you imagine the headlines? 'Blackwood CEO's Drunken Meltdown: Heartbreak or Stock Market Crash?'"

The quip falls flat. Ryan doesn't smile. Instead, he looks directly at me, his gaze suddenly clear despite the alcohol still in his system.

"We need to talk."

"So talk. I'm listening." I push my half-dry hair back from my face, my expression deliberately neutral.

He takes a deep breath, his shoulders squaring as if preparing for battle or a crucial business presentation.

"Let's get remarried."

Chapter 33: Chapter 33 Dangerous Proposition

Serena's POV

"Let's get remarried."

His words hang in the air between us, so absurd I can't help but laugh. It starts as a small chuckle but quickly grows into full-blown laughter that makes my sides hurt.

"Excuse me?" I finally manage between gasps, wiping away a tear of bitter amusement. "Did you hit your head when you were drunk?"

He stands suddenly, swaying slightly but moving toward me with surprising determination.

The coffee table wobbles as he bumps against it, nearly knocking over my half-empty cup.

Before I can retreat, his hands grip my shoulders, his touch burning through the thin fabric of my pajamas.

I can smell the whiskey on his breath, see the slight redness in his normally clear eyes.

"You heard me." His face is inches from mine, his eyes intense despite the alcohol. The sharp line of his jaw tightens as he speaks. "Come back to me."

I push against his chest, feeling the familiar solid warmth beneath my palms that I once craved every night.

But he holds firm, pulling me closer until I'm pressed against him.

The familiar scent of his cologne mixed with whiskey is disorienting, sending unwanted memories flooding back—nights when I'd fall asleep wrapped in his arms, mornings waking to his sleeping face.

"You're drunk. You don't know what you're saying," I manage to get out, my voice weaker than I'd like, betraying the effect he still has on me. My heart hammers traitorously against my ribs.

His hand slides up to cradle the back of my head, fingers tangling in my damp hair.

A droplet of water runs down my neck from my half-dried hair, and his eyes follow its path. "I've never been more clear about anything."

When his lips crash against mine, my body betrays me with an immediate response.

Heat courses through me as his mouth moves with desperate hunger against mine. His lips are softer than I remember, more urgent, more demanding.

The stubble on his jaw scratches slightly against my skin, sending shivers down my spine.

For a dangerous moment, I surrender to the sensation, my hands clutching his shirt instead of pushing him away. My fingers curl into the expensive fabric, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath.

The taste of whiskey on his tongue snaps me back to reality. With renewed strength, I shove him hard, breaking free. My chest heaves as I back away.

"Get out!" My voice shakes with rage—at him, at myself, at my body's treacherous reaction.

The lamp beside us casts long shadows across his face, making him look like a stranger. "You can't just walk back into my life drunk and expect me to fall at your feet. Those days are over!"

He stares at me, breathing heavily. Something dangerous flashes in his eyes – something possessive and raw that makes my stomach flip. "You still want me. I felt it."

The raw arrogance in his voice infuriates me. My hands clench into fists at my sides as I fight the urge to throw something at him. "What I want is for you to leave. Now."

"I'm not leaving unless you agree to remarry me. About the past... I was wrong. I apologize." He switches to his native tongue, the words sounding even more intimate somehow.

I freeze, wondering if I misheard. Ryan Blackwood, apologizing? This man who never admits he's wrong about anything?

"I'm serious, whether you believe me or not. Blackwood needs a mistress, a proper one."

Ryan shifts uncomfortably, struggling with the words. "I just want you back in my life, Serena. Even if it's just to see you every day."

"Mr. Blackwood, you flatter me," I say with biting sarcasm. "But there are countless women in New York who'd kill to marry you and become Mrs. Blackwood.

I've already played that role, and clearly, I wasn't suited for it. Perhaps you should look elsewhere."

My words drip with venom, not giving him an inch of sympathy.

"I've gotten used to having you in my life," he insists, his tone growing more urgent.

"Serena, I mean everything I'm saying. If you agree to remarry me, I'll accept whatever conditions you set. You can continue with your work—I'll support you fully."

My body tenses as I finally see the sincerity in his eyes. A part of me I thought was dead stirs painfully in my chest.

But his belated apology means nothing now. The damage is already done, the scars too deep.

"Ryan, just leave," I say, my voice softening despite myself.

"Don't say things like this anymore. What we had was broken from the start. Yes, I admit I once had feelings for you, but there's no future for us now."

"Why?" His eyes search mine desperately. "Don't you believe me?"

"That's not it," I snap, my patience finally breaking. "If you don't leave right now, I'll call the police and report you for trespassing."

His jaw clenches, pride and frustration warring on his face.

The muscle in his cheek twitches as he grinds his teeth. For a moment, I think he might refuse, might force another confrontation.

Instead, he straightens his rumpled jacket with a jerky motion, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

"This isn't over, Serena."

The words sound like both a threat and a promise as he stalks toward the door, his footsteps heavy on my hardwood floor.

He pauses with his hand on the knob, turning back to fix me with a look that makes my heart race against my will.

"Next time I come for you, I'll be sober. And you won't be able to lie to yourself about what you want."

The door slams behind him, rattling in its frame as I'm left standing alone in my living room, trembling with anger and something else I refuse to name.

I slide down the wall until I'm sitting on the floor, my emotions in complete disarray.

How can I possibly be so calm? This was the man I loved for three years.

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The heaviness in my chest feels suffocating.

Part of me wants to break down and cry until there's nothing left, but my rational side insists he's not worth my tears.

I've already divorced him. I can't jump back into that fire again.

With a heavy sigh, I finally pull myself together and head to bed, though I know sleep will be impossible tonight.

Chapter 34: Chapter 34 Fever Dreams

Ryan's POV

I stumble through the doorway of the Blackwood mansion, my head spinning with alcohol and rejection.

The grand foyer seems to tilt around me, marble floors gleaming mockingly under the chandelier light.

Simon rushes forward to steady me, his concerned face blurring before my eyes.

"Mr. Blackwood, you're burning up," he says, pressing a hand to my forehead.

I push him away, swaying dangerously. "I'm fine."

But I'm not fine. The cold night air after leaving Serena's apartment has seeped into my bones, mingling with the whiskey in my system.

My thoughts are a jumbled mess of her defiant eyes, her trembling lips after our kiss, and the wall she's built between us.

"Sir, please let me call the doctor," Simon insists, hovering nearby as I drag myself toward the staircase.

The grand staircase suddenly looks impossibly steep. My legs give way beneath me, and the world goes dark.

Voices float around me in fragments. A needle prick in my arm. Cool cloth on my forehead. The clinical smell of antiseptic.

"...temperature of 104..."

"...needs intravenous fluids..."

"...should we inform Mrs. Blackwood—former Mrs. Blackwood?"

My throat feels raw, words escaping without permission as the fever consumes me.

"Serena..." Her name tears from my lips like a prayer. "Don't go... please don't go..."

Through the haze, I sense movement around me, hushed conversations I can't quite grasp.

My mind drifts between consciousness and delirious dreams where Serena stands just beyond my reach, always turning away when I call her name.

Not once do I call for Sophie.

The realization filters dimly through my fever—the woman I thought I couldn't live without has faded from my thoughts, replaced entirely by the one who walked away.

I wake to the sterile whiteness of a hospital room, an IV drip attached to my arm and the steady beep of monitors.

My head pounds mercilessly, but the fog has cleared. The digital clock on the wall shows it's been nearly two days since I collapsed.

Simon sits in the corner, working quietly on his tablet. He looks up immediately when I stir.

"Welcome back, sir," he says, relief evident in his voice. "How are you feeling?"

"Like hell," I rasp, my throat raw. "Water."

He quickly brings a cup with a straw, helping me sit up slightly to drink. The cool liquid is heaven against my parched throat.

"The doctor says the fever has broken," he explains, setting the cup aside. "You developed pneumonia from exposure. They want to keep you another day for observation."

I nod, too exhausted to argue.

My thoughts immediately turn to Serena—does she know? Would she care if she did?

The memory of her pushing me away, the contempt in her voice when she threatened to call the police, cuts deeper than any physical pain.

Yet I remember the way she responded to my kiss, however briefly. The contradiction gives me hope, however slim.

How could I get her back? Would flowers work? No, too generic. A grand gesture? She'd see through that immediately. Maybe I could—

The door to my room swung open, interrupting my thoughts.

Ivy Hart slipped in, wearing a concerned expression that didn't reach her eyes. Her perfectly styled blonde hair and immaculate outfit looked out of place against the clinical backdrop.

"Ryan, I came as soon as I heard!" she exclaimed, rushing to my bedside. "Are you alright? Should I call for a better doctor?"

My stomach churned at the sight of her. This woman—had been at the center of so much pain between Serena and me.

How many times had she whispered poison in my ear about Serena? How often had I believed her over the woman I married?

"Get out." My voice is quiet but hard as steel.

She blinked, feigning confusion. "What? But Ryan—" *freewebnovel.com*

"I said get out." I push myself up straighter, ignoring the pain that shoots through my chest. "I have no interest in seeing you, today or any other day."

Her face contorts, the mask of concern dropping completely. "You can't speak to me that way! Sophie—"

I laugh coldly, the sound echoing harshly in the sterile room. "Simon, please escort Ms. Hart out. And make sure security knows she's not to be admitted again."

Simon steps forward immediately, professional as always despite the awkward situation. "Ms. Hart, if you'll come with me."

"This is outrageous!" She screeches, throwing the flowers down. "You'll regret this, Ryan! I'll be telling my sister about this in my dreams."

I heard those words and suppressed the smirk threatening to surface.

Ivy's 'dreaming of Sophie' stunt was nothing new—it was the same tired play she'd pulled time and again, trying to get under my skin.

But it didn't work anymore.

When Simon returns minutes later, he looks slightly disheveled but satisfied. "She's been escorted from the premises, Mr. Blackwood."

I nod, sinking back against the pillows. "Should I inform Ms. Quinn about your condition?" he asks hesitantly.

The question strikes a raw nerve. Would Serena come if she knew? Would she sit beside my bed, worry etched on her beautiful face?

Or would she simply shrug and continue with her day, unmoved by my suffering?

"No," I finally answer, staring at the ceiling. "She wouldn't come anyway."

"I wouldn't be so certain about that."

The unexpected voice makes both Simon and me snap our heads toward the doorway. My grandmother stands there, elegant as always in her tailored suit, disapproval radiating from every pore.

"Grandmother," I acknowledge, suddenly feeling like a scolded child despite being CEO of a multinational corporation.

"Simon, give us a moment," she commands, and he immediately excuses himself.

She approaches my bed slowly, assessing me with critical eyes that miss nothing. "So you're still fighting with your wife?"

My heart skips a beat. She doesn't know. Of course she doesn't - I never told her about the divorce, couldn't bear to face her disappointment.

"Something like that," I manage, averting my eyes.

"Look at me when I'm speaking to you, boy." The command in her voice has me meeting her gaze automatically.

"What foolishness have you been up to now? I heard you calling her name in your delirium. The nurses told me you were quite... distressed."

Heat rushes to my face. "It's complicated, Grandmother."

"Marriage always is. But that doesn't explain why you're here alone, burning with fever, while your wife is nowhere to be seen." Her eyes narrow. "What have you done to that poor girl?"

The question hits like a physical blow. What haven't I done? How do I even begin to list my failures?

"I... I didn't trust her. I believed others over her. I was cold when she needed warmth. Absent when she needed presence."

The admissions pour out of me, each one a knife twisting in my gut.

"I treated her like she was disposable when she was the most precious thing in my life."

My grandmother's expression doesn't change, but I see a flicker of disappointment in her eyes that cuts deeper than any reprimand.

"The Blackwood men have always been fools when it comes to matters of the heart."

She says finally. "Your grandfather was the same - stubborn as a mule, blind to his own faults. It took him years to realize what was right in front of him."

She reaches out, her hand surprisingly strong as it grips mine. "But you, Ryan... you always were quicker to learn than he was. Fix this. Before it's too late."

"I'm trying," I admit, the words painful in their honesty.

"And?"

"It's not working."

Grandmother sighs, patting my hand before pulling away. "Rest now. Recover your strength. You'll need it if you're to win her back."

She stands, smoothing down her impeccable suit. "A Blackwood never gives up on what truly matters. Remember that."

As she leaves, I stare at the ceiling, her words echoing in my mind. A Blackwood never gives up. And Serena matters more than anything.

I close my eyes, determination hardening within me. I've made countless mistakes, but giving up on Serena won't be one of them. When I leave this hospital, I'll have a plan. A real one, not a desperate, drunken plea.

I'm getting her back. No matter what it takes.

Chapter 35: Chapter 35 False Promises

Serena's POV

I was deep into reviewing the latest design sketches when my phone buzzed. Grandmother Blackwood's name flashed on the screen. My finger hovered over the decline button for a second before I sighed and answered.

"Hello, Grandmother."

"Serena, dear! I'm at Century Plaza. Join me for some shopping?"

I hesitated, glancing at the pile of work on my desk. Maya had been pushing me to take a break all week, saying I was working myself to exhaustion. Maybe she was right.

"I have quite a bit of work to finish..."

"Nonsense! A few hours away from that studio won't hurt. I miss you terribly."

I bit my lip, torn between obligation and the mountain of tasks ahead. Finally, I called Maya over.

"Can you and Julian handle these approvals if I step out for a few hours? Grandmother Blackwood wants to see me."

Maya's eyebrows shot up. "The grandmother-in-law? Even after the divorce?"

"She doesn't know yet," I admitted quietly. "Ryan hasn't told her."

"Of course we'll manage. Go!" Maya practically pushed me toward the door. "You've been working non-stop since you got back from the hospital. A little retail therapy might do you good."

Forty minutes later, I spotted Grandmother Blackwood sitting regally on a bench near the plaza's central fountain. The moment she saw me, her face lit up with genuine warmth.

"Serena, darling!" She reached for my hands, holding them tightly in her own.

"It's been too long since you've visited. I've missed you terribly, so I had to scheme to get you out here. I hope I'm not interrupting anything important?"

I shook my head, smiling despite myself. "Nothing that can't wait, Grandmother."

"Wonderful! Now, let's get you some new clothes. The seasons are changing, and you need a proper wardrobe update."

She linked her arm through mine, and I noticed she didn't mention Ryan's name at all.

Instead, she focused entirely on me, dragging me from store to store, insisting on purchasing jewelry and clothes despite my protests.

"Grandmother, please, this is too much," I objected as she held up a stunning sapphire necklace against my throat.

"Nonsense! It brings out your eyes beautifully. We'll take it," she informed the eager saleswoman.

By the time we finally settled at a restaurant for lunch, my feet were aching, and bags from luxury boutiques surrounded our table.

"I haven't shopped like this in ages," Grandmother sighed contentedly. "Gets the blood flowing! Makes me feel young again."

I smiled, playing along. "You're already youthful, Grandmother. Your energy puts women half your age to shame."

She took a sip of her water, then fixed me with that penetrating stare I knew so well. Here it comes.

"Serena, dear... is something wrong between you and Ryan? He came home last night with a terrible fever. The nurses said he kept calling your name."

I stared down at my plate, stabbing a piece of lettuce with more force than necessary. So that's what this outing was really about.

"Grandmother..." I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. "The truth is, Ryan doesn't love me. He never did. I was just a replacement for someone else, and I—"

"Nonsense," she cut me off sharply. "Whatever Ryan thinks he feels, you are the only Lady Blackwood, and that will never change. You belong at the head of our family."

I shook my head slowly. "I can't live with a man who doesn't love me. That's no way to spend a life."

"Better to set him free," I added softly.

"What ridiculous talk! Serena, you will always be my granddaughter-in-law. Those other flitting women mean nothing! They're temporary distractions, nothing more."

"Grandmother, please, I—"

She reached across the table, clasping my hands in her bony fingers with surprising strength.

"Serena, from the first moment I saw you, I knew you were special. Only a woman like you deserves my grandson.

Listen to me—couples fight! They argue, they make up. I'll make Ryan apologize properly."

I couldn't help but laugh bitterly. Ryan had already attempted that last night, drunk and desperate. What good had it done?

I fell silent, knowing further argument was pointless. The divorce papers were already signed. Ryan would have to tell her himself—I couldn't bear to break her heart.

After lunch, Grandmother insisted on more shopping. I trailed behind her into an exclusive boutique, where a scene was already unfolding.

"Package all of these for me," a familiar voice commanded.

Ivy Hart stood in the center of the store, draped in an evening gown that hugged every curve, surrounded by fawning sales associates. Not a single staff member noticed us enter.

I was shocked to see her looking so confident. After her disgrace, I'd expected her to lie low for a while. Yet here she was, shopping as if nothing had changed.

Where was she getting the money? Without Ryan's support or the jewelry business backing her, she should be struggling financially. Instead, she was buying armfuls of designer clothes.

The sales associate approached her with a payment terminal. "How would you like to pay today, Miss Hart?"

Ivy gave her a condescending look. "You don't recognize me? Charge everything to Mr. Blackwood's account, as usual."

"But Miss Hart..." the woman hesitated. "This is the third time this month you've said that, and Mr. Blackwood hasn't come to settle the previous bills yet."

I bit back a smile. So that was it—she was trying to maintain appearances by spending money she didn't have.

"Are you deaf? I told you Ryan will handle the bill! What's wrong with you people?" Ivy snapped, changing back into her own clothes with obvious irritation.

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"With your terrible customer service, it's no wonder this place will go out of business soon!"

The staff exchanged uncomfortable glances, clearly caught in an awkward situation.

"What are you standing around for? Package my things immediately!" Ivy demanded.

"I wasn't aware my grandson had appointed anyone else to spend his money," Grandmother's voice rang out coldly.

Ivy's head whipped around, her expression freezing when she saw us. Her eyes widened at the sight of Grandmother holding my arm like a cherished relative.

"Grandmother! What a surprise to see you here," Ivy recovered quickly, pasting on a fake smile and stepping forward.

Grandmother's eyes narrowed. "I am not your grandmother. I have only one granddaughter-in-law, and she's standing right beside me. At your age, you shouldn't be claiming false relationships."

I could see the confusion on the staff's faces turn to understanding as they realized who we were.

"Mrs. Blackwood! Here are the receipts for Miss Hart's previous purchases this month," a manager rushed forward, presenting several slips of paper. "Perhaps you could look them over?"

Chapter 36: Chapter 36 Don't give up at the final hurdle

Serena's POV

Grandmother Blackwood glanced at the receipts, then let out a cold laugh that sent chills down my spine. With a flick of her wrist, she tossed the papers directly into Ivy's face.

"Have I gone senile? I don't recall any connection between the Blackwood family and you, Ivy Hart. These clothes you're buying—why should the Blackwoods pay for them?"

The humiliation on Ivy's face was immediate. Around us, the store employees began whispering, barely concealing their amusement at her predicament. I fought to keep my expression neutral, but inside I was experiencing a shameful sense of satisfaction.

"Mrs. Blackwood, I was only—" Ivy stammered, her usual confidence crumbling.

"Don't think I'm unaware of your recent antics," Grandmother cut her off with brutal efficiency. "You've been dismissed from Blackwood Enterprises. Where you work now is none of my concern, but if you ever misuse the Blackwood name again, I won't be so lenient!"

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, radiating an authority that could make anyone cower.

I knew within hours this incident would spread throughout Century Plaza like wildfire.

Ryan might not care about the money—Ivy had clearly been doing this for quite some time—but now, without access to funds and accustomed to a lavish lifestyle, Grandmother's words had effectively crushed Ivy's last hope.

"Mrs. Blackwood, please hear me out! It wasn't what you think," Ivy pleaded, her composure completely gone. "I can explain everything—I was set up! Someone framed me!"

Before I could react, Ivy lunged forward, desperately trying to grab onto Grandmother's legs in a pathetic display of begging.

I quickly pulled Grandmother back a few steps, and immediately the security guards stepped in to block Ivy's advance.

"It really wasn't my fault!" she cried, mascara beginning to run down her cheeks.

Grandmother snorted dismissively and turned to the store staff. "Her bills are her responsibility. If she can't pay, handle it according to your store policy."

The employees nodded in understanding. The message was crystal clear: Ivy's Blackwood connection—her meal ticket—had been permanently revoked.

Grandmother squeezed my hand gently, her stern expression melting into warm affection as she turned to me.

"Serena, dear, did that frighten you? This is exactly how you should handle women trying to attach themselves to Ryan. You're young and perhaps too kind-hearted, but you can always tell Grandmother, and I'll take care of it for you."

I nodded automatically, but my heart was filled with conflicted emotions.

The truth was painfully obvious—Grandmother had always known about Ivy's existence. She simply hadn't intervened before because Ryan had protected Ivy.

Now that there seemed to be problems between them, she was finally wielding her authority, trying to win me over.

Still, watching Ivy's spectacular fall from grace did give me a certain satisfaction. After everything she'd done to sabotage me, seeing her reduced to begging was...vindicating.

The unexpected confrontation had dampened both our moods. After a few more minutes of halfhearted browsing, Grandmother suggested we head home.

"Serena, why don't you come back with me? Ryan is ill, and we don't know how he's doing right now."

I shook my head slowly, not ready to face him yet. "Grandmother, please give me time to think."

She sighed, disappointment evident in her eyes. "Very well, but don't wait too long. Serena, I've lived long enough to know that a man's heart will grow cold if you don't keep it warm.

You've invested three years in this marriage—don't give up at the final hurdle."

I watched her car disappear into traffic, wondering if she was right.

Had I really invested too much to walk away now? Or was this exactly the moment when I needed to be strongest?

My phone buzzed in my purse—Maya checking in on me.

I sent her a quick message that I'd be back at the studio soon.

Whatever happened with Ryan, I still had a life and career of my own to build. That, at least, was something no one could take from me.

Author's POV

"YOU DARE DEFY ME?"

Evelyn Blackwood burst into the hospital room like a storm, her designer heels clicking sharply on the polished floor.

Her face was flushed with fury, her perfectly styled hair trembling with every breath.

Ryan looked up from the small table beside his hospital bed, where his laptop was open and a few documents were neatly arranged.

"Grandmother, you're back."

"Don't you 'Grandmother' me! What's going on between you and that insufferable Ivy Hart?" She jabbed a bony finger in his direction.

"I took Serena shopping today and ran into that little parasite strutting around Century Plaza, bragging that you'd pay for everything she buys!"

Ryan coughed weakly, attempting to calm the situation. "Grandmother, I've been too lenient with her in the past. I'll be more careful going forward."

"Lenient? Who exactly is she to you?" Evelyn's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Don't mention Sophie Hart to me—I can't stand hearing that name! If you want any chance with Serena, you will cut ALL ties with Sophie's family, immediately!"

Ryan opened his mouth but wisely closed it again, recognizing the dangerous glint in his grandmother's eyes.

"Your silence means agreement," Evelyn declared, pointing an accusing finger at him.

"If I discover any more interaction between you and Ivy Hart, I'm washing my hands of your marital problems!"

With a dramatic huff, she swept out of the room, leaving Ryan exhaling in relief.

Desperate to escape further lectures, Ryan checked himself out of the hospital against medical advice. The empty house greeted him coldly—Serena hadn't returned.

The vast master bedroom felt hollow without her presence.

He sank onto the edge of the bed, noticing how illness had made him unexpectedly emotional. His phone vibrated suddenly, but the name flashing wasn't Serena's.

Ivy Hart. Again.

The persistent buzzing irritated him beyond measure. Ryan immediately blocked the number, his jaw tight with resolve.

Moments later, an unknown number lit up his screen. He answered with caution.

"Ryan, you can't abandon me like this!" Ivy's voice came through, tearful and desperate. "I've lost my studio, I have no money, I'll be sleeping on the streets soon!"

Her pitiful sobbing echoed through the speaker. Just weeks ago, he would have rushed to her rescue without question. But everything had changed now.

"Ryan, if not for me, then for Sophie's sake! I'm her only sister!" Ivy played her trump card, knowing full well how Sophie's memory had controlled him for years.

"ENOUGH!" His voice thundered through the room. "Haven't I helped you enough all these years? You made your mistakes—now face the consequences."

Ryan gripped the phone tightly, his knuckles turning white. "Ivy, don't call me again. Your problems are no longer my concern. Ever."

A shocked gasp came from the other end. "Ryan, how can you be so heartless?"

"Perhaps it's time you reflected on your own actions." He ended the call with a decisive tap.

Leaning back against the headboard, Ryan let out a long, weary sigh. The weight of his decision pressed heavily on his chest. Breaking ties with Ivy felt like another step away from Sophie's memory.

Would Sophie understand? Or would she hate him for abandoning her sister?

For the first time, Ryan realized he cared less about that answer than he once did.

Chapter 37: Chapter 37 Ivy's in trouble

Author's POV

Ivy Hart was desperate now.

Two weeks without Blackwood protection, and her savings were bleeding dry. Each rejected job application pushed her to lower her salary expectations even further. Finally, some tiny no-name studio had agreed to take her in—as a damn assistant.

Her. A former designer.

The humiliation burned in her stomach as she shuffled papers and made coffee like some glorified intern. Two and a half days into this miserable job, and she was already dragging her feet. How had she fallen this far? From being Ryan's darling to this?

"Ivy, there's a dinner meeting tonight. Clean yourself up and join us," her sleazy boss announced, eyeing her like she was merchandise.

"Not going," she snapped, lifting her chin with defiance.

He laughed. Laughed in her face.

"Then pack your things and don't come back tomorrow. I don't pay for deadweight around here."

Her heart sank, reality crashing down on her shoulders. She had no other options. After a beat, she gave a reluctant nod.

"That's more like it," he smirked, his gaze crawling over her figure. "Wear something pretty. If we land this project, there's a bonus in it for you."

Ivy rolled her eyes when he turned away, but her mind was already calculating. If she had to endure this, she might as well use it to her advantage.

Later that night, she slipped into her most effective weapon—a dress that screamed innocence but whispered danger.

The moment she stepped into the private dining room, every male head turned. Their hungry stares followed her as she walked, hips swaying just enough.

"Ivy! Come sit here, beautiful," called one gray-haired executive, patting the seat beside him. *freewe&novel.com*

"Mr. Lee, your studio's hiding quite the treasure," the man said to her boss, not even trying to hide his leering.

Her boss practically shoved her forward.

"Ivy, pour Mr. Jack a drink, won't you?"

She forced a smile while screaming inside, obediently pouring the expensive liquor into his glass. Three rounds later, his hand began creeping toward her thigh under the table.

"Excuse me," she whispered, feigning dizziness. "Too much to drink."

The moment she slipped into the hallway, her fingers flew across her phone screen.

[Ryan, help me! Please!]

Minutes dragged by. No reply.

Then—finally—a single text: [?]

She didn't hesitate. She dialed his number, her voice cracking perfectly as soon as he picked up.

"I thought—it was just a business dinner," she said, breath hitching.

"But this old man keeps touching me and talking about taking me to his hotel! Ryan, I'm drinking too much, they won't stop pouring, I—I don't know what to do..."

On the other end, Ryan's voice tightened. "Where are you?"

She gave the address immediately, sniffing into the phone for effect.

"Please hurry, Ryan! I don't know how much longer I can hold them off. They're probably already looking for me..."

Ryan's POV

ANOTHER MESS TO CLEAN UP. I frowned at my phone, reading Ivy's dramatic message begging for help. Why did she always create these situations? After the confrontation with Grandmother, I'd promised myself to cut ties with her completely. Yet here she was, crying wolf again.

The call came through moments later, her voice trembling and tear-soaked. "Those men are touching me... trying to take me to a hotel!" she sobbed. "Ryan, please, I'm scared!"

Damn it. Despite everything, I couldn't just leave Sophie's sister in potential danger. What if she really was in trouble this time?

"Where are you?" I asked tersely, already reaching for my car keys. She rattled off the address of some mid-range restaurant downtown, her voice slurring dramatically about being forced to drink.

I signaled to Simon who was working late. "I need backup. Ivy's in trouble—supposedly."

Simon's expression showed exactly what he thought of this midnight rescue mission, but he nodded professionally. "I'll bring the car around, sir."

Twenty minutes later, I kicked open the private dining room door with more force than necessary. The scene inside was nothing like Ivy had described. Yes, there were drunk businessmen, but Ivy herself looked remarkably composed for someone supposedly being assaulted. Her makeup was perfect, her dress unwrinkled, and the only thing disheveled was her carefully tousled hair.

"Who the hell are you?" slurred one of the older men, spilling wine as he gestured wildly.

Before I could answer, Ivy launched herself at me, clinging dramatically to my arm. "Ryan! You came for me!" she wailed, suddenly transforming into a damsel in distress. "Please take me away from here!"

The cold fury building inside me must have shown on my face because the businessmen backed off instantly. Without a word, I extracted Ivy's grip from my arm and guided her out, Simon following close behind.

In the elevator, she continued the act, sniffing pathetically. "Those terrible men... they kept forcing drinks on me... I feel so dizzy..."

I didn't respond. The car ride was worse—she leaned heavily against my shoulder, practically purring.

"Ryan, I've been suffering so much without the company's protection," she whimpered. "I've had to take this awful job where they treat me like garbage. You saw what they made me do tonight!"

I stared straight ahead, jaw clenched tight. "I'm taking you home."

"I had to sell my apartment," she said quickly, looking up with wide, calculated eyes. "My new place is... it's terrible. Could I possibly stay with you? Just for a few days? I promise I won't be any trouble. Just until I find a better job."

"No." The answer came instantly. "I'll arrange a hotel room for you."

Her disappointment flickered briefly before she masked it with resignation. "If that's what you prefer... Thank you for helping me tonight. I'm sorry to be such a burden."

I merely nodded, maintaining my distance as Simon drove us to the nearest luxury hotel. After checking her in, I handed her the keycard, ready to leave.

"Ryan..." she caught my sleeve, eyes suddenly filling with fresh tears. "Please don't go. Please don't go. I'm scared... what if I have nightmares tonight?"

Every time I close my eyes, it's like I'm back there. I'm still so scared...I know it's silly, but I just... I don't want to sleep by myself."

I looked at her for a long moment, my expression unmoved. "You're not a child, Ivy. You'll fall asleep, and the world will keep turning."

I pulled my arm away, but she grabbed me again, more forcefully this time, practically throwing herself against my chest. "Please, just stay a little while! I can't be alone right now!"

As I tried disentangling myself from her desperate grip, a movement in my peripheral vision caught my attention. Standing frozen by the elevator was Serena.

My heart stopped. "Serena—"

She turned instantly, jabbing the elevator button repeatedly.

"Damn it!" I shoved Ivy away harder than I intended, racing after Serena as the elevator doors began closing. I barely managed to slip my hand between them, forcing them back open.

"Serena, wait. This isn't what it looks like."

Chapter 38: Chapter 38 Elevator scare

Serena's POV

I CHECKED MY WATCH as I walked through the hotel lobby.

Our dinner with potential investors had gone exceedingly well, and the contract was practically signed.

Dreamland Studio would soon have the financial backing to launch our international collection.

"That went better than expected," I murmured to myself, a small smile tugging at my lips. Two years of relentless work was finally paying off. ***freewe&novel.com***

As I approached the elevators, my phone buzzed with a message from Maya—she'd secured the Japanese distributor we'd been courting for months.

Perfect timing. Once we finalized everything tomorrow—

The words died in my throat.

Standing by an open hotel room door was Ryan—my ex-husband—with a woman clinging desperately to his chest. Not just any woman. Ivy Hart.

I froze, a sudden chill washing over me despite my rational mind screaming that this shouldn't matter. Ryan's personal life was no longer my concern. We'd been divorced for years.

Yet something sharp and painful twisted in my chest as I watched Ivy press herself against him, her fingers clutching his sleeve possessively. The intimacy of the gesture was unmistakable.

I turned immediately, jabbing the elevator button like my life depended on it. Down, down, anywhere but here.

"Damn it!" I heard him growl, followed by footsteps racing toward me.

The elevator doors were almost closed—almost my salvation—when his hand shot between them, forcing them back open. He slipped inside, breathing hard, his face a storm of emotions.

"Serena, wait. This isn't what it looks like."

I let out a short, bitter laugh. "Really? That's what you're going with? The oldest line in the book?"

"You don't understand—"

"I don't need to understand," I cut him off, pressing myself against the elevator wall, creating distance between us. "Your personal life isn't my business anymore, Ryan. You don't need to explain yourself to me."

His jaw tightened. "So you just assume the worst? That's how little you think of me?"

"I don't think anything about you." My voice came out colder than I intended. "We're divorced, remember? You're free to do whatever—and whoever—you want."

Ryan's eyes darkened dangerously. "Is that how you see me? Someone who jumps from one woman to another?"

"What else am I supposed to think?" I gestured wildly toward the closed doors. "She was practically climbing you like a tree!"

"She called me claiming she was being assaulted! I came to help her!" His voice rose with frustration.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I shot back.

But instead of answering, his eyes burned into mine as he stepped closer.

"I was in the hospital," he said, voice low and trembling with anger.

"Why didn't you come? Not once. Not even a call. Did you even care if I was alive or dead?"

"Your medical emergencies aren't my concern anymore," I said coldly. "I don't have any obligation to—"

"So that's it? Years together and you just switch off caring completely?" He moved closer, his scent—that damn familiar cologne—filling my senses.

"Because I never stopped caring about you, Serena."

My heart thundered traitorously in my chest. "Move back, Ryan."

"Make me," he challenged, his face inches from mine.

The air between us crackled with electricity. I could feel the heat radiating from his body, see the storm brewing in his eyes. Anger, frustration, and something darker, hungrier.

"This is ridiculous," I whispered, my voice betraying me by wavering.

"Is it?" His gaze dropped to my lips. "Tell me you feel nothing, and I'll step back."

I opened my mouth to lie, but no sound came out. Instead, I found myself staring at his lips, remembering how they felt against mine.

"Damn you," he growled, and then his mouth crashed down on mine.

My hands, traitors to my mind's protests, grabbed his shoulders, pulling him closer instead of pushing him away.

His body pressed mine against the elevator wall, one hand tangling in my hair while the other gripped my hip possessively.

I gasped against his mouth, giving his tongue access to deepen the kiss.

"I've missed this," he murmured against my lips, his hand sliding down to grip my thigh and hitch it around his waist. "Missed you."

My skirt rode up as he pressed between my legs, the hard evidence of his desire unmistakable against my core.

I moaned involuntarily, my body responding to his touch like it had been starved for years—which, in truth, it had.

His lips traveled down my neck, teeth grazing the sensitive spot beneath my ear that he still remembered. "Tell me to stop," he challenged, knowing I wouldn't.

Instead of answering, I pulled his mouth back to mine, my fingers working frantically at his tie. His hands slid under my blouse, warm against my skin, reclaiming territory once his.

Suddenly, the elevator lurched violently, lights flickering before plunging us into darkness. We froze as the car shuddered to a complete stop.

The emergency lights flickered on, bathing us in dim blue illumination. Our heavy breathing echoed in the silent space.

"What the hell?" Ryan muttered, slowly letting me slide back to my feet.

The intercom crackled. "Attention passengers, we're experiencing a technical malfunction. Please remain calm. Engineers have been notified and will restore service as quickly as possible."

Ryan and I stared at each other, the reality of our situation crashing down around us.

"How long?" Ryan demanded.

"At least an hour, sir. Maybe longer."

I closed my eyes, leaning against the wall. Trapped in an elevator with Ryan Blackwood after nearly having sex with him. The universe clearly had a twisted sense of humor.

"So," he said after an excruciating silence, "looks like we might be here a while."

I leaned my head back against the wall, closing my eyes. "Fantastic. Just fantastic."

A pause. Then his voice, low and far too calm.

"Come here. It's cold on your side."

I opened one eye, glaring at him. "Not a chance."

His brow arched, amused. "Why not?"

"Because," I said sharply, crossing my arms, "I'm not making the same mistake twice."

He smirked, stepping just half an inch closer. "What mistake would that be?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

He chuckled, dark and soft. "Ah. So you are afraid of something."

I stiffened. "Excuse me?"

He leaned slightly forward, voice dropping to a murmur.

"You're afraid if you come closer... you'll want to kiss me again."

I scoffed, turning my head away, heart pounding despite myself.

"You're delusional."

But he was still smiling. And worse—I couldn't tell if he was wrong.

Chapter 39: Chapter 39 Elevator scare2

Ryan's POV

I WATCHED HER carefully from across the elevator, admiring how the emergency lights cast blue shadows across her face. Even disheveled and angry, Serena was breathtaking. The way her chest rose and fell with each breath, how she nervously tucked her hair behind her ear—habits I'd memorized years ago.

"You can't stand there forever," I said, breaking the silence that had stretched between us.

"Watch me," she shot back, arms still crossed defensively.

The temperature in the elevator was dropping steadily. I could already see goosebumps forming on her exposed arms.

"You're cold," I stated flatly.

"I'm fine."

"Always so fucking stubborn," I muttered, shrugging off my suit jacket. I extended it toward her. "Take it."

She eyed the jacket suspiciously, like it might bite her.

"I don't need your—"

A loud metallic groan cut through her words, and the elevator lurched suddenly. Serena gasped, instinctively reaching out to steady herself against the wall.

"What was that?" Her voice trembled slightly.

"Probably just the cables settling," I answered, though I wasn't entirely convinced. The building was old—this hotel had been scheduled for maintenance next month.

Another loud creak echoed through the small space, followed by a more violent jolt. This time, Serena couldn't hide her fear. Her eyes widened, her breathing becoming rapid and shallow.

"Ryan..." The way she said my name—half accusation, half plea—made something twist inside my chest.

I moved across the elevator in two strides, standing close enough that she could reach for me if she wanted.

"It's going to be alright," I said firmly. "These systems have multiple safety backups."

She nodded jerkily, but I could see she wasn't convinced. Serena had always hated confined spaces—a fact I'd almost forgotten until now.

The elevator groaned again, and this time she did reach for me, fingers clutching my shirt sleeve.

"Hey," I said softly, placing my hand over hers. "Look at me."

Her eyes met mine, pupils dilated with fear.

"Want me to distract you?" I asked, keeping my voice low and steady. "Tell you a story?"

"Please," she whispered.

I thought for a moment, then smiled wryly. "Alright. Did I ever tell you about the time I set off the fire alarm in my dorm kitchen during sophomore year?"

Her brow furrowed slightly, curious despite herself. "No."

I said with a shrug. "Thought I'd cook me dinner. Pasta seemed safe enough. Turns out, you're supposed to boil water before adding the noodles. Who knew?"

Serena blinked. "...Everyone?"

"Yeah, well. Not me," I said, deadpan. "I dumped the dry pasta into a cold pot, poured in too much oil, walked away to light some candles—and came back to smoke, a flaming dish towel, and two RA's screaming at me through the alarm."

She gave a choked laugh, her grip on my sleeve loosening just a little.

"Then?" she asked.

"Campus security made me take a fire safety class," I said. "Can't blame her. The hallway smelled like burnt regret for a week."

Serena smiled, just faintly, but it was enough. The tension in her shoulders eased.

"You're ridiculous," she murmured.

"But I made you laugh," I said softly.

Another lurch rocked the elevator. She instinctively buried herself against my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her without hesitation.

"I've got you," I whispered against her hair. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Her body trembled against mine, and I kept one hand moving slowly up and down her back—something I remembered used to calm her when words wouldn't.

"Talk more," she whispered. "Please."

I searched for something—anything—to keep her mind occupied.

"Okay," I said, exhaling slowly. "Did you know penguins propose to their mates with pebbles?"

She blinked, caught off guard. "...What?"

"Yeah," I nodded, managing a small smile. "They find the smoothest pebble they can and present it to the one they like. If the other penguin accepts it, they mate for life."

Serena stared at me. "Are you seriously telling me penguin trivia right now?"

"You told me to talk," I said, shrugging. "I'm doing my best to be romantic and educational under pressure."

She let out a shaky laugh, the tension in her shoulders easing just a little.

"That is... the dumbest thing I've ever heard," she whispered, but there was a smile tugging at her lips.

"Yeah?" I said softly. "Still worked, didn't it?"

Another violent lurch, the elevator creaked ominously, swaying slightly. Serena whimpered, burying her face against my shirt.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

"I know, baby," the endearment slipped out naturally. "But I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I promise."

She looked up at me, those beautiful brown eyes swimming with tears. "How can you promise that? We're trapped in a metal box hanging by cables."

I cupped her face in my hands, making her focus on me and not our surroundings.

"Because I'd tear this whole fucking elevator apart with my bare hands before I'd let it hurt you," I said, meaning every word. "I've failed you before. I won't fail you again."

Something changed in her expression—a softening, a recognition of the truth in my words.

Without thinking, I leaned down and pressed my forehead against hers, our breath mingling in the small space between us.

"Ryan," she whispered, my name a question on her lips.

Before she could say more, the elevator jerked sharply, lights flickering wildly. Serena cried out, and I pressed her against the corner, shielding her body with mine.

Then suddenly—blessedly—the main lights came back on, and the elevator hummed to life, resuming its descent.

"Oh thank God," Serena breathed, sagging against me in relief.

The intercom crackled again. "We've successfully restored power and stabilized the system. We apologize for the inconvenience and distress. The elevator will now proceed to the lobby level where maintenance staff will assist you."

I kept my arm firmly around Serena's waist as the elevator descended smoothly to the ground floor. When the doors finally opened, we were met by concerned hotel staff and maintenance personnel.

"Are you both alright?" the building manager asked anxiously, rushing over.

"We're fine," I answered curtly, keeping a steady hand on Serena's back as I guided her out of the elevator.

"Though your building's maintenance leaves much to be desired."

"I'm so terribly sorry, Mr. Blackwood. This has never happened before—"

I gave him a hard look. "Let's make sure it doesn't happen again."

Then I turned my attention back to Serena, gently guiding her through the lobby toward the main doors.

"Come on. I'll drive you home."

She hesitated, then gave a small nod, too exhausted to argue.

My car waited at the curb, gleaming beneath the streetlights. I opened the passenger door for her, and she slid in without a word.

The drive was quiet.

She didn't lean away from me, but she didn't say much either. Her hands were clenched tightly in her lap, her shoulders still stiff from tension. I kept my eyes on the road, but my thoughts were entirely on her.

When we pulled up outside her apartment building, I shifted the car into park and turned to her. "I'll walk you up."

She blinked, surprised. "You don't have to."

"You just got stuck in an elevator, Serena. You're still shaking," I said gently. "I'm not letting you go upstairs alone." ***freewebnovel.com***

She hesitated, then gave a small nod. "Okay."

We got out of the car in silence.

When we reached her floor, I walked her to her room, waiting as she unlocked the door.

She paused in the doorway, looking up at me with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"Thank you," she said softly. "For... keeping me calm in there."

I nodded, suddenly reluctant to leave her. "Will you be alright?"

She bit her lower lip, hesitating before meeting my eyes again.

"Could you... would you mind staying? Just for a little while?" Her voice was barely above a whisper. "I'm still a bit shaken."

My heart hammered against my ribs. "Are you sure?"

Instead of answering, she stepped aside, holding the door open wider—an invitation I'd been waiting years to receive.

I stepped inside, hearing the door close behind me with a soft click that sounded like the beginning of something new.

Chapter 40: Chapter 40 There's something I need to tell you

Serena's POV

The moment the door closed behind us, regret crashed over me like a tidal wave. What was I thinking, inviting Ryan Blackwood into my room?

The man who had shattered my heart and left me to pick up the pieces alone.

But it was too late now. He stood in the center of my suite, tall and imposing, his presence filling every corner of the room. His eyes swept over the space—noting my open laptop on the desk, the design sketches spread across the desk.

"Nice décor," he said, breaking the silence.

I hugged myself, suddenly feeling vulnerable. "Thanks... it's all thanks to the money you gave me."

He went silent, his expression unreadable, and the pause seemed to stretch. My stomach tightened, unsure if I'd said too much, or not enough.

"Dreamland's doing well, then." His tone was casual, almost deliberately so.

"We manage," I replied stiffly, unsure what to do with my hands, with myself. "Would you like something to drink? There's a minibar."

Ryan shook his head, his gaze never leaving me. "I'm fine."

Another awkward silence stretched between us. I moved to gather the sketches from the desk, needing something to occupy my trembling hands.

"These are beautiful," he said, stepping closer to examine one of the designs I'd left on the nightstand. "For the winter collection?"

"Yes," I answered, surprised he remembered. "How did you know?"

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "The snowflake motif. "

"Oh... yes." I turned away, placing the sketches on the desk. I just didn't know how to face him—every time I saw him, the memory of what happened in the elevator came rushing back.

"Serena," Ryan's voice was closer now. "Look at me."

I forced myself to turn around. He stood just a foot away, close enough that I could smell his cologne—the same one he'd worn for years, woodsy and warm.

"Why did you ask me to stay?" he asked quietly.

I swallowed hard. "I told you. I was still shaken from the elevator."

"Bullshit," he said, though his tone remained gentle. "You've never needed anyone to hold your hand through a crisis. Least of all me."

My eyes narrowed. "Then why did you accept the invitation?"

"Because I've been waiting two years for you to give me even the smallest opening," he admitted, his honesty disarming me. "And I'm selfish enough to take it, even if you regret it tomorrow."

"I regret it already," I whispered.

Ryan took another step forward, close enough now that I had to tilt my head to maintain eye contact. "Do you? Really?" *freewebnovel.com*

My breath caught in my throat. "I should."

"But you don't."

His hand came up slowly, giving me plenty of time to back away. When I didn't, his fingers brushed along my cheek, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"I've missed you," he said, his voice dropping to a low rumble that I felt more than heard. "Every fucking day."

"Don't," I warned, even as I leaned imperceptibly into his touch. "Don't say things you don't mean."

His eyes darkened. "I've said many things I didn't mean, Serena. But never that."

My body betrayed me, responding to his proximity like it always had—heart racing, skin warming, breath quickening. I stepped back, bumping into the desk behind me.

"You did that to yourself," I reminded him, though my words held less bite than intended.

"I know." He ran a hand through his hair, a rare gesture of frustration. "Christ, Serena, don't you think I know that? I've replayed every mistake in my head a thousand times."

"No," I said softly, my gaze locking with his. "You just can't stand to let me go. You're too proud for that."

He closed the distance between us in two long strides, his hands gripping my shoulders.

"Is that what you believe?" His eyes searched mine with an intensity that made my knees weak.

I tried to look away, but he caught my chin between his fingers, forcing me to meet his gaze.

"Answer me, Serena."

"What else was I supposed to think?" I whispered, hating the vulnerability in my voice.

Without warning, his mouth crashed down on mine, desperate and demanding. Then his hands slid down my back, gripping my hips and pulling me flush against him.

I should have pushed him away. I should have slapped him. But instead, he ignited my desire with disarming ease.

"Does it feel different now?" he growled against my lips, one hand tangling in my hair.

I gasped as he backed me against the wall, his body hard and unyielding against mine. His lips moved to my neck, teeth grazing the sensitive skin beneath my ear.

"Ryan," I breathed, my head falling back, giving him better access.

"Say it again," he commanded, his voice rough with desire. "Say my name."

"Ryan," I repeated, my fingers digging into his shoulders.

He lifted me suddenly, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist as he carried me to the bed. We fell onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs and half-removed clothing.

His hands were everywhere—under my blouse, skimming my ribs, cupping my breast through the lace of my bra. Each touch ignited a fire that had been smoldering for years.

"I've missed you," he confessed against my collarbone, his breath hot on my skin. "Every fucking day."

I arched into his touch, too far gone to deny the truth. "I've missed you too."

He pulled back slightly, his eyes dark with desire as he looked down at me. "Let me show you," he said, his voice a husky whisper. "Let me prove how much I want you. Only you."

His fingers worked the buttons of my blouse, exposing more skin with each one. When he'd undone them all, he pushed the fabric aside, his gaze hungry as it swept over me.

"Beautiful," he murmured, leaning down to press his lips to the swell of my breast above my bra. "So fucking beautiful."

I reached up, my fingers trembling as I unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the taut muscles of his chest and abdomen. My nails scraped lightly down his torso, savoring his sharp intake of breath.

When he kissed me again, it was slower, deeper—a kiss that spoke of possession and promise. His hand slid up my thigh, pushing my skirt higher until his fingers brushed against the edge of my underwear.

"Tell me you want this," he demanded, his voice rough with restraint. "Tell me you want me."

"I want you," I admitted, the words torn from somewhere deep inside me. "God help me, I still want you."

With a groan, he captured my mouth again, his tongue tangling with mine as his fingers slipped beneath the lace barrier.

I gasped at the intimate touch, my body instantly responding to him as though we'd never been apart.

He knew exactly how to touch me, how to make me tremble and moan. My hips rose to meet his hand, seeking more pressure, more friction.

"That's it, baby," he encouraged, his lips trailing down my neck. "Let go for me."

I was close—so close—when a sudden realization hit me like a bucket of ice water. The doctor's words from earlier today echoed in my mind: "Congratulations! You're going to be a mom."

I was pregnant. And Ryan had no idea.

With a gasp, I pushed against his chest. "Wait—Ryan, stop."

To his credit, he froze immediately, though his breathing was ragged and his eyes were dark with unfulfilled desire.

"What's wrong?" he asked, concern replacing the passion in his expression.

I struggled to find the words, my heart pounding against my ribs. "There's something I need to tell you—"

Before I could continue, the shrill ring of his phone cut through the charged atmosphere. Ryan cursed, clearly intending to ignore it, but the persistent ringing continued.

"You should get that," I said, using the interruption to pull away from him, hastily rebuttoning my blouse with shaking fingers.

He looked at me for a long moment, then retrieved his phone from his pocket. His expression darkened as he checked the caller ID.

"This is important," he said reluctantly. "I have to take this."

I nodded, grateful for the reprieve as I smoothed down my skirt and tried to gather my scattered thoughts. What had I been about to do? More importantly, what had I been about to tell him?