

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

- Chapter 41 I won't be looking back

Chapter 41: Chapter 41 I won't be looking back

Serena's POV

I gently touched my lower abdomen, my hand trembling, as Ryan took his call in the corner of my room.

Should I tell him? Did he deserve to know?

Questions swirled through my mind like leaves caught in a storm. If I told him, would he try to use the baby to control me? Would he suddenly become the attentive husband he never was before? Or worse—would he remain indifferent to this child as he had been to me?

"I need to go," Ryan's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts as he approached, already rebuttoning his shirt with quick, efficient movements.

His eyes never left mine, searching for something I wasn't sure I wanted him to find. "There's an emergency at the office."

"Of course," I replied, my voice steadier than I felt. "It's probably better this way."

He paused, frowning slightly. "You were about to tell me something important."

"It was nothing," I lied, avoiding his penetrating gaze. To my relief, he didn't press me.

Then Ryan paused at the door, his hand on the knob. "Serena, about what just happened..."

"It was a mistake," I cut him off quickly. "The elevator incident, the adrenaline... It's just biology, Ryan. Nothing more."

Something flickered across his face—disappointment, maybe even hurt—but he masked it quickly. "If that's what you need to tell yourself."

Then he was gone, leaving me alone with my racing thoughts and the phantom sensation of his touch still lingering on my skin.

I convinced myself that night that it was just the adrenaline—a textbook case of misplaced emotional response.

The danger in the elevator had triggered something primal between us, nothing more.

What I didn't anticipate was Ryan's persistence.

The very next day, a sleek black Bentley appeared outside Dreamland Studio precisely at closing time. And there he was, leaning against the car door, arms crossed, waiting for me.

I pretended not to see him and took a cab home instead.

The next day, he was there again. And the day after that. And the day after that.

By the fifth day, my employees couldn't stop whispering about it.

"Mr. Blackwood is pursuing Ms. Quinn again," I overheard Celeste telling Lucy as I passed the design room. "But she doesn't seem interested at all."

"I'd be dreaming with a smile if someone with a car like that was waiting for me every day," Lucy sighed dramatically.

"Well, Ms. Quinn is gorgeous. It makes sense she'd have someone like that chasing after her."

I quickened my pace, my cheeks burning.

This was exactly what I'd been trying to avoid—becoming office gossip. I needed to put a stop to Ryan's daily appearances before rumors started affecting our professional reputation.

The chatter died instantly when Maya stepped into the room, giving everyone her signature "get back to work" glare. I'd never been more grateful for my best friend's intimidating presence.

She followed me into my office, moving to the window to peer down at the now-familiar Bentley parked outside.

"So," she said, turning to face me with raised eyebrows, "what's the deal with Ryan Blackwood? Is he seriously trying to win you back?"

I sighed, setting down my pen. "Who knows what goes through that man's head?"

"And you're just going to keep ignoring him?"

I shrugged, trying to appear more nonchalant than I felt. "Let him wait if that's what he wants. I'm treating him like air."

Maya snorted. "Good strategy. Men like him aren't used to being ignored. It's probably driving him crazy." She tilted her head, studying me.

"But seriously, do you think he's actually had some kind of revelation? That he wants to remarry you?"

"Even if he has, it's too little, too late," I said firmly, though my hand instinctively moved to rest on my still-flat stomach. The baby—our baby—was a complication I wasn't ready to factor into this equation.

"You're right," Maya nodded. "A man like that doesn't just wake up enlightened one day. He's probably putting on an act. The moment he gets what he wants, he'll revert to his old ways."

I didn't respond. Part of me wondered if that was true. The desperation in his eyes when he kissed me in the hotel room had seemed genuine.

But then again, I'd spent three years convincing myself he cared when all evidence pointed to the contrary.

That evening, I stayed late to review several pending designs. Julian decided to stay as well, nursing a cup of coffee while eyeing Ryan's car that hadn't budged from its spot all day.

"Need any help?" he asked, appearing in my doorway after most of the staff had gone home.

I smiled but shook my head. "I've got about thirty more minutes of work. You should head home, Julian. It's getting late."

"Actually," he hesitated, glancing out the window, "I thought I might wait and drive you home. To save you from... unwanted attention."

My hands stilled on the keyboard. Julian's offer was thoughtful, but I couldn't help wondering if there was more behind it than simple concern.

"That's very kind, but—"

"I insist," he cut in gently. "That man has been harassing you all week. The least I can do is make sure you get home safely."

I sat in silence, conflicted. On one hand, accepting Julian's offer felt like using him as a shield against Ryan. On the other, I was tired of Ryan's daily vigils outside my workplace.

As I contemplated my response, my thoughts drifted to the man waiting outside. Why was Ryan suddenly willing to spend hours each day just waiting for me?

The Ryan I knew valued efficiency above all else; wasting time was anathema to him. Had he truly changed? Or was this just another calculated move in whatever game he was playing?

Even if he was sincere, could his persistence now erase three years of coldness and indifference? The memory of lying awake night after night, wondering what I had done wrong, why he couldn't love me the way I loved him, still cut deep.

"Serena?" Julian's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "If you don't mind me asking... Maya mentioned you once said you'd never leave him. What changed?"

My body tensed at the unexpected question. How could I possibly explain the complexity of my marriage to Ryan? The hope, the disappointment, the gradual realization that I was chasing a mirage?

"I just couldn't do it anymore," I finally said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I was tired."

Tired of being invisible in my own home. Tired of competing with a ghost. Tired of loving someone who couldn't—or wouldn't—love me back.

I closed my computer, suddenly desperate to be anywhere but here, trapped between memories and questions I wasn't ready to answer.

"I'm finished for the night. If you're still offering that ride..."

Julian's face lit up. "Absolutely."

We turned off the lights and locked up the studio. The night air was cool against my skin as we stepped outside, and I was immediately aware of movement by the curb.

Ryan stood there, looking impossibly handsome in his tailored suit, a bouquet of red roses in his hand. His expression when he spotted Julian beside me was thunderous.

"Serena," he said, his voice tight as he approached, pointedly ignoring my companion. "I thought we might talk over dinner."

He extended the roses toward me, his eyes seeking mine with an intensity that still made my heart skip. "I've been doing a lot of thinking. About us. About how badly I messed everything up. I'm hoping you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

I stared at the roses, remembering how many times I'd hoped for exactly this kind of gesture during our marriage. How many nights I'd cried myself to sleep wishing he would look at me the way he was looking at me now.

But it was too late. Far too late.

"Ryan," I said, crossing my arms defensively, "you need to stop coming here. It's disruptive to the business, and frankly, it's uncomfortable for everyone."

"I just want to talk—"

"I don't need you to pick me up or drive me home," I continued firmly. "Please respect that."

Before Ryan could respond, Julian stepped forward with a mischievous smile that seemed completely at odds with his usually reserved demeanor.

"No need to worry about Serena getting home safely, Mr. Ex-man," he said, dangling his car keys. "Consider it my way of repaying her for taking me in at the studio. I'll make sure she gets home just fine."

He turned to me. "Shall we, Serena?"

I nodded, grateful for the interruption. "Thank you, Julian." **freewebmove1.com**

As I climbed into Julian's car and buckled my seatbelt, I couldn't help but feel a perverse satisfaction when Julian honked twice in Ryan's direction—a childish but effective dismissal.

Through the rearview mirror, I caught a final glimpse of Ryan standing alone on the sidewalk, the roses hanging limply at his side, his proud shoulders slumped in defeat.

For a moment—just a moment—I almost told Julian to stop the car.

But then I remembered the years of loneliness, the hollow marriage, the pain of loving someone who saw right through me.

I turned my eyes forward and didn't look back.

Chapter 42: Chapter 42 You're actually mental

Ryan's POV

I stood there watching Serena drive away with Julian, the roses hanging limp in my hand like my crushed hopes.

The car's taillights disappeared around the corner, taking with them any chance I had of talking to her tonight.

Damn it.

I loosened my tie, feeling like I couldn't breathe properly. The realization hit me like a physical blow—Serena was truly moving on.

That designer with his smug smile and casual familiarity was stepping into the space I'd left vacant.

I tossed the roses into a nearby trash can with more force than necessary. How had I forgotten that? Sophie had loved roses.

"Mr. Blackwood?" Simon's voice came from behind me. My assistant had been waiting discreetly in the car. "Should we head back to the office?"

"No," I said firmly. "We're not giving up."

"What's the plan for tomorrow then, sir?"

I stared at the now-empty street where Serena had just been. "Lilies," I said decisively. "She never liked roses. Serena preferred lilies."

Simon cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Actually, sir, Mrs. Blackwood—I mean, Ms. Quinn—is allergic to lilies, as I recall."

I turned to stare at him, feeling like I'd been slapped. "She's allergic? How do you know that?"

"She had a reaction at the company Christmas party three years ago when you brought in floral arrangements. The medical team had to be called."

I had no memory of this. None whatsoever. Where had I been during this incident? Probably working in my office, oblivious to my own wife's medical emergency.

"What does she like then?" I asked, hating how desperate I sounded.

Simon hesitated. "I believe she's partial to Violets, sir. Nothing too formal or arranged."

Anger coursed through me, but it wasn't directed at Serena—it was all for myself. I didn't even know what flowers my own wife preferred. Three years of marriage, and I knew nothing about her likes, her allergies, her preferences.

Three wasted years treating her like she was invisible when she was right there in front of me.

I really am the worst husband in the world.

The next day, Julian was out of town on business—a piece of information Simon had acquired through his network. It was the perfect opportunity to try again without interference.

I waited outside Dreamland Studio, a bouquet of Violets in hand. My heart actually raced when I saw her pushing through the glass doors, looking breathtaking in a fitted navy dress that highlighted every curve. Her hair was pulled back in a sleek ponytail, exposing the elegant line of her neck.

The moment she spotted me, her steps faltered slightly before she regained her composure. I moved quickly to intercept her path.

"Serena," I said, my voice coming out lower than intended. I extended the flowers toward her. "I thought you might prefer these."

She glanced at the flowers but made no move to take them. "What do you want, Ryan?"

"To talk," I said simply. "I've made reservations at Chen's." I watched her eyes widen slightly—she loved that restaurant's authentic local cuisine. "Remember how you always said their dumplings were the best in the city?"

"You never wanted to go there," she said, suspicion clear in her voice. "You always preferred French or Italian."

I nodded, accepting the criticism. "I made a lot of mistakes. Not appreciating your preferences was one of many."

She shifted her weight, clearly uncomfortable with the direction of our conversation. "I'm not interested in dinner, Ryan."

"Then let me drive you home," I persisted, falling into step beside her as she tried to walk away. "I came specifically to see you."

"You're wasting your time," she snapped, stopping suddenly to face me. Her eyes flashed with irritation. "There's nothing between us anymore. Nothing. Even if you're suddenly deciding to be nice to me now, it's too late."

God, she was magnificent when angry. The sharp angle of her cheekbones, the fierce light in her eyes, the slight flush across her skin—I'd never truly appreciated this side of her during our marriage.

"I know I hurt you," I admitted. "I know I wasn't the husband you deserved."

"That's putting it mildly," she scoffed.

"But I'm asking for a chance, Serena. Just one dinner."

"No."

"Then yell at me some more," I suggested, surprising myself with a smile. "Get it all out. Tell me exactly what a terrible husband I was. And then we can go eat."

She stared at me like I'd grown a second head. "You're insane," she finally muttered, shaking her head. "You're actually mental."

With that parting shot, she turned and walked away, her ponytail swinging with each determined step.

I watched her go, still clutching the Violets, feeling strangely encouraged despite the rejection. She'd engaged with me. She'd shown emotion. Anger was better than indifference—it meant she still felt something.

And that was enough to keep me going.

Several days passed before I saw her again, this time at the Westfield Gala—an event I'd specifically arranged to attend after learning Dreamland Studio had been invited. I arrived fashionably late, scanning the crowded ballroom until I spotted her standing with Maya near the champagne fountain.

She looked stunning in a floor-length emerald gown that caught the light whenever she moved. I straightened my tie and made my way toward her, ignoring the curious glances from other attendees who were no doubt wondering about the status of our relationship.

"What a pleasant surprise," I said smoothly as I approached.

Serena gave me a cool look. "It's just a gala, Ryan. Nothing surprising about it."

Maya, never one to miss an opportunity to twist the knife, jumped in with false brightness. "Well, well. Look who's suddenly become so attentive! I don't recall seeing this level of devotion when you two were actually married."

I'd expected Maya's barbs. She'd never approved of me, and with good reason—I hadn't treated her friend well. Instead of bristling as I might have in the past, I nodded in agreement.

"You're absolutely right," I admitted, meeting Maya's startled gaze directly. "I made terrible mistakes. I took Serena for granted." freewebmovel.com

Maya's eyebrows shot up, clearly not expecting this response. She turned to Serena with a questioning look. "Is this for real? The great Ryan Blackwood admitting he was wrong?"

When Serena didn't answer, just stared fixedly across the room, Maya leaned closer to her. "Are you sure you don't want to reconsider?" she whispered, though not quietly enough that I couldn't hear. "The man seems genuinely sorry."

"I think I see Mr. Quinn arriving," Serena said suddenly, pointedly changing the subject. "We should go say hello."

Before I could say anything else, the two of them walked away, leaving me standing alone with my half-empty champagne flute.

I watched her retreating figure, a hollow feeling spreading in my chest. Had I truly lost her for good? The thought was unbearable. I downed the rest of my champagne in one gulp, the bubbles burning my throat.

Chapter 43: Chapter 43 Did his allergies magically disappear?

Serena's POV

It wasn't long before Mr. Quinn appeared.

I noticed Mr. Quinn arriving with a young woman by his side—his apprentice designer from overseas who was looking to establish herself here in the city.

The event tonight was partly orchestrated to help expand her network, quite the grand introduction.

Maya and I made our way over to greet them. In the design world, Mr. Quinn was practically royalty—someone nobody would dare disrespect.

"Dreamland Jewelry," he said, nodding appreciatively as we approached. "I've heard about your brand. Quite impressive reputation. I didn't expect the founders to be so young—you two have remarkable potential ahead of you."

Maya immediately blushed at his praise, waving her hands dismissively. "Mr. Quinn, this is all Serena's achievement. I just handle the business side of things."

"So you're the famous Lazuli," Mr. Quinn's eyes brightened with recognition as he studied me more carefully. "I've seen your designs—they truly possess a special spirit."

This is my granddaughter and apprentice, Eliza Quinn. She's recently returned to develop her career here, and I'd appreciate if you could offer her some guidance."

The young woman beside him smiled politely. "Hello, I'm Eliza Quinn. It's a pleasure to meet you both."

"We'd be happy to help any way we can," I replied automatically, though something about her name tickled at the back of my mind.

Quinn wasn't exactly an uncommon surname, but still...

Eliza looked at me with unmistakable curiosity behind her practiced smile. "It's truly an honor to meet the Lazuli in person," she said. "Your reputation extends even overseas."

I returned the pleasantries, commenting on her own impressive international recognition. We exchanged the standard mutual compliments when suddenly I felt the air shift behind me.

Ryan had approached our little group.

Eliza's eyes lit up immediately. She extended her hand toward him with an eager "I've heard so much about you, Mr. Blackwood," only for Ryan to respond with the barest nod of acknowledgment.

Her hand hung awkwardly in the air for a moment before she withdrew it.

Quickly pivoting from the uncomfortable moment, Eliza changed topics. "I understand Blackwood Industries has been struggling with its jewelry division since Sophie Hart's departure. You're looking for designers, aren't you?"

Her voice took on a silky quality as she added, "With my grandfather's connections, I could help restore your resources in that sector. Perhaps there's an opportunity for me there?"

I tensed, not expecting this sudden business proposition.

Ryan's response was immediate and clear. "Actually, Blackwood Industries is divesting from jewelry entirely. "

I nearly choked on my champagne. What? Since when? This was the first I'd heard of it.

Was he planning to give all the jewelry resources to me? I guessed as much.

"You're abandoning a profitable sector?" she questioned, her professional smile slipping. "That would only benefit your competitors."

"That's not your concern," Ryan replied flatly.

Something shifted in Eliza's demeanor then. I recognized that look—a woman who wasn't used to rejection, particularly from men.

But rather than backing down, she seemed even more determined.

She adjusted her posture, leaning slightly toward Ryan with her champagne flute delicately balanced between manicured fingers.

"I've just returned to the city and barely know my way around," she purred. "Perhaps you could show me the local highlights later, Mr. Blackwood? I'd love to learn more about the business environment here."

I felt a strange twist in my stomach watching this display—not jealousy exactly, but something uncomfortable nonetheless.

Ryan's response was brutal in its directness. "I'd suggest you keep your distance. Your perfume is overwhelming."

Eliza's smile froze, her eyes turning cold.

Before I could react, Ryan took my arm and guided me away from the group. I was too stunned to resist.

When we reached a quiet corner, his expression finally relaxed. "God, that perfume was suffocating. How did you manage to stand there talking to her for so long?"

"Women wear perfume, Ryan. It's perfectly normal," I replied, pulling my arm free from his grip.

His eyes narrowed slightly as he studied me. "You don't wear perfume anymore. I noticed."

My hand instinctively moved toward my stomach before I caught myself. The pregnancy had made me sensitive to strong scents, so I'd stopped wearing perfume and limited my cosmetics.

"That's none of your business," I said quickly.

Ryan sighed, running a hand through his perfectly styled hair. "What will it take, Serena? What do I need to do for you to forgive me?"

The directness of his question caught me off guard. For a moment, I just stared at him—this powerful man who had once been my husband, who had ignored me for years, now standing before me looking almost... vulnerable.

"You think it's that simple?" I finally managed. "That you can just decide one day to care, and I'll come running back?"

"No," he said quietly. "I know it's not simple. But I need to know if there's any chance at all."

I looked away, unable to hold his intense gaze. "Why now, Ryan? Why, after all this time, do you suddenly care?"

"Because I was blind," he said, his voice dropping lower. "Because I didn't see what was right in front of me until it was gone."

A server passed by with a tray of champagne. I desperately wanted to grab one, but resisted—another pregnancy reminder. Instead, I took a deep breath and met his eyes again.

"It's too late," I said, hating how my voice wavered slightly. "I've moved on. Julian—"

"Are you in love with him?" Ryan interrupted, his jaw tightening.

"Who?"

"Julian."

Of course I wasn't. But I wasn't about to let Ryan know that—giving him an inch would only make him push harder.

"That's not your concern either," I replied, sidestepping his question.

"It is my concern," he insisted, moving closer until I could smell his cologne—that familiar scent that still haunted my dreams sometimes. "Everything about you is my concern, Serena."

"You gave up that right when you signed our divorce papers," I reminded him, trying to keep my voice steady.

"A mistake I regret every day," he admitted. His hand reached up as if to touch my face, then dropped back to his side when I flinched away. "I know I hurt you. I know I failed you. But I'm asking—begging, if that's what it takes—for a second chance."

I felt a flutter in my chest that had nothing to do with the babies I was carrying. This was the Ryan I had always wanted to see during our marriage—sincere, vulnerable, his walls down. But was it real? Or just another manipulation because he couldn't stand losing?

"I need to go," I said, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. "Maya is waiting for me."

As I turned to leave, his voice stopped me. "Have dinner with me. Just once. If you still want nothing to do with me afterward, I'll respect that."

I hesitated, my back to him.

"No, Ryan," I said quietly but firmly, without turning around. "That Chapter's closed."

Then I walked away.

As I walked away, I could feel his eyes following me across the room.

I spotted Maya across the room and made my way over to her. She looked up, curiosity and concern lighting her eyes.

"What was that all about?" she asked as I reached her. "And what's this about Blackwood pulling out of the jewelry industry? Wait—he's getting ready to hand over all the resources to you?" freewebnovel.com

"I have no idea," I admitted. "That's the first I've heard of it."

"He's trying everything to get you back, isn't he?" Maya observed, glancing over my shoulder toward where Ryan still stood.

"It doesn't matter," I said firmly, though we both knew that was a lie.

And I was—tired of fighting my feelings, tired of wondering what might have been, tired of second-guessing every interaction with Ryan.

Maya suddenly gasped, her eyes widening. "Serena, look over there. Eliza Quinn and Ryan, they looked close...."

She didn't need to finish her sentence for me to understand what she meant.

Eliza had made her intentions clear from the start—she wanted to align herself with Ryan, to leverage his power. Of course she'd be cozying up to him now.

I turned slightly, catching sight of Eliza and Ryan standing together across the room.

"Looks like we might have a formidable competitor soon," I muttered.

Maya nodded, concern etched across her face. "With Mr. Quinn's backing, if she partners with Blackwood Industries, she'd be a serious threat to us."

I pressed my lips together, choosing not to respond. But my eyes betrayed me—tracking their every move as they continued talking, laughing even, as if they'd known each other for years.

I rolled my eyes.

Men and their lying mouths—can't trust a word they say.

Just minutes ago, Ryan had been complaining about her overpowering perfume—and now? Now he looked perfectly at ease, like it had never bothered him at all.

What happened? Did his allergies magically disappear?

Chapter 44: Chapter 44 We have a deal

Author's POV

Eliza Quinn had been watching Ryan and Serena's interaction with calculated interest.

The tension between them was palpable, confirming her suspicions that their relationship was far more complicated than mere business acquaintances. She saw her opportunity when Serena walked away, leaving Ryan standing alone with that unmistakable look of longing on his face.

She approached him confidently, her heels clicking against the marble floor as she positioned herself directly in his line of sight.

"Unrequited love is such a painful thing to witness, Mr. Blackwood," she remarked with a knowing smile playing on her lips.

Ryan's face immediately hardened. "What exactly do you want, Miss Quinn?"

"I'm merely making an observation," Eliza replied, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone. "And perhaps offering some assistance. Women understand other women in ways men simply can't."

"And why would you help me?" Ryan asked, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

Eliza tilted her head slightly, studying him. "Because I see potential for a mutually beneficial arrangement. And because Serena isn't as indifferent to you as she pretends to be."

That caught his attention. Ryan's expression shifted almost imperceptibly, but Eliza didn't miss it. She'd successfully baited her hook.

"What exactly are you proposing?" he asked, his voice carefully controlled.

"I've just returned to establish myself here," Eliza explained. "I need resources, connections, a studio of my own, a platform for my jewelry brand. You have all of that at your disposal."

Ryan crossed his arms. "And in return?"

"I help you understand what's really going on in Serena's mind. Women's hearts are like needles at the bottom of the ocean—impossible to find unless you know exactly where to look." She leaned closer, her voice dropping further. "Miss your chance now, and you might never get her back."

Ryan considered her words carefully. His preference was to direct all Blackwood jewelry resources toward Serena, but having Mr. Quinn's protégée on his side could prove strategically valuable. After a moment's deliberation, he nodded.

"Fine. We have a deal."

Eliza's smile widened as she raised her champagne glass. "To successful partnerships."

They clinked glasses, their conversation appearing cordial and engaged to anyone watching from across the room.

Ryan couldn't help stealing glances toward Serena throughout their conversation. She was laughing at something Maya had said, seeming completely unbothered by his interaction with Eliza. His jaw tightened slightly, a flicker of disappointment crossing his features before he masked it again.

By the following afternoon, news of the partnership between Blackwood Industries and Eliza Quinn had spread throughout the city's business and design circles. Industry insiders speculated about what this meant for the future of Blackwood's jewelry division, which had previously been rumored to be shutting down entirely.

Wasting no time, Eliza immediately began preparations for her debut jewelry showcase—an event designed to announce her arrival on the local scene with maximum impact.

She personally oversaw every detail, from the venue selection to the lighting design, determined to create a spectacle worthy of attention.

A week later, an elegantly designed invitation arrived at Dreamland Studio.

The envelope, addressed specifically to Serena Blackwood rather than her professional name Lazuli, contained a handwritten note from Eliza requesting Serena's presence as a special guest.

Maya picked up the invitation from the reception desk, examining it with a frown before bringing it to Serena's office.

She found her friend bent over sketches for their upcoming collection, completely absorbed in her work.

"You might want to see this," Maya said, placing the invitation on top of Serena's sketches.

Chapter 45: Chapter 45 Remarriage is absolutely out of the question!

Serena's POV

I stared at the invitation in Maya's hand, trying to process what this all meant.

"Eliza Quinn certainly has some kind of magic touch," Maya said, shaking her head in amazement. "A few sentences at the gala and she's got Ryan wrapped around her finger already."

I'd expected something like this, but not quite so quickly. The news had spread faster than wildfire.

"This is practically a declaration of war, isn't it?" Maya continued. "She seems far more formidable than Ivy Hart ever was."

I nodded slowly. I'd had WhisperStream look into Eliza's background, and surprisingly, there wasn't any dirt to dig up. She was genuinely talented - a true prodigy in the design world.

"Don't worry so much," I told Maya, keeping my voice steady. "We just need to focus on our own products. Even if we end up sharing the market, there's plenty of business to go around."

The truth was, this city had always been full of hidden talents and fierce competitors. The fact that Dreamland Studio had managed to secure its place was already quite an achievement. At our current stage, we couldn't realistically dominate the entire market anyway.

"Easy to say, but what if her ambitions are bigger than we think?" Maya frowned. "With Blackwood's resources behind her, she could accomplish in months what might take others years."

Julian appeared with a cup of coffee in hand, glancing curiously at the invitation on my desk.

"I leave town for a few days and miss all the excitement?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yesterday's gala was particularly interesting," Maya explained. "This famous overseas designer showed up and looks ready to shake things up."

Julian's eyes lit up with interest. "Is that so? Then I absolutely can't miss this jewelry showcase."

"That's perfect," Maya nodded approvingly. "You should go with Serena—show our support in full force."

After Maya left to handle some business matters, Julian and I were alone in the office.

"You seem troubled," he said quietly.

I looked up, surprised. "Me?"

"Don't pretend. I can see it all over your face," Julian replied, his voice gentle but direct. "Mr. Ex-Man paid you another visit while I was away, didn't he? Are you having second thoughts?"

Faced with such a blunt question, I couldn't bring myself to deny it immediately.

"See? That's why I shouldn't leave town," Julian sighed dramatically. "The moment your knight in shining armor steps away, the ex swoops in."

I couldn't help but smile at his theatrics. "Don't worry, I'm not easily swayed. I don't believe in going back to eat from the same bowl twice."

"Good. You might want to repeat that mantra several times a day, just to make sure you don't fall for whatever sweet talk he's offering."

I gave him a curious look. Julian seemed different today—more protective, perhaps.

"How was your business trip?" I asked, changing the subject.

"It went well. The client was difficult, but nothing I couldn't handle now that I had your backing," he replied, setting his coffee cup aside. His tone shifted to something almost playful. "Serena, would it be possible to get the kind of coffee I like in the office? The hand-ground kind? It might help my productivity."

I don't really drink coffee anymore—I've actually quit entirely—so I simply nodded without giving it much thought.

"Sure, just tell accounting to expense it."

"No need for that. I have beans at home, they just need to be ground properly."

Julian leaned in closer, his eyes twinkling mischievously. "Any chance you could grind some coffee beans for me each day?"

After much cajoling and pleading, I finally agreed to Julian's request.

The moment I said yes, I couldn't help but think back—how I had done the same thing for Ryan once, gone out of my way for him... and he had barely even noticed.

Julian, though... he was different.

Julian showed genuine gratitude, checking on me throughout the day with small gestures of appreciation.

And honestly, it was a little... nice, finally feeling like my efforts actually mattered.

During lunch break, Ryan barged into my office without warning.

When he saw me grinding coffee beans, his face darkened instantly.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, his voice tight.

I finished grinding the beans methodically, poured them into a container, and only then did I look up to answer him.

"Exactly what it looks like. Grinding coffee."

"For whom?"

He knew very well I wasn't much of a coffee drinker.

"For a colleague," I replied simply.

"What brings you here?" I asked, changing the subject. "Is there something you need?"

"Grandmother misses you," he said, his voice softening. "She's asked us to come home for lunch."

I considered for two seconds before declining.

"I have too much work this afternoon. Please explain to her that I can't make it."

"What about dinner, then?" he persisted.

I frowned, feeling irritation build. "I saw your grandmother not long ago. When are you planning to tell her we're divorced? Or do you intend to keep up this charade forever?"

While I respected Evelyn Blackwood, she wasn't my family anymore. Having to pretend we were still a happily married couple every time I visited was becoming unbearable.

"Serena, Grandmother's health is fragile. Do you want her to fall ill with this news?" Ryan's tone was accusatory.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "So what's your plan? Wait until she passes away? Don't you find that ridiculous? How long do you think we can keep this secret?"

Ryan looked momentarily taken aback, then his voice grew more passionate.

"If we just remarry, we can pretend the divorce never happened."

"You make it sound so simple!" I snapped, feeling like I was talking to a brick wall.

Ryan's expression shifted, his voice becoming uncharacteristically gentle.

"Serena, I know I made mistakes. Can't you forgive me this once? I promise I'll never treat you that way again."

"And what about Sophie?" I asked, hitting him where it hurt most. "Isn't she your eternal flame? Can you promise you'll never think about her again, not even once?"

I was striking at the core issue—if he wanted forgiveness, he needed to address the root problem.

His silence spoke volumes as he struggled to formulate a response.

"Can't answer, can you?" I said coldly. "I refuse to compete with a ghost for a man's affection. As long as your heart isn't fully clear, don't you dare mention remarriage or forgiveness to me!"

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

"Sophie is dead," he finally said, his voice strained. "Why can't you be more understanding about this? She's not here to compete with you!"

Sophie was Ryan's deepest wound, and bringing her up always triggered a cascade of emotions. From my perspective, he was actually being quite restrained.

I gave a bitter laugh, swallowing my disappointment.

"In that case, don't come looking for me again. Remarriage is absolutely out of the question!"

We stared at each other in tense silence before Ryan finally turned and walked out of the studio.

I collapsed into my chair, utterly drained. Once again, I was reminded that I could never measure up to his perfect memory of Sophie.

Chapter 46: Chapter 46 Interesting segment

Serena's POV

I stood in front of the mirror, smoothing down my white evening dress one last time.

Tonight was Eliza Quinn's first jewelry showcase, and I'd be damned if I didn't look my absolute best. Professional rivalry demanded nothing less.

When Julian picked me up, I couldn't help but notice how striking he looked in his white suit. The matching outfits weren't planned, but the coincidence worked perfectly.

"Well, don't we look like salt and pepper shakers—except both salt," I joked as he helped me into his car.

"Yeah," Julian replied with that easy smile of his. "We're going to turn heads tonight."

As we approached the entrance to the exhibition hall, Julian leaned in close. His cologne—subtle but distinctly masculine—tickled my senses.

"Take my arm," he whispered, his breath warm against my ear. "Trust me, it'll keep the wolves at bay. Especially your ex."

I didn't hesitate, sliding my hand through the crook of his elbow. It felt natural, like we'd been doing this for years.

"Oh, so you're my bodyguard now?" I teased, but I was grateful for his foresight. The last thing I needed was unwanted attention or, worse, Ryan creating a scene.

The moment we entered, Eliza's presence was impossible to miss. She wore a fire-engine red dress that screamed for attention against the more subdued colors around her.

When she spotted us, she made a beeline through the crowd, her eyes locking onto Julian with undisguised interest.

"Serena! You made it!" She air-kissed both my cheeks, her perfume almost overwhelming.

Then she turned her megawatt smile on Julian. "And who's this handsome man you've brought with you?"

Julian took her extended hand with perfect politeness. "Julian Clarke. I'm one of the designers at Dreamland Studio."

"A designer! How fascinating," Eliza practically purred. "I've heard such wonderful things about Serena's team."

"All well-deserved, I assure you," Julian replied smoothly.

As we made small talk, Eliza casually dropped her bombshell. "This showcase wouldn't have been possible without Ryan's help, you know. He's been absolutely incredible in making all this happen so quickly."

My smile remained fixed while internally I rolled my eyes. Of course he had been. I'd expected nothing less from Ryan "I-Move-Mountains-For-Pretty-Women" Blackwood.

"That's wonderful," I replied, my voice perfectly modulated. "Ryan has always had an eye for talent."

Julian sensed my discomfort and smoothly steered the conversation elsewhere. We excused ourselves moments later to mingle with potential clients.

As we worked the room, I felt the weight of someone's stare.

Looking across the crowd, I locked eyes with Ryan.

His expression turned icy in an instant—as he took in the sight of Julian and me, arm in arm, looking every bit the perfect couple—even the air around seemed to drop several degrees.

I sighed internally. What right did he have to look so possessive? We were divorced, for God's sake!

Julian, ever perceptive, noticed my discomfort and the direction of my gaze. He deliberately pulled me closer, his arm sliding around my waist.

"Your ex is heading this way," he murmured. "Stay cool."

I stiffened slightly at Julian's touch—it was more intimate than our usual interactions—but I didn't pull away. Ryan's approaching figure made that impossible.

Before Ryan could reach us, Eliza tapped her champagne glass with a spoon, commanding everyone's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she announced, her voice ringing clear across the room. "We have a special treat tonight! The renowned designer Serena Quinn has honored us with her presence. Serena, would you please come up and share your thoughts on our collection?"

The spotlight swung to find me in the crowd. Shit. Every eye in the room turned expectantly toward me. Refusing would make me look petty and unprofessional. I squeezed Julian's arm once before letting go and making my way to the stage.

"Thank you, Eliza," I said, taking the microphone with practiced ease. "Your collection shows remarkable vision and craftsmanship. The integration of traditional techniques with modern aesthetics is particularly striking."

I meant what I said—her work was genuinely impressive. Professional courtesy demanded acknowledgment of talent, regardless of personal feelings.

I was just about to gracefully exit when Eliza's voice rang out again.

"And now, for our pièce de résistance! Serena, would you do us the honor of modeling our signature ruby necklace? And to help her, we need none other than Ryan Blackwood himself!"

Fuck. My. Life.

Ryan appeared beside me as if by magic. Before I could protest, he was standing behind me, taking the magnificent ruby necklace from Eliza's hands.

I felt his fingers brush against my neck as he fastened the clasp, sending unwanted shivers down my spine.

"Now, Serena," Eliza continued, her smile dripping with false innocence, "would you help Ryan with this matching ring? It completes the set so beautifully."

I took the ring, knowing damn well every bit of this had been orchestrated.

Ryan extended his hand, his eyes boring into mine with an intensity that made my stomach flip.

With deliberate precision, I slid the ring onto his index finger rather than his ring finger—a subtle but clear statement that this was not symbolic of anything romantic.

"These pieces truly represent the pinnacle of Eliza's artistry," I said smoothly to the audience, professional to the core.

"For those interested in discussing potential collaborations, I strongly recommend scheduling a private viewing. The craftsmanship deserves to be appreciated up close."

With that redirection, I carefully removed the necklace and handed it back to Eliza, making my escape from the stage as quickly as dignity would allow.

Her smile tightened slightly at my quick removal of the jewelry, but she recovered fast, thanking me for my participation.

As the event wound down, I was heading back toward Julian when Ryan stepped directly into my path.

"Serena," he said, his voice low and urgent. He pressed something into my palm—a small velvet box. "This is for you."

Eliza designed it specifically at my request. It's a symbol of my sincerity and my desire to make things right."

Before I could tell him where he could stick his symbolism, he stepped back.

"All I ask is for one chance to prove myself to you. One chance to show you things can be different." And then he was gone, disappearing into the crowd like a goddamn ninja.

I stood there frozen, the box feeling like it weighed a ton in my hand. My legs suddenly felt wobbly beneath me. What the hell was I supposed to do with this?

Julian appeared at my side, eyeing the box with thinly veiled displeasure.

"Need help disposing of that?" he asked, nodding toward the box in my hand. "There's a particularly deep trash can right outside. Or I could accidentally drop it down a drain on our way to the car."

Chapter 47: Chapter 47 My uncle returned to the country

Serena's POV

I sat staring at the small velvet box Ryan had just offered to toss for me. God, what a mess.

Was I really going to throw it away?

"Let's keep it," I said at last, my voice deliberately light. "Jewelry's expensive—even if it's from him. No point wasting perfectly good craftsmanship."

Julian raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced, but didn't press the matter.

"Ready to leave then?" he asked, glancing around. "This showcase is getting rather tedious."

"God, yes," I sighed, slipping the box into my clutch. "Between the ambush on stage and Ryan's dramatics, I've had enough excitement for one night."

Julian nodded, offering his arm again as we headed toward the exit. I felt Ryan's eyes burning into my back the entire way out, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of looking back.

The silence in the car was deafening. Julian seemed lost in thought, occasionally glancing my way when he thought I wasn't looking.

Meanwhile, I couldn't stop thinking about that damn box burning a hole in my purse and Ryan's words about wanting one more chance.

It took less than twenty-four hours for everything to explode. My phone started blowing up with notifications the next morning.

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered, staring at the screen in disbelief.

There we were—Ryan and I—plastered across every gossip site and social media platform in the country.

Photos of us on stage together, him placing that ruby necklace around my neck, his fingers lingering against my skin.

The headlines were worse: "Blackwood Power Couple Reuniting?" and "Love Rekindled at Quinn Showcase."

Sure enough, I woke up to twelve missed calls from WhisperStream. When I finally returned his call, he sounded like he was having way too much fun with my misery.

"Good morning, superstar! You and your ex-hubby are trending everywhere! The whole 'jewelry power couple' angle is really taking off."

"Can you please kill this story?" I groaned, massaging my temples. "Hire whatever trolls or bots you need."

WhisperStream chuckled. "Already tried, sweetheart. No dice. These articles are coming directly from Blackwood-owned media outlets. Someone high up wants this narrative pushed."

He paused dramatically before adding, "Want to see what the fans are saying? They're shipping you two hard. Some of these edits are actually pretty artistic—"

"No!" I snapped, ending the video call.

I was still glaring at my phone when Julian appeared in my office doorway, looking thunderous.

"You drank all the coffee," he accused, crossing his arms. "The entire pot I made this morning."

"There's more in the break room," I replied, not looking up from my email.

"I can't work without proper coffee. You know that." He leaned against my doorframe, unfazed. "You owe me compensation."

I finally looked up. "Compensation? For coffee?"

"Dinner. That new place downtown everyone's talking about. I already made a reservation."

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. "Why would you—"

"Because you haven't eaten a proper meal all day, the office is buzzing with gossip about your stage moment with Ryan, and frankly, I could use a good steak." He shrugged. "Two birds, one stone."

My stomach growled traitorously. He was right—I'd been too distracted to eat.

"Fine. But this isn't a date."

When we arrived at the restaurant, I understood Julian's true intentions. The place was packed with social media influencers and the see-and-be-seen crowd.

"Let's sit downstairs," Julian announced loudly as the hostess tried to lead us to the quieter upstairs section. "I love the energy down here!"

He even convinced a couple at a prime window table to take a private booth instead, slipping the maître d' what must have been a substantial tip.

"These tabloids are ridiculous," he proclaimed dramatically as we sat down. "Creating romance where there's nothing but professional rivalry. Absolutely shameless!"

That's when it clicked. The public location, the window seat, the loud commentary—Julian was creating a counter-narrative to the Ryan rumors.

People were already sneaking photos of us with their phones. I felt my anxiety rising.

"You don't have to do this," I whispered across the table.

Julian smiled, reaching for his water glass. "I refuse to be second fiddle in some online fantasy where you and Blackwood are star-crossed lovers. Besides," he added with a cocky grin, "I'm much more photogenic than he is."

I couldn't help laughing. "You're sacrificing yourself for the greater good?"

"Hardly a sacrifice to be seen dining with the Serena Quinn," he replied smoothly. "Now, shall we give them something worth photographing? I recommend the chocolate soufflé—your expression when you taste it will break the internet."

We proceeded to have dinner as if we were completely alone, despite being in the center of the restaurant's busiest section. By the time we finished dessert, I'd almost forgotten about the paparazzi lurking at nearby tables.

Julian's plan worked brilliantly. By midnight, the narrative had shifted. Photos and videos of our dinner were everywhere, with comments suggesting WE looked like the real couple, while my stage moment with Ryan appeared more like competitors being forced together.

I was finally starting to relax when my phone rang. Ryan's name flashed on the screen.

"What do you want?" I answered, not bothering with pleasantries.

"My grandmother wants us to come to dinner tomorrow night," he said without preamble. "My uncle Kane is back from Switzerland. She's hosting a welcome home dinner."

I froze. Kane Blackwood. The man who'd been sent abroad for "medical treatment" after a mysterious car accident during the company succession battle. The accident that had conveniently secured Ryan's position at the top.

"I'm divorced, remember? Family dinners aren't part of the deal anymore."

"Grandmother doesn't know that," Ryan reminded me tersely. "And Kane's return is complicated enough without adding that revelation. Please, Serena. Just one dinner."

I sighed deeply. If Evelyn learned about our divorce while dealing with Kane's return, the shock might be too much for her health.

And if Kane discovered our separation, he might use it as ammunition in whatever game he was playing by returning now.

"Fine. One dinner. But after this, we need to tell your grandmother the truth."

The Blackwood mansion was lit up like a Christmas tree when we arrived the next evening.

Evelyn had clearly gone all out for Kane's return, which spoke volumes. She'd always had a soft spot for her younger son.

When we entered the living room, I immediately spotted Kane in his wheelchair. His physical appearance might have changed, but those eyes—cold and calculating as a snake's—were exactly as I remembered them.

"Ryan!" Kane called out, his voice deceptively warm. "And the beautiful Serena. How wonderful to see you both."

Ryan's hand found the small of my back as we approached, a gesture that seemed protective rather than possessive. I allowed it only because I knew we needed to present a united front.

"Uncle," Ryan nodded. "Welcome home."

Kane's gaze slid from Ryan to me, then back again. "Three years of marriage now, isn't it? And still no little ones running around? Hmm."

I felt Ryan stiffen beside me.

Kane's smile turned predatory. "One begins to wonder if there might be some... performance issues at play." He looked directly at Ryan, the insult unmistakable.

I felt my expression harden.

This was exactly why I hadn't wanted to come in the first place.

I knew it was only a matter of time before the drama reached me, and sure enough, here it was. *freewebrnovel.com*

If Grandma caught wind of this, she'd start nagging me about having a kid again.

I'm still not even showing.

I didn't tell anyone before — mostly because of the divorce.

Looking back, thank God I kept it quiet.

But I can't shake the feeling that this man is going to stir up something bigger. Something the Blackwood family isn't ready for.

"Thank heavens! There you boys are," Evelyn's voice rang out as she approached us from the foyer. "I've been waiting at the table for ten minutes!"

Her timing couldn't have been better.

Chapter 48: Chapter 48 Should I tell the truth?

Serena's POV *freewebnovel.com*

The testosterone-fueled standoff between Ryan and Kane instantly dissolved, both men plastering on practiced smiles as they turned toward her.

The silent animosity lingering in the air remained palpable, but at least they weren't about to lunge at each other's throats.

I followed closely behind Ryan as we made our way to the dining room, accidentally catching Kane's gaze. The cold mockery in his eyes sent a chill down my spine.

There was something reptilian about the way he looked at me—calculating, as if measuring exactly how useful I might be in whatever scheme he was hatching.

Ryan must have sensed it because he suddenly shifted position, putting his body between Kane and me.

"Don't even think about it," he muttered to Kane, voice barely audible but sharp as a blade.

Kane's wheelchair glided smoothly across the polished floors as he laughed. "Think about what, dear nephew? I was merely admiring how... devoted you've become. Sophie would be so surprised to see how quickly you've transferred your affections."

My stomach twisted at the mention of Sophie. Ryan's muscles tensed beside me, his jaw clenching tight enough to crack teeth.

"Kane," Ryan warned, his voice dangerously low.

I placed my hand lightly on Ryan's arm. "It's fine," I whispered. "He's just trying to get a reaction."

Kane's eyes gleamed with satisfaction at hitting a nerve. I refused to give him the pleasure of seeing me rattled.

"Mr. Blackwood," I addressed Kane with a deliberately bright smile, "your physical therapy in Switzerland must have been excellent. Your arm strength is remarkable—you're navigating that wheelchair like a Formula One driver."

Ryan relaxed slightly beside me, the corner of his mouth twitching upward. Kane's smug expression faltered for a split second before he recovered.

"Come along now," Evelyn called from the dining room doorway. "The food is getting cold, and I've had the chef prepare all of Kane's favorites."

Of course she had.

Dinner was a masterclass in passive aggression disguised as family bonding.

Evelyn had seated Kane at the head of the table—Ryan's usual place—with herself at the opposite end.

Ryan and I sat across from each other along the sides, leaving me directly adjacent to Kane. Not ideal.

We'd barely gotten through the soup course when Evelyn decided to launch her first offensive.

"I was speaking with the Vandermeer family last week," she announced, delicately patting her lips with her napkin. "Their daughter just had twins. Beautiful baby girls."

I stared intently at my soup, willing myself to remain expressionless.

"That's wonderful," I replied neutrally.

"When are you two planning to start your family?" Kane jumped in, not missing a beat. "The Blackwood name needs proper heirs, and you're not getting any younger, Ryan."

"Our family planning is our business," Ryan replied coolly.

Kane leaned toward me conspiratorially. "I do hope the issue isn't on his side. The Blackwood men have always been quite... virile."

He winked, making my skin crawl. "Though three years of marriage with no results does raise questions."

My spoon froze halfway to my mouth. I could feel Ryan's eyes on me, probably wondering if I was about to throw my soup at his uncle's face. The temptation was strong.

"Perhaps," I said carefully, "some people understand that children deserve to be born into stable, loving environments rather than produced like livestock to satisfy family expectations."

Evelyn's eyes widened at my boldness, but Kane merely laughed.

"Speaking of family expectations," he pivoted smoothly, "I've been reviewing the company portfolio while abroad. Fascinating reading. I have some thoughts on restructuring our Asian divisions."

And there it was—the real reason for his return, barely disguised beneath family pleasantries.

"Our Asian markets are performing exceptionally well," Ryan countered. "Record profits last quarter."

"Yes, but imagine what they could do with proper leadership," Kane smiled, his eyes cold.

Kane was clearly back to make a power play, and he wasn't even trying to hide it. He leaned forward in his wheelchair, looking directly at Ryan.

"Nephew, surely you wouldn't look down on your uncle just because I'm temporarily disabled?"

Kane narrowed his eyes, clearly enjoying the tension he was creating. He was obviously hoping Ryan would lose his temper in front of Evelyn.

"Kane, what nonsense are you talking?" Evelyn sighed heavily. "Your legs aren't permanently damaged. I won't have you speaking like this!"

Ever since losing both her sons to tragedy, Evelyn couldn't bear to hear talk of permanent injuries or disabilities.

"Grandmother, don't get upset," Ryan interjected smoothly. "Uncle is just joking. I think what's most important right now is getting his legs properly treated. It would be a real shame if a temporary condition became permanent due to neglect."

Ryan shot Kane a cold look, not backing down an inch.

The two men were locked in verbal combat, and I felt a chill watching their exchange. Evelyn, however, seemed oblivious to the underlying hostility, treating it as typical family bickering. After all, with only three years between them, they'd always had a competitive relationship.

"Enough of this talk," Evelyn waved her hand dismissively. "Let's eat. Kane has finally returned from abroad—you should stay here at the family home permanently. It would give me peace of mind to see you every day."

"Of course, Mother. I'll do as you wish," Kane replied, but his gaze shifted to me, who had remained silent throughout most of the exchange. He tapped the table twice to get my attention.

"You know, Serena, I've acquired several properties near your design studio. Beautiful spaces. Consider them a welcome gift from your uncle-in-law."

I noticed Ryan's knuckles turning white around his fork. Kane was blatantly trying to lure me to his side, as if I were some prize to be stolen in their ongoing power struggle.

Ryan's knuckles turned white around his fork. Kane was blatantly trying to lure me to his side, as if I were some prize to be stolen.

"That's very kind," I replied with a practiced smile, "but I'm quite happy with my current arrangements."

"Are you?" Kane pressed, eyes darting between Ryan and me. "You two seem... distant for newlyweds. I can't help wondering if all is well in paradise."

Ryan's expression darkened dangerously. I knew that look—he was moments away from saying something we'd both regret.

"Kane," Evelyn interrupted sharply, "you've always had a talent for saying exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time."

Kane laughed, but the sound held no warmth. "Just making conversation, Mother."

"By suggesting my grandson is an inadequate husband?" Evelyn's voice could have frozen hell itself. "You demean yourself and this family with such tactics."

Kane's smile faltered, but he recovered quickly. "I meant no offense. I just heard they were living separately, and I was concerned."

How the hell did he know we were living apart?

Scratch that—he probably knew we were already divorced.

The word "separately" was just for show.

Evelyn's frown was immediate as she turned sharply to me.

"Living separately? What's this about? Serena, didn't you promise me you would work things out with Ryan?"

Should I tell the truth?

I let out a nervous laugh, feeling utterly cornered. My eyes darted to Ryan, silently pleading for backup.

If I'd known dinner would be this uncomfortable, I would have claimed illness and stayed home!

Chapter 49: Chapter 49 You'd better behave yourself

Serena's POV

"Grandmother, we aren't living separately," Ryan stepped in smoothly.

"Serena simply wanted to pursue her work. Uncle's information isn't accurate—he should be careful about believing rumors."

"Though it's understandable," Ryan continued, seizing the opportunity, "since Uncle just returned to the country and isn't up to date on domestic matters. Perhaps focusing on recovery would be better than concerning yourself with company business right now."

Ryan's counterattack was brilliant, attempting to neutralize Kane's ambitions regarding the company. But Kane didn't seem rushed. He simply placed a piece of food on Evelyn's plate.

"Mother, I've been away from home so long that I can't even keep track of simple family news. That's what happens when you have no money, no power—when you're practically useless."

At the word "useless," I saw Ryan close his eyes briefly, knowing what was coming.

Sure enough, Evelyn bristled immediately. "Kane! The Blackwood assets have always included your share. How can you speak about yourself this way?"

The elderly woman turned to her beloved grandson. "Ryan, did you hear what your uncle just said?"

Under the pressure from his grandmother, Ryan had no choice but to concede.

"I understand, Grandmother," he said, surprising everyone. "Uncle's experience could be valuable. I'd be happy to discuss transitioning some of our European operations under his management."

A peace offering? No—I could tell it was a strategic move. Give Kane enough responsibility to keep him occupied but not enough to cause real damage.

Kane seemed momentarily caught off guard by the concession. "I'm... pleased you recognize what I bring to the table."

I observed them all while pretending to be absorbed in my meal.

The façade of family harmony was paper-thin, with currents of ambition and resentment swirling beneath. *freewebnovel.com*

Every smile concealed a calculation; every pleasantry masked a power play. I couldn't wait to escape this battlefield disguised as a dining room.

After dessert, Evelyn announced she needed to rest and excused herself upstairs. I immediately saw my opportunity.

"I should be going too," I said, rising from my chair. "I have some designs to finalize for tomorrow's client meeting."

Ryan stood as well. "I'll drive you."

"How chivalrous," Kane drawled once Evelyn was out of earshot. "Though I don't see why you bother with the charade when it's just us. I'm family, after all."

Ryan went still, a dangerous quiet settling over him as he turned to face his uncle.

"Let me make something absolutely clear," he said, his voice low and controlled. "Whatever game you're playing—whatever you think you're going to accomplish by coming back here—I suggest you reconsider. Test me if you want, but understand the consequences."

Kane's fake smile dropped entirely, revealing the coldness beneath. "Is that a threat, nephew? Not very hospitable."

"It's a reality check," Ryan replied. "You're welcome back in the family, Kane. But stay in your lane."

"My lane?" Kane's laugh was brittle. "This was my company before your father stole it from me. Don't lecture me about lanes in the house I grew up in."

Ryan's smile curled into something sharp and scornful. "Oh, well. Clearly, you still haven't faced the truth."

His voice was laced with disdain, sharp as broken glass. "A cripple like you thinks he can still turn the world upside down? Don't make me laugh."

I stood frozen, witnessing the mask of civility finally slip away completely.

"Come on, Serena," Ryan said without breaking eye contact with Kane. "Let's go."

As Ryan guided me toward the door with his hand at the small of my back, I could feel Kane's eyes burning into us.

I stopped short and brushed his hand off.

"No need," I said, my voice cool. "I can leave on my own."

Without waiting for a response, I turned and walked quickly out of the old house.

I wasn't going to be caught in the middle of whatever power play he and Kane were engaged in.

I refused to be their pawn.

* * *

Author's POV

The tension remained thick in the living room as uncle and nephew continued their standoff.

"What exactly are you implying, Ryan?" Kane's voice cut through the silence.

"You really think I don't know the truth about what happened back then?" Ryan's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Kane's wheelchair. "If it weren't for Grandmother's sake, you would have lost more than just your legs."

Ryan fought the urge to kick the wheelchair over. Instead, he restrained himself and turned to leave, his long legs carrying him toward the door.

Kane let out a derisive laugh. "Even if you know, so what? Blackwood Group is partly mine too. You can't stop me."

That final remark ignited Ryan's fury. He turned back, his eyes reddening with anger as he faced his uncle.

"Since you're so eager to take over company affairs, I'll make sure you get your wish. Just wait and see."

Ryan strode out, leaving the living room in silence. Moments later, the sound of shattering glass echoed through the space.

Kane's hand bled from the broken glass, but he felt no pain. His eyes gleamed with malice. Now that he was back, he was determined to prove to his nephew that he was far from a cripple.

* * *

Ivy's POV

I spent a few days at the Blackwood estate before Ryan's people arranged new accommodations for me.

They even set me up with a new job—though not the one I'd hoped for.

Instead of returning to Blackwood's jewelry design studio, I found myself at a mediocre workshop with barely any reputation in the city.

I was still designing, sure, but no one took me seriously. The only silver lining was that because of my connection to Ryan, nobody dared mistreat me outright. Life was... tolerable, I guess.

After finishing work one evening, I was walking home along my usual route when a black SUV screeched to a halt beside me at a deserted intersection.

Before I could even process what was happening, two men in dark suits leaped out and grabbed me.

I screamed, but they shoved a cloth into my mouth, silencing me instantly. My heart hammered against my chest as they bound my wrists and ankles with zip ties and threw me into the back of the vehicle.

Panic flooded my body.

Chapter 50: Chapter 50 My nightmare

Ivy's POV

My entire body trembled uncontrollably as the car sped through the city streets and out toward the suburbs.

Was I being kidnapped for ransom? Was this because of Ryan? Would they hurt me? Kill me?

The bodyguards didn't touch me beyond the restraints, which was my only comfort during the terrifying ride.

Eventually, we pulled up to a private villa tucked away in an exclusive neighborhood. They dragged me inside and unceremoniously dumped me onto a plush carpet.

I glanced around, heart pounding. Who the hell had brought me here?

Then came the soft mechanical whir of an approaching wheelchair—quiet, almost polite, but it sent ice lancing through my veins.

I looked up.

And in that instant, familiar features swam into focus. My breath caught, and the fear in my chest bloomed, sharp and blinding.

It was him. Kane Blackwood. My nightmare.

He rolled to a stop in front of me, the wheelchair gliding to a halt with an ominous hiss. His eyes glittered with sadistic pleasure as he drank in my terror.

Without a word, he reached down and yanked the cloth from my mouth. His lips curved into a cruel, almost lazy smile.

"Well, well," he murmured. "After all this time... you don't recognize me?"

I shook my head frantically, forcing my lips into what I hoped passed for a smile. It felt more like a grimace.

"Kane... how... when did you come back?" My voice was barely a whisper.

He scoffed. And then, without warning, he slapped me hard across the face.

The slap echoed through the room like a gunshot.

I didn't cry out. I knew better.

Years ago, as Kane's lover, I'd learned the rules: pain excited him. The more you showed, the more he wanted. The only weapon I had was silence—and pretending.

"Kane," I said, working to steady my voice, "why have your men drag me here like this? You could've just called me."

I softened my tone, slipping into the coquettish cadence he used to like. A desperate gamble.

"You worthless slut," he spat. "If I hadn't brought you here by force, would you have come willingly?"

"Of course I would!" I said quickly, leaning into the lie. "I've always wanted to see you. Please—untie me. I'm not going to run."

Despite Kane's volatile temper, getting back into his good graces could provide me with the protection and lifestyle I desperately needed. Better the devil you know, right?

"Kane, please," I whispered, inching closer to his wheelchair. "These ties are hurting me."

"Untie her," he ordered his men.

Relief washed over me as they cut the zip ties. I immediately positioned myself by his wheelchair, looking up at him adoringly.

"I've missed you so much. You've been gone for so long."

Kane watched my performance with obvious contempt.

"Really? You seemed to be doing quite well without me. Working at Blackwood's design studio, career taking off nicely. What happened? Did Ryan get bored after he used you up and threw you away?"

My smile froze on my face. How did he know so much about my situation? Did that mean he also knew how desperately I'd tried to seduce Ryan?

Before I could form a response, Kane grabbed my chin with bruising force, squeezing until my face contorted painfully.

"You treacherous bitch. I sent you to seduce Ryan so we could destroy him together. Instead, you fell for him. Tell me, how should I make you pay for this betrayal?"

My eyes widened in terror as I frantically shook my head, making muffled sounds of denial against his grip.

"I didn't... I swear..."

"Do you think I'm an idiot? Useless!" He suddenly released me, shoving me backward. I tumbled onto the floor, my cheek throbbing with angry red fingerprints.

"Kane, please," I gasped, scrambling to explain. "You know what Ryan's like—completely impenetrable. I never had a chance to destroy him! He's still obsessed with my sister."

"Is that so?"

Kane seemed to consider this, his expression thoughtful.

"You're still worthless to me," he finally said. "Tell me, how would you like to disappear?"

Terror exploded in my chest. "Kane, no! Please! Give me another chance! Don't do this to me!"

I knew exactly what Kane was capable of. When he decided someone needed to "disappear," they vanished without a trace. No witnesses. No body. Nothing.

"Another chance?" he echoed, seeming amused by my desperation.

"Yes, another chance! Please, Kane. We were together once. Don't do this to me."

Kane laughed coldly, slapping away my pleading hands. freewebnovel.com

"Together? You were nothing but a warm body in my bed. You think that makes you special? You're delusional."

I felt hope draining from me. Ryan already despised me—he wouldn't swoop in to save me now. Nobody would.

Kane seemed to feed on my despair, his eyes gleaming with a perverse satisfaction.

"So tell me," he said suddenly, "how do you plan to use this second chance?"

Hope flickered back to life. "Anything! I'll do anything you want! Just tell me what you need!"

My mind raced with possibilities. If I could just get out of here alive, I'd never let Kane catch me again. I'd run far away, change my identity if necessary.

Kane's eyes narrowed, sharp and knowing, as if he were reading every thought racing through my head. A dangerous smile curved across his face.

"Ivy, tell me—does Ryan even know you used to be mine? I wonder how he'd react if he found out his precious Sophie's sister was keeping my bed warm. Think about it—how do you imagine he'd look at you then?"

His voice dropped to a low, taunting murmur. "I can't wait to find out."

The blood drained from my face, and I collapsed back onto the floor, hollow and defeated. There was no escape. No matter what I did now, I was already trapped.

Kane didn't let me breathe before delivering the final blow.

"I want the Blackwood Group's trade secrets. I don't care how you manage it—this is the last chance you'll ever get."

He leaned forward, eyes glinting like a viper ready to strike.

A chill rippled down my spine, sweat slicking my back. There was only one answer I could give.

"...I understand."

Kane's lips twisted into a satisfied smile. "Good girl. Three days. I'll be waiting."

I tried to keep my voice steady, forcing out a fragile plea. "Couldn't you give me a little more time?"

“Of course,” Kane said smoothly, turning his wheelchair as if I were no longer worth his gaze. His tone was colder than steel.

“Just make sure you give Ryan a heads-up—so he knows when to pick up your body.”

I couldn’t remember how I was dragged out of the villa. All I knew was that my death sentence had been written. Kane never bluffed—when he spoke, he meant it.

By the time I came to, I was dumped at the corner near my apartment. My legs buckled under me, and I had to cling to the wall just to stay upright.

Three days. That was all I had. And every second was already slipping away.