

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

- Chapter 51 You truly are worthless

Chapter 51: Chapter 51 You truly are worthless

Ivy's POV

I smoothed my hair nervously as I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

Twenty minutes had passed since Kane's threatening, and I'd changed into a fresh outfit for my visit to Blackwood Corporation. My heart hammered against my chest like a trapped bird. I needed to get back into Ryan's good graces—and fast.

When I reached the top floor, his assistant blocked my path with an apologetic but firm expression.

"Miss Hart, Mr. Blackwood is busy at the moment."

I bit my lip, trying not to show my frustration. Ever since that incident, accessing Ryan's office had become nearly impossible for me.

The days when I could waltz in whenever I pleased were long gone.

"That's fine," I said, forcing a sweet smile. "I'll wait a bit. I won't disturb Ryan. Just let him know I'm here, would you?"

I settled onto the leather sofa in the waiting area, sitting demurely with my hands folded in my lap. The assistant gave me a surprised glance—my unusual patience clearly throwing him off. Good. Let him think I've changed.

After a moment's hesitation, he went to inform Ryan of my presence.

"Sir, Miss Hart is here to see you. She seems to have something important to discuss."

I heard Ryan's muffled response through the door, but couldn't make out his words. The assistant returned to his desk without inviting me in. My stomach knotted with anxiety as the minutes ticked by.

An hour passed. Then two. The office had emptied out, leaving just me, Ryan, and his assistant in the entire floor. My legs had gone numb from sitting still for so long, but I maintained my composure. I needed this to work.

Finally, as the night grew late, Ryan's voice came through the intercom.

"Send her in."

The assistant gestured toward the door. "Mr. Blackwood will see you now."

My heart leapt. I stood up quickly—too quickly—and had to steady myself against the arm of the sofa. I smoothed my skirt, took a deep breath, and walked into Ryan's office with my most dazzling smile.

"Ryan, you're still working so hard," I cooed, using the sweet tone that used to make him soften toward me.

He barely glanced up from his computer screen, his fingers continuing to tap away at the keyboard. "What do you want, Ivy? Make it quick."

I swallowed hard, fighting to maintain my smile. "I... I'm not happy with my current job situation. I was hoping I could come back to work for Blackwood?"

Ryan's jaw tightened, but he didn't bother looking up. "Don't be ridiculous. Your reputation is shot. Most design studios won't touch you now. And Blackwood's jewelry division is currently under Eliza's management. There's no place for you."

My smile froze on my face. I hadn't expected him to reject me so bluntly. The Ryan who used to care about me, who would at least pretend to consider my feelings—where had he gone?

Time for Plan B. I let my eyes well up with tears, my lower lip trembling ever so slightly.

"Ryan, it's precisely because my design reputation is ruined that I can't continue like this," I said, my voice breaking. "The way people look at me now... if Sophie knew what had happened to me, she would be heartbroken."

I watched his face closely as I mentioned Sophie's name. Once, it would have been enough to make him do anything I asked. Now, his expression remained stony, unmoved.

I edged closer to his desk, my eyes scanning for anything useful, any document I could glimpse. "If you don't want me back in the design studio, I could... I could be your assistant instead!"

Ryan finally looked up, his gaze traveling over my face with undisguised irritation.

"My assistant? Do you have any relevant skills? You'd just be a distraction up here." He checked his watch pointedly. "It's late. Go home, Ivy. If you need something, send me a text." *freewe&novel.com*

I stood there, completely stunned. Before I could even attempt to argue, his assistant appeared at the door.

"Miss Hart, I'll arrange a car to take you home. Mr. Blackwood is very busy, so it's best not to disturb him further."

I opened my mouth to protest, but the look in Ryan's eyes told me pushing further would only make things worse. With no other choice, I left the office, my mind racing to formulate another plan.

One tactic down, I thought as the elevator doors closed. Time for something more dramatic.

During the ride home, I suddenly doubled over in the backseat, clutching my stomach and moaning in pain.

"Miss Hart?" The driver glanced at me through the rearview mirror, alarmed. "Are you alright?"

"No," I gasped, making sure my voice sounded weak and pained. "Please... take me to Westside Private Hospital."

The driver immediately changed course.

At the hospital, I asked for Dr. Miller—a physician I'd bribed in the past for various medical notes and excuses.

With a substantial payment, he agreed to falsify examination results, making my condition seem serious.

I lay in the hospital bed, trying to look pale and fragile as the driver stepped out to call Ryan. My ears strained to catch his side of the conversation.

"Mr. Blackwood, Miss Hart has been admitted to the hospital. The doctor says her condition is quite serious... What would you like me to do, sir?"

In the past, Ryan would have dropped everything and rushed to my side at the first sign of illness. Even a minor cold would have warranted his personal attention.

But now, I could hear the driver's voice falter as he listened to Ryan's response.

"Yes, sir... I understand. I'll handle it."

My heart sank before the driver even returned. His uncomfortable expression told me everything.

"What did Ryan say?" I asked anyway, desperately hoping I was wrong.

"Mr. Blackwood said..." he hesitated, clearly trying to soften the blow, "he said you should focus on getting better. He's not a doctor, so..."

"He's not coming?" I nearly sat bolt upright before remembering my act. I forced myself to sink back against the pillows, wincing for effect. "Did you tell him how serious this is?"

The driver looked annoyed. "You heard me tell him yourself, Miss Hart."

I bit my lip hard enough to draw blood. Once, I'd had Ryan wrapped around my finger.

A few tears, a little pouting, and he'd give me anything I wanted—all because I reminded him of Sophie. What changed? Why wasn't it working anymore?

A terrible thought struck me. Was there someone new in his life? Someone who had his attention now?

Serena's face flashed through my mind, and my stomach actually did twist with genuine pain this time. My façade crumbled as real color drained from my face.

Left with no other options, I spent the night in the hospital, returning home the following day with nothing to show for my efforts.

I couldn't even bring myself to go to work. My mind was consumed with Kane's demands: how could I possibly steal Blackwood's business secrets?

Ryan was meticulous about security. Important documents were locked in his safe, and I couldn't even get close to his office, let alone know his passwords.

The task seemed impossible, and Kane's deadline was looming. My hands shook as I paced my apartment, panic rising in my chest.

Then my phone rang. Kane's name flashed on the screen, sending a chill down my spine. I answered with trembling fingers.

"You've been playing games all night and have nothing to show for it?" His voice slithered through the speaker like a snake.

"Ivy, you truly are worthless. I'm beginning to think you're not even worth my time."

"Kane, please," I begged, my voice cracking with genuine fear. "I'm working on it! If I can't get the documents, I'll find another way to cause problems for Blackwood. I promise!"

There was a long pause on the line—the kind that made my skin crawl with dread.

"You'd better not disappoint me," he finally said, his tone slightly less venomous. "Ryan is hosting a Blackwood gala tonight. Be there. Show me your commitment."

My throat tightened. The meaning was clear: Kane wanted me to create some kind of scene, cause some kind of damage. If I failed, the consequences would be worse than anything I could imagine.

"Yes, I understand," I said flatly, feeling hollow inside.

After hanging up, I sat motionless on my bed for nearly an hour, trying to calm my racing heart. Finally, I dragged myself to my closet to select a dress for the evening.

As I applied my makeup with unsteady hands, my mind worked furiously. How could I fulfill Kane's demands without completely destroying whatever slim chance I had left with Ryan?

Then, suddenly, a face appeared in my thoughts—a perfectly crafted plan forming around her.

Serena.

Chapter 52: Chapter 52 Blackwood Gala

Serena's POV

The invitation arrived just as I was leaving the studio for the day. Simon Graves, Ryan's ever-efficient assistant, stood waiting with the elegantly embossed envelope.

"Miss Quinn, please consider attending," he said with practiced politeness.

I didn't even bother looking at it before handing it back. "Please tell Ryan that Blackwood affairs no longer concern me. I'd rather not waste my evening in that toxic environment."

Simon shifted uncomfortably. "The gala is to welcome Mr. Kane Blackwood back from abroad. Many influential people will attend. Mr. Blackwood specifically mentioned that representatives from the jewelry association board will be present—an excellent opportunity for your studio."

I stopped mid-stride. "The jewelry board?"

"Yes. Mr. Blackwood said you're welcome to bring your partners as well—as many as you'd like."

Now it made sense. Ryan knew exactly what bait would work. We desperately needed those contacts for our materials sourcing.

Damn him for being so calculating.

"Fine. I'll be there," I replied, accepting the invitation with reluctant fingers.

Back at the studio, I found Maya finalizing arrangements with a supplier on the phone while Julian reviewed our quarterly projections nearby, his black-rimmed glasses sliding down his nose as he concentrated.

"I need backup," I announced, dropping into my chair. "Ryan's throwing another power play gala, and unfortunately, Dreamland needs to make an appearance."

Maya hung up and swiveled toward me, her gray eyes narrowing. "That man just can't leave you alone, can he?"

"It's a business move," I insisted, though we both knew it wasn't quite that simple. "The jewelry association board members will be there. We need their connections for the upcoming collection launch."

Julian closed his folder. "I'll accompany you. It would be good to assess the competition anyway."

"Count me in too," Maya declared. "I've been dying to see what these Blackwood events are really like. Plus, Celeste could use the exposure to potential clients."

Celeste, who had been silently working in the corner, looked up with wide eyes. "Me? At a Blackwood gala?"

"Absolutely you," I confirmed. "Your latest designs deserve to be seen by industry insiders."

The gala was ostensibly to welcome Kane Blackwood after his overseas business trip, but anyone with half a brain could see it for what it really was - a calculated move in the ongoing power struggle within the Blackwood empire.

I'd been around long enough to recognize the signs of corporate warfare dressed up as champagne and caviar.

That evening, I deliberately chose an understated black gown - elegant enough to meet the dress code but not flashy enough to draw attention. My days of trying to impress the Blackwood circle were long behind me.

"You look stunning even when you're trying not to," Maya commented, herself resplendent in emerald green.

The Blackwood mansion was lit up like a Christmas tree when we arrived, luxury cars lining the circular driveway.

I took a steadying breath before stepping out of our car, memories flooding back of the many times I'd entered this house - first as a nervous bride, then as a determined wife trying to earn her husband's love, and finally as a woman walking away from a marriage that had been dead from the start.

Inside, the ballroom glittered with crystal chandeliers and wealth. Maya immediately began working the room, charming jewelry buyers and industry veterans with her natural confidence. Celeste followed, wide-eyed but handling herself admirably for someone at her first major industry event.

Julian stayed close to me, his presence reassuring. "Are you okay?" he asked quietly as we accepted champagne from a passing waiter.

"I'm fine," I lied, scanning the room for Ryan. "Just ready to make the necessary connections and leave."

Julian's eyes narrowed as he studied my face. "You don't need to be here, you know. Dreamland is successful enough to stand on its own merits. We don't need Blackwood's approval or connections."

"This isn't about approval," I insisted, though his concern touched me. "It's about strategic business decisions."

"Is it?" Julian pressed, unusually direct. "Then why don't you simply refuse when he keeps showing up at our studio?"

I raised an eyebrow, suddenly realizing Julian was acting strangely tonight.

"Why are you so concerned about my ex-husband all of a sudden?"

Julian nearly choked on his champagne, taking a moment to recover.

"I'm not concerned about him! I'm concerned about you! You were so devoted before the divorce, always giving without receiving. Now that he's showing you a little attention, I'm worried you'll fall back into old patterns."

"Who said anything about falling back?" I frowned. I was focused on growing my business, not rekindling old flames.

"Then why dress so distinctively tonight? Aren't you trying to catch your ex's attention?"

I blinked, glancing around. Only then did it hit me—I was one of the few women wearing black in a sea of glittering silks and sequins.

I let out a short, awkward laugh. "I just thought black would be understated. I didn't realize it would make me stand out."

Julian's whole demeanor shifted, the tension easing from his features as if my words had reassured him.

"Serena, just remember everything that happened. Don't let that man fool you twice."

I murmured my agreement, though the sudden protectiveness in his tone felt strange. Normally it was Maya playing the role of my moral compass, not Julian.

When did he sign up for the "overprotective friend" club?

We joked about a few other things, carefully avoiding any further mention of Ryan. Just as we were enjoying ourselves, the room's energy shifted.

Ryan entered, pushing Kane's wheelchair. Beside them walked Evelyn Blackwood, Ryan's grandmother, her silver hair elegantly coiffed, her posture rigid with old money pride.

Ryan only made a show of pushing the wheelchair for a moment before passing the duty to an assistant.

His face was as coldly handsome as ever, features set in that impenetrable mask I knew so well.

The crowd surged forward to greet the Blackwood family, eager to curry favor. I instinctively stepped deeper into the corner, trying to make myself invisible.

The last thing I wanted was to keep playing the doting couple in front of Evelyn Blackwood.

"I need a moment," I murmured to Julian, slipping away toward the lounge set aside for guests.

The quiet there was a welcome contrast to the buzzing ballroom. *freewebnovel.com*

I pushed open the door, seeking a few minutes of peace—only to find myself face to face with Ivy Hart.

She was perched on the edge of a velvet settee, clutching a champagne flute in one hand.

Her knuckles were white around the stem, and when she lifted her head to see me standing there, she froze.

The glass trembled in her grip, eyes widening in what looked like genuine shock.

Why would she look so startled to see me?

Chapter 53: Chapter 53 I slapped her hard across the face

Serena's POV

I stood frozen, watching Ivy stared back at me. The air between us crackled with tension.

"Well," I finally broke the suffocating silence, "this is uncomfortable."

Ivy quickly composed herself, smoothing her dress with practiced nonchalance. "Serena. What a surprise." Her voice attempted casual pleasantness but landed somewhere between strained and artificial.

I moved further into the room, keeping a safe distance between us. "Is it really a surprise? Ryan invited my design team personally." I kept my tone neutral while watching her carefully for reactions.

"Of course he did," she muttered, fidgeting with her clutch. Her hands were trembling slightly.

Something about her seemed off. The Ivy I remembered was always perfectly composed, calculating, and confident. This woman looked like she was barely holding it together.

"You seem nervous," I observed casually. "Big plans for the evening?"

Ivy's eyes darted to mine, then quickly away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I turned to face her directly. "Cut the act, Ivy. I've known you long enough to recognize when you're plotting something."

"Me? Plotting?" She laughed, the sound brittle and forced. "That's rich coming from you. The woman who swooped in and took everything from me."

I couldn't help but scoff at that. "Took what, exactly? A loveless marriage to a man who never wanted either of us? A life of being constantly overlooked and dismissed? Please, do explain what precious treasures I stole from you."

Her perfectly manicured hand gripped her clutch so hard her knuckles turned white. "You think you're so clever, don't you? Acting like you're above it all now. But I know the truth. You're just Ryan's pathetic little replacement for Sophie."

"At least I had the dignity to walk away," I replied coolly. "While you're still clinging to scraps of attention like a starving dog."

Something in Ivy snapped. With a sudden, violent motion, she swept a nearby vase off the side table, sending it crashing to the floor. Water splashed across the carpet as flower stems scattered everywhere.

"You don't understand!" she shrieked, her carefully crafted society mask crumbling completely. "You have no idea what I'm dealing with!" **freewebnovel.com**

I took a step back, genuinely alarmed by her outburst. "Ivy, what's going on with you?"

For a moment, something like desperation flashed in her eyes. Then, without warning, she slapped herself hard across the face, leaving an angry red mark on her cheek.

"What the hell are you doing?" I gasped, completely bewildered.

Before I could react further, she crumpled to the floor, sobbing dramatically. The rest room door swung open, and two society women entered, stopping short at the scene before them.

"Oh my god!" one exclaimed, rushing to Ivy's side. "What happened?"

Ivy looked up, tears streaming down her face, her perfectly applied makeup now streaking in tragic rivulets. "I—I just wanted to talk to her," she sobbed, gesturing vaguely in my direction.

More women pushed into the room, drawn by the commotion. Within seconds, I found myself surrounded by accusatory glares and whispers.

"Someone get Mr. Blackwood!"

"Is she okay?"

"What did you do to her?"

I stood there, utterly dumbfounded by how quickly the situation had spiraled. "I didn't touch her," I stated firmly. "She did this to herself."

No one was listening. They were all too busy helping Ivy to her feet, cooing sympathetically and shooting venomous looks my way.

I caught fragments of their whispers: "...always been jealous..." "...unstable..."

Ryan appeared at the doorway, his tall frame filling the entrance as he surveyed the chaotic scene. His gaze moved from the broken glass on the floor to Ivy's tear-streaked face, and finally to me, standing alone against the wall.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, his voice cutting through the chatter.

Ivy immediately stumbled toward him, clutching at his sleeve. "Ryan, I—I just wanted to talk to her, to make peace, but she got so angry..."

The audacity of her performance was breathtaking.

Had she learned nothing from our past confrontations?

Dreamland had thoroughly outperformed her company at every turn, and I'd become respected in industry circles through hard work, not manipulation.

"You're seriously going to stand there and lie?" I asked, keeping my voice level despite my rising anger. "You think because there are no security cameras in here, you can say whatever you want?"

My mind was clear despite the chaos. What was Ivy's angle here? Was this just to make Ryan feel sorry for her?

If he truly cared about her, she wouldn't have been so ignored at the gala tonight.

"Serena, you have everything now," Ivy whimpered, her voice rising to ensure everyone heard.

"Why do you keep coming after me? Look at my dress! I borrowed it for tonight, and now it's torn! How am I going to return it?"

The room's attention shifted to her white gown, which indeed had a tear at the shoulder. It did look like it had been ripped in some kind of struggle.

Even if she'd wanted to damage it herself, it would have been difficult to create that particular tear.

More whispers, more judgmental stares. I felt like I was back in that nightmare of my marriage—always the outsider, always presumed guilty.

But not this time.

I wouldn't let it happen again.

"Let's be clear about what you're claiming," I said, my voice cutting through her sobs. "You're saying I pushed you, tore your dress, and slapped you. Is that right?"

Ivy nodded, raising her tear-filled eyes to mine with practiced innocence. "Isn't that exactly what happened?"

I smiled coldly. "You're right."

"What?" She looked genuinely confused.

Before anyone could react, I strode forward on my high heels and did exactly what she claimed I'd already done—I slapped her hard across the face.

The room gasped in collective shock. Now both her cheeks were symmetrically red.

No one could believe what they'd just witnessed.

The Serena Quinn, respected designer and businesswoman, had just slapped someone in front of dozens of witnesses, including Ryan Blackwood himself.

Ivy looked stunned for a moment before fury replaced her fake tears.

"Serena Quinn! How dare you humiliate me like this!" she shrieked.

"I'm just doing what you already claimed I did," I replied calmly. "Making your lie into truth."

"Ryan!" Ivy turned to him, clutching her reddened cheek dramatically. "You saw it! She's just a bully who thinks she can get away with anything!"

I turned to face Ryan too, my eyes challenging him. Was he going to defend Ivy again, just like he always had?

Chapter 54: Chapter 54 The secret marriage was exposed

Serena's POV

I stood there, bracing myself for Ryan's reaction.

After that dramatic slap I'd delivered to Ivy's face, I expected anger, disapproval, or even public censure. What I didn't expect was his concerned gaze falling on my hand.

"Did you hurt yourself?" he asked quietly, reaching for my reddened palm.

The question caught me completely off-guard. After everything that had just happened, he was worried about my hand? The unexpected gentleness in his voice made something flutter dangerously in my chest.

Before I could respond, Ivy let out an indignant gasp, her mascara-streaked face contorting with disbelief.

"Are you serious right now?" she shrieked, gesturing wildly between us. "She just assaulted me in front of everyone, and you're asking if SHE'S hurt?!"

Ryan barely glanced her way, his patience visibly thinning. "Enough, Ivy. You've caused enough of a scene."

"I caused a scene?" Her voice rose to an eardrum-piercing pitch. "She's the one who slapped me!"

"Ivy," Ryan said coldly, his eyes narrowing. "I see through your little games. Enough. This gala is important to the Blackwoods, and your theatrics are getting tiresome."

I couldn't help but feel a spark of vindication. For once, Ryan wasn't automatically taking Ivy's side. Maybe he'd finally seen through her tactics.

Ryan gestured to Simon, who had appeared discreetly at his side. "Please escort Ms. Hart out. She needs to compose herself."

Simon stepped forward efficiently, but before he could reach her, Ivy did something that left everyone in the room speechless.

She dropped dramatically to her knees and clutched Ryan's leg like a drowning woman clinging to a life raft.

"Ryan, please!" she wailed, tears flowing freely now. "You can't do this to me! You've found someone new and you're just throwing me away? How can you be so heartless?"

The hushed gasps that echoed around us told me exactly how her words were being received.

The implication of "someone new" versus her being the "someone old" created an instant scandal. I could practically see the society gossip columns writing themselves.

People exchanged knowing glances, and I spotted at least three phones surreptitiously recording the unfolding drama. Of course they would.

Ryan Blackwood, notorious for keeping his personal life private, never had women hanging around him or tabloid stories about his love life. This was prime gossip material.

Ryan's face darkened with anger. "What are you talking about? Let go of me!" He tried to step back, but Ivy clung even tighter.

I couldn't help rolling my eyes. So this was her master plan all along—to create a dramatic scene that would link us romantically, making it seem like I'd achieved success through Ryan's influence rather than my own talent and hard work.

Classic Ivy.

"Excuse me," I said coolly, trying to push through the growing crowd. "Your personal drama isn't my concern."

I was just about to leave when Kane rolled smoothly into my path.

His smile was sharp, malicious, and aimed straight at me.

"Leaving so soon, Mrs. Blackwood?" he asked, loud enough for everyone in the lounge to hear.

The air froze. That title—Mrs. Blackwood—hit the space like a bomb.

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My stomach dropped. I hadn't expected him to announce my secret three-year marriage to Ryan in front of all these people—what was he trying to do? And we'd long been divorced.

Kane's grin widened, cruel and deliberate, clearly enjoying my reaction.

"Oh, my mistake," he said, his voice dripping with fake concern. "I almost forgot—you're Ryan's ex-wife now, aren't you? I completely understand why you left him. Who could tolerate such a two-faced husband?"

I kept my expression neutral. Confirming anything—or adding to the drama—would only make it worse. Ryan could deal with this PR disaster himself.

Kane, clearly enjoying our silence, decided to fan the flames further.

"You know what I find truly sad?" he said, addressing the room more than me. "That her husband was obsessed with a dead woman throughout their entire marriage."

My chest tightened at the mention of Sophie. Even now, knowing her place in Ryan's life, it still hurt.

"That's enough!" Ryan's voice snapped across the room. "Kane, shut your mouth right now."

Kane raised an eyebrow, pretending to be offended. "Is that how you speak to your elders, nephew?"

The tension was thick enough to cut. Guests suddenly found reasons to leave, murmuring hurried goodbyes as the gala devolved into a family spectacle.

I scanned the room. Evelyn Blackwood wasn't here. At least Kane had spared her the shame of witnessing this.

Maya and Julian finally reached my side, concern written all over their faces. Before they could speak, Julian took my hand.

"It's getting late," he said firmly. "We should go."

I nodded gratefully, desperate to escape. The revelation about our secret marriage and divorce was Ryan's problem, not mine.

I'd signed the papers, walked away, and built my own life. Whatever fallout came next wasn't my responsibility.

"Serena, stop right there," Ryan said, his gaze fixed on my hand in Julian's.

Julian didn't even slow down, guiding me toward the exit.

"Come on, Serena," he said softly.

I hesitated for just a moment, feeling Ryan's gaze burn into my back. Three years ago, I would have turned immediately, stayed to fix things.

But that Serena no longer existed—the one who thought love meant self-sacrifice for someone blind to it.

I kept walking, letting Julian's steady presence guide me toward the exit.

As we reached the door, I caught a glimpse of Ryan's face. He looked so hurt, like a puppy that had been abandoned.

A sharp little sting hit my chest, but I immediately shook it off. I shouldn't let his emotions affect me—I wasn't going to let anyone pull me back into the past.

Chapter 55: Chapter 55 You really do care about Serena, don't you?

Ryan's POV

I watched Serena walk away with Julian's hand firmly holding hers. Something primal and dark clawed at my insides.

Something primal and dark clawed at my insides. I wanted nothing more than to charge after them and rip Julian's hand away, but I couldn't. Not here. Not now.

"Looks like my dear niece-in-law has found herself a new lover," Kane's oily voice slithered into my consciousness. "As your uncle, let me give you some advice—women need to be coaxed. And if coaxing doesn't work..." His voice dropped to a menacing whisper. "Make them fear you."

He paused dramatically, savoring the tension crackling through the room. "Once they fear you, they'll never dare to betray you again."

I watched as Kane shot a meaningful glance at Ivy, who visibly shuddered under his gaze.

"What exactly do you want?" I stepped closer, my patience wearing thin. "How does damaging Blackwood benefit you in any way?"

I grabbed Kane's collar, nearly lifting him from his wheelchair. The action was impulsive, fueled by rage I couldn't contain any longer.

First Serena walking away with Julian, now Kane's public sabotage – it was too much.

Yet Kane showed no fear. If anything, his eyes lit up with excitement at my display of anger.

"My, my, touched a nerve, have I? You really do care about Serena, don't you?"

I clenched my jaw, refusing to give him the satisfaction of an answer. As the head of Blackwood Group, I couldn't afford vulnerabilities, especially ones this snake could exploit.

"I thought so," Kane smirked. "This is getting more entertaining by the minute."

"I'm warning you," I growled, my voice dangerously low. "Try anything else, and you'll regret ever coming back to the city."

I shoved him roughly back into his wheelchair, but his smile never faltered.

"That depends entirely on how cooperative my dear nephew is feeling," he replied smoothly. "When will you let me take over some operations at Blackwood?"

So that was it. Power. It always came down to power with Kane. If I let him get a foothold in the company, he'd start building his own faction, undermining me at every turn.

After a long pause, I made my decision. "Since you're so eager, take over our operations in Chicago."

Blackwood had several struggling subsidiaries – financial sinkholes that needed extensive restructuring. If Kane was so ambitious, let him prove himself with those.

Surprisingly, Kane didn't argue. One evening's work had publicly humiliated me and netted him control of several companies. He clearly considered it a victory.

"Thank you, dear nephew. I'll send my people for the handover tomorrow. Please have everything ready."

As Kane wheeled himself away, I turned my attention to Ivy, who still cowered on the floor.

"Get out," I said coldly. "And don't show your face at any more Blackwood events."

Ivy remained slumped on the floor, but I could see the relief washing over her features.

The next morning, I stepped into the office, Simon approached, his expression tense.

"Sir... last night's media coverage—it's... extensive. Our PR team hasn't been able to contain it, and Kane's deliberate manipulation is front and center in every report."

I didn't flinch. "Go on."

"The headlines are focusing on the secret marriage and divorce," Simon continued, swallowing nervously.

"But the more damaging narrative is the feud between you and Kane. He's positioned himself as the wronged uncle, and the public is eating it up. Negative stories about you are spreading fast, overwhelming the team's efforts to manage the fallout."

I nodded slowly, absorbing the report. "Understood. Keep monitoring Kane closely. And get me a full dossier on Julian Clarke. We're not going to let this derail anything else."

Simon hesitated, clearly worried. "Sir... with all due respect, perhaps we should focus on calming the PR storm first—"

"Simon," I interrupted, already planning my next move, "contact our partners at TechFuture. Move up the announcement of our joint venture by two days."

Understanding lit his eyes. "A diversion strategy?"

I smirked slightly. "Not just a diversion. A controlled redirection. The market responds to strength, not weakness. By the time the press wakes up tomorrow, Kane's stunt will be old news."

In the business world, I'd never encountered a problem I couldn't solve. This was no exception.

Serena's POV

I stared at the cascade of headlines flooding my phone, each one worse than the last. If this continued, Dreamland Studio would inevitably get caught in the crossfire. I needed to act fast.

WhisperStream had already reached out, his message displaying genuine concern beneath his usual business-like tone.

[Need reinforcements for damage control?]

[Yes. Protect Dreamland's image at all costs, but stay clear of Blackwood affairs.]

There was a noticeable pause before his next message appeared.

[So it's true? You were actually married to Blackwood? Never pegged you for such high society connections.]

I rolled my eyes. If not for Ryan and his emotional baggage, my career would have reached its peak years ago. What was I thinking back then? Was my brain completely waterlogged?

[Less gossip, more action. Deliver results, and your compensation won't disappoint.]

His response came instantly: [Consider it done, boss!]

I set my phone down with a heavy sigh. What a mess.

Julian walked in carrying coffee, his expression sympathetic. "Still upset?"

"I don't understand what got into Ivy last night. If she hadn't pulled that stunt, none of this would be happening," I complained, massaging my temples.

Looking back, I'd been too lenient with her. I should have made sure she couldn't show her face in this city again!

"Why let them get to you?" Julian said, setting the coffee beside me.

"If things become unworkable here, you could always start fresh elsewhere. Los Angeles has excellent opportunities."

He wasn't wrong. Los Angeles's design scene was just as vibrant as here.

I shook my head firmly. "I've invested too much to just walk away. And what about everyone at the studio? Most of them have built their lives here. I can't ask them to uproot everything."

That would be completely irresponsible of me.

"Just offering options," Julian smiled gently. "From what I can see, things haven't reached critical mass yet."

"Let's hope they don't," I sighed, feeling the weight of exhaustion settling over me.

"There's an exclusive luxury jewelry showcase next week," Julian mentioned. "All the prominent designers will be there. Interested?"

I waved dismissively. The studio was already keeping me overwhelmingly busy. I could attend as a spectator, but competing was out of the question.

"Actually, Maya and I already discussed this. You and Celeste will represent Dreamland. We've secured spots for you both," I said confidently. "This could be your moment to shine."

Thanks to WhisperStream's expertise and, surprisingly, Ryan's resources working in tandem, the negative press began to fade within days. Things seemed to be moving in a positive direction again.

With the luxury showcase approaching rapidly, Celeste and Julian were deeply focused on preparations, working late into each night.

As I left the studio that evening, exhausted from a long day of work, a familiar black car pulled up alongside me.

The window rolled down to reveal Ryan's face, his expression tense but controlled.

"Get in," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I crossed my arms. "I have my own car, thank you."

"Serena," his voice softened slightly, "please. Come back to the villa. It's not safe."

"Not safe?" I repeated incredulously. "What are you talking about?"

Ryan's eyes darkened. "Kane. After what happened at the gala, I don't trust him. He might target you next."

A chill ran down my spine as I remembered Kane's predatory smile. But returning to Ryan's house? After everything? I wasn't sure I was ready to cross that threshold again.

Chapter 56: Chapter 56 The luxury jewelry showcase

Serena's POV

"I don't need your protection," I told Ryan firmly, standing my ground beside his car. "I can take care of myself."

His jaw tightened visibly. "Kane isn't someone to underestimate, Serena."

"Neither am I," I replied, my voice steady despite the flicker of concern his warning had ignited. "Besides... the thought of living with you again makes me sick."

Ryan's eyes narrowed. A shadow passed over his face—surprise, frustration, and something else he kept carefully hidden.

"You... really feel that way?"

I steeled myself and nodded, forcing the words past the lump in my throat.

"Don't come bothering me again, Ryan."

Turning away, I walked off without looking back.

I heard him sigh heavily before the window rolled up and his car pulled away.

Part of me wondered if I was being stubborn for stubbornness' sake, but returning to the villa would've sent the wrong message. To both of us.

The next few days flew by in a whirlwind of preparations. I threw myself completely into mentoring Julian and Celeste for the luxury showcase.

"No, the clasp needs to be more delicate," I instructed Celeste, who was hunched over her workstation, squinting at the intricate golden piece. "Remember, when the wearer puts this on, it should feel effortless."

Celeste nodded, her fingers already working to adjust the mechanism. Her talent was undeniable, but her perfectionism sometimes made her overthink the practical aspects.

Julian was working nearby on his centerpiece—a necklace inspired by ancient celestial maps. The stones caught the light perfectly, creating an illusion of stars twinkling against dark metal.

"That's gorgeous," I admitted, leaning in for a closer look.

Julian smiled, pleased with the praise. "I think we're ready."

"Almost," I corrected him. "Let's review the presentation concepts again. The story you tell is just as important as the piece itself."

We worked late into the night, refining every detail. By the time I left, confidence had replaced my earlier anxiety. Dreamland Studio was going to make an impression no one would forget.

Ivy's POV

Meanwhile, in another part of the city...

I gripped my phone tightly as Kane's name flashed across the screen. Taking a deep breath, I answered with the sweetest voice I could manage.

"Kane? Is everything alright?"

His tone was sharp, clearly unhappy with the struggling Chicago operations he'd taken over.

Not surprising—those subsidiaries were financial disasters that would take months to turn around, if they could be saved at all.

"Kane, is there anything I can help with?" I asked carefully, trying not to trigger his infamous temper.

"The luxury jewelry showcase in the New York. You'll attend. I've already secured a spot for you."

My heart sank. My reputation was already in tatters after the gala incident. Competing would only invite more humiliation.

"You don't sound pleased," Kane noted coldly.

"No, no! I'm thrilled," I rushed to assure him. "I'm just wondering... what exactly would you like me to do there?"

Kane made a disgusted sound. "Ivy, is your brain completely waterlogged? Can't you think for yourself? Do I need to spoon-feed you every single instruction?"

I forced a light laugh, trying to appease him. "I just want to make sure I don't mess up your plans. Maybe a little hint?"

After a pause, Kane's voice lowered. "Ryan seems quite attached to that Serena woman. Her Dreamland Studio will be participating. I don't expect you to beat her professionally—we both know you're not capable of that—but surely you can find some way to humiliate her."

My mind immediately started churning with possibilities. Serena Quinn was my sworn enemy. Making her miserable would be my pleasure.

"Consider it done," I promised eagerly.

Kane seemed satisfied with my enthusiasm, gave a few more instructions, then abruptly ended the call.

I pulled out my old design portfolios, making hasty modifications to prepare something. As I worked, a particularly devious idea began taking shape.

By the time I finished, I was smiling to myself. Serena wouldn't know what hit her.

Serena's POV

The day of the luxury jewelry showcase arrived with all the fanfare such prestigious events command.

The venue buzzed with excitement as cameras were set up for the live broadcast that would stream to millions of fashion enthusiasts around the world.

Each designer would present their work on stage, explaining their inspiration and creative process.

Celeste was the first Dreamland representative to go on stage. Her theme, "Childhood Bonds," resonated deeply with the audience as she shared a touching story about friendship from her youth.

The live stream's comment section flooded with supportive messages. She'd built quite a following recently – quite impressive for an emerging designer.

Julian's presentation was scheduled midway through the event. By then, the audience had grown somewhat restless, but the moment his handsome face appeared on stage, the live stream chat exploded with excitement.

His striking looks certainly gave him advantages in this industry. But when he announced his theme – "Confession" – the excitement reached fever pitch.

Julian took the microphone with easy confidence.

"My inspiration came from an unexpected source. I met a mysterious designer online whose work radiated a yearning for life's beautiful moments. I imagined her as someone inherently positive and bright. Later, when I learned more about her, I discovered her life hadn't always been filled with happiness."

I sat frozen in my seat. An uneasy feeling crept up my spine as his words hit uncomfortably close to home.

Julian continued, his voice growing warmer. "When I returned to this country and finally met her in person, she reminded me of a pine tree – resilient, unyielding, refusing to surrender no matter the circumstances."

"She's led Dreamland Studio to new heights and is undoubtedly one of the most influential designers of our generation."

The live stream was going wild, my name repeatedly flashing across the comments.

That ridiculous "Julian-Serena" shipping trend from a few weeks ago was suddenly roaring back to life, with fans claiming this as proof of our romance.

I realized with horror that cameras were now turning toward me, capturing every expression. I maintained a calm smile, though my heart was racing. What was Julian doing?

He smiled directly at me, his eyes sparkling under the stage lights. "I think everyone has guessed who I'm talking about. I want to tell her something—"

He paused dramatically, and I noticed a slight tremor in his hand.

"Serena Quinn, you are the most extraordinary woman in the world, and you deserve the best man. And I believe I qualify as a good man."

The audience gasped collectively. The live stream comments went absolutely berserk:

"SCREAMING!!! IS THIS REAL??"

"This IS love! Julian is so elegantly romantic!"

"I'm dying! This ship is sailing!!!"

I maintained my composed expression, but internally I was in complete turmoil. Julian harbored feelings for me? How had I missed all the signs?

Chapter 57: Chapter 57 Ivy's Plan

Serena's POV

A camera suddenly shoved into my face made me blink against the harsh lights. Someone thrust a microphone toward me, the show's producers clearly delighted by this unexpected drama.

I could practically see dollar signs in their eyes as they eagerly milked this moment for ratings.

I had no choice but to take the microphone.

My mind raced—I couldn't coldly reject Julian in front of everyone, but I also couldn't encourage false hopes. God, why did he have to do this here?

"I certainly know you're a wonderful man, Julian," I said, injecting a teasing tone into my voice while my heart hammered uncomfortably.

"But using me for publicity like this? I might have to dock your pay!"

The audience laughed, breaking the tension. Over their chuckles, I watched Julian's smile slowly fade around the edges, his eyes dimming slightly.

He understood my meaning perfectly—this was my gentle rejection wrapped in humor to spare us both public embarrassment.

"I hope everyone will continue supporting Dreamland Studio. Thank you!" I added quickly, flashing a peace sign toward the cameras while desperately wishing I could disappear.

Julian smoothly recovered, his professionalism kicking in. "Did you all hear that? This is the capitalist exploitation I deal with daily!"

More laughter followed, but I caught glimpses of the livestream comments flashing across a nearby monitor:

"My ship is sinking before it even sailed!"

"Some love stories never get their chance..."

"I refuse to believe this! They're definitely secretly in love!"

No matter how much these internet strangers tried to convince themselves otherwise, everyone in the room knew the "Julian-Serena" romance had been firmly shut down.

I felt a pang of guilt seeing how passionately some viewers had invested in a relationship that never existed.

After his presentation, Julian didn't return to his seat but left the venue entirely. I watched him go, sighing quietly.

I hadn't expected this complication. Would things ever be the same between us at the studio?

Maya leaned toward me, her perfume carrying notes of jasmine as she whispered, "Why turn him down? Julian is charming, talented, and clearly adores you."

"You're hopeless with men, you know that?" she added teasingly, nudging my shoulder.

I rolled my eyes at my friend's matchmaking attempt, too distracted to formulate a proper response.

"Not now, Maya," I whispered back, my throat tight with emotions I couldn't quite name.

The next presenter was Ivy Hart. The moment her work appeared on screen, I winced internally. The designs were basic at best, derivative at worst.

The comments section flooded with brutal criticism—some downright vicious. Even I felt a flicker of sympathy despite everything she'd done to me.

Ivy wore an unusually loose-fitting dress today that did nothing for her petite frame—strange for someone normally obsessed with appearances.

It hung from her shoulders like a shapeless cloud, making her look oddly vulnerable. It was as if she'd given up trying.

"Hello everyone," she began nervously, her voice higher than usual. "My theme today is 'Secret Love.'"

I straightened in my seat, suddenly alert. Something felt off.

"Since childhood, I've carried someone in my heart. He's handsome, powerful, a prominent figure in our capital. From the first moment I saw him, I fell deeply in love."

My stomach tightened. Everyone knew she was referring to Ryan. Her obsession with him was no secret, but to declare it so publicly during a professional jewelry presentation? This was beyond inappropriate.

The event organizer's face darkened with displeasure. I overheard him snapping at his staff, demanding to know how she'd been approved to present. Apparently, there had been a last-minute swap no one had authorized.

Kane's doing? I wondered, connecting the dots. This smelled like his particular brand of manipulation.

As Ivy continued gushing about her "secret love" while completely ignoring the actual jewelry, the main screen abruptly went black.

"Sorry, Designer Hart, we're experiencing technical difficulties. Please step down from the stage," a staff member announced, attempting damage control.

Ivy's face froze, her expression flashing from shock to fury. She clearly wasn't done with whatever she had planned.

My instincts screamed danger. This wasn't just about an inappropriate presentation—something else was brewing.

Then, as if on cue, Ivy began dramatically gagging on stage. The audience gasped collectively as she doubled over, making retching sounds while somehow managing to speak between them.

"It's just—" *gag* "—my special condition—" *gag* "—nothing to worry about!"

My blood ran cold as her meaning became clear. The livestream comments exploded:

"Is she PREGNANT?!"

"Look at her loose dress! That explains everything!"

"OMG is it Ryan Blackwood's baby?? SCANDAL!"

I felt myself go rigid, my fingers unconsciously digging into my palms so hard they left crescent marks. The possibility hit me like a physical blow.

Ivy pregnant? With Ryan's child?

What about my own pregnancy that I'd kept secret from everyone, including Ryan himself? I'd been planning to tell him on my own terms, when I was ready. Now this?

A thousand thoughts crashed through my mind like a tsunami. Was she lying? She had to be. But what if she wasn't? Ryan and I had been separated for months. Legally, he could do whatever—and whoever—he wanted.

My vision narrowed, the room suddenly feeling too hot, too crowded. I forced myself to take deep, measured breaths. *freewebnovel.com*

"Serena? Are you okay?" Maya whispered, concern etching her features. "You've gone white as a sheet."

"I'm fine," I managed, though the words felt like shards of glass in my throat. "Just another of Ivy's cheap performances."

But as event staff escorted a still-dramatically-gagging Ivy off stage, I couldn't ignore the seed of doubt taking root in my heart. Ryan wouldn't... would he?

And if he had—where did that leave me and my unborn child?

Maya gripped my hand tightly, grounding me. "Don't believe a word of it, Serena. That woman's full of it. She's just doing this to get under your skin—it's pure retaliation."

I nodded stiffly, trying to calm my racing heart, but her words barely sank in. I couldn't stop the images flashing through my mind, or the chaos erupting online.

By the time the jewelry showcase ended, the hashtags were already trending:

#IvyThrowsUpOnStage

#RyanBlackwoodLoveChild

#ScandalousPastRevealed

I scrolled through them one by one, numb. And then I saw it—

A photo. Blurry, but unmistakably real.

Ryan, holding Ivy in his arms, walking toward the entrance of a hotel.

My breath caught. My vision blurred.

And then I remembered it—that night, tied up in that cold, dark room, listening helplessly as muffled moans echoed through the walls.

The sound of them.

My stomach turned.

And then—everything went black.

Chapter 58: Chapter 58 She was pregnant

Ryan's POV

I drummed my fingers impatiently on my desk, barely focused on the financial report Simon had just handed me.

The quarterly numbers looked promising—Blackwood's market share had increased by twelve percent—but my mind was elsewhere.

Three meetings down, two more to go before I could escape this suffocating office.

My phone buzzed. Unknown number. I almost ignored it, but something made me answer.

"Mr. Blackwood speaking."

"Mr. Blackwood." The voice was unfamiliar but urgent. "This is Jackson. You assigned me to protect Ms. Quinn?"

My body tensed instantly. The security detail I'd arranged to protect Serena after she refused to return to the mansion.

"What happened?" I demanded, already moving toward the door.

His voice came through panicked, breathless. "She's been rushed to the hospital!"

My blood turned to ice. "Which hospital?" I demanded, already on my feet.

The moment Jackson told me the location, I slammed my phone down and grabbed my jacket.

"Simon, cancel everything. Reschedule the board meeting."

"But sir, the investors have flown in from—"

"I don't care if they've flown in from Mars," I snapped, loosening my tie. "Family emergency."

The drive to the hospital passed in a blur of traffic lights and horn blasts as I weaved through downtown.

I hadn't told Serena about the security detail—she would have seen it as another attempt to control her. But thank God I'd had the foresight.

I pulled into the hospital parking lot with tires screeching, tossing my keys to the valet without waiting for a ticket. Inside, I flashed my ID at the front desk.

"Serena Quinn. Brought in by ambulance about forty minutes ago."

The receptionist directed me to the third floor. As I approached the nurses' station, I heard Maya's familiar voice speaking with a doctor just around the corner.

"So it was just stress that triggered this?" Maya asked, worry evident in her tone.

"Yes, essentially she experienced what we call threatened miscarriage. The baby is fine, but she had some spotting due to extreme stress. Ms. Quinn needs complete rest for the next few days. No work, no stressful situations," the doctor explained. "She's been pregnant for just over three months now, and while the first trimester is always delicate, emotional distress at this stage can be particularly dangerous."

I froze mid-step, the doctor's words hitting me like a physical blow.

Pregnant?

My brain struggled to process this information. Three months pregnant? That would mean...before our divorce. Before she left.

My child. Serena is carrying my child.

A surge of emotions crashed through me—shock, joy, confusion, and then a blinding, possessive need to protect what was mine. I felt my face split into a grin I couldn't control.

I stepped forward, intercepting the doctor before he could walk away.

"Excuse me," I said, my voice surprisingly steady despite the earthquake happening inside me. "Did you just say she's pregnant?"

The doctor looked up at me, slightly startled. "Yes, about fourteen weeks along. The baby appears healthy, but she experienced some threatened miscarriage symptoms. Are you family?"

"I'm the baby's father," I said automatically, the words feeling both strange and completely right on my tongue. "What exactly happened to her?"

"She experienced what we call emotional shock, which caused some uterine contractions. Nothing too serious this time, but she needs to avoid any further distress. Complete bed rest for at least three days."

My mind raced. Emotional shock? What did this mean?

Maya suddenly appeared beside the doctor, her expression changing from concern to cold fury when she spotted me.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, arms crossed defensively. "How did you even know she was here?"

I ignored her question. "Why didn't she tell me she was pregnant?"

Maya's eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. "Are you kidding me right now? After that little girlfriend of yours, Ivy Hart, announced her own pregnancy to the world? The nerve of you to even show your face here!"

For a second, I froze, not fully grasping her words. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I demanded, my voice sharper than I intended.

Maya let out a cold laugh, yanking her phone from her pocket. With a few swift taps, she shoved the screen toward me.

"See for yourself. It's everywhere—front page, trending feeds. Your precious Ivy Hart made sure the world heard it loud and clear during the jewelry show today."

My gaze dropped to the glowing screen. Headlines screamed back at me, accompanied by photos of Ivy standing under the stage lights, one manicured hand resting meaningfully over her abdomen.

I'm carrying his child, the captions quoted, bold and merciless.

A rush of disbelief and fury crashed through me. My jaw clenched so hard it ached.

"This is insane," I muttered, pulse hammering in my ears. "Ivy Hart is not my girlfriend. That entire stunt was fabricated."

"Sure, and I suppose she just magically came up with all those intimate details about you two?" Maya countered, standing protectively between me and Serena's room. "Save it for someone who hasn't watched Serena cry herself to sleep over you."

Her words stung more than I wanted to admit. Had Serena really cried over me? The thought both pained and secretly pleased me.

"I need to see her," I insisted.

"Absolutely not. You've done enough damage already. Unless you're planning to trample over my dead body, you're not getting anywhere near her room."

I could have easily pushed past her—physically, at least. But I needed Maya on my side if I wanted access to Serena long-term.

"Fine," I conceded, pulling out my phone. "But at least let me prove something to you."

I dialed my head of security and switched it to speaker. "Keith, I need everything you've found on Ivy Hart in the last hour. Specifically her medical records."

Keith's voice came steady on the other end. "Understood, sir. I'll get on it immediately."

I hung up, shoving the phone back into my pocket. Maya's arms were crossed, skepticism written all over her face. "You'd better hope you're not bluffing," she muttered.

The next hour dragged by like a lifetime.

I tried to keep myself composed, but the thought of Ivy's announcement—her smug voice echoing in front of the cameras—made my blood simmer.

What the hell had she done? And more importantly, how many people already believed her lie?

Chapter 59: Chapter 59 I would earn back her trust

Ryan's POV

I ran through every possible scenario in my head, trying to understand Ivy Hart's audacious stunt at the jewelry show. Why there? Why now?

My phone buzzed, cutting through the storm of my thoughts. Keith's name lit up the screen. I answered at once, putting it on speaker.

"Sir," Keith reported briskly, "we've confirmed the pregnancy claim is completely fabricated. We located the doctor who issued the medical report—he's confessed to being paid off. No actual tests were conducted."

I exhaled, tension easing just slightly. But then Keith continued, his tone darkening.

"Also, there's something else you should know. We've traced several calls between Ms. Hart and your uncle over the past three weeks. The frequency and timing suggest they've been coordinating."

"My uncle?" I repeated, a cold realization dawning. "You're certain?"

"Yes, sir. Multiple calls, usually late at night. We're still tracking down their connection, but it appears they've been plotting something together."

I ended the call, meeting Maya's now-uncertain gaze. "Satisfied? This was a setup orchestrated by my uncle. Ivy has never been pregnant, and certainly not with my child."

Maya's stance softened slightly. "Even if that's true, you still kept your entire marriage a secret. You let Serena feel like your dirty little secret for years. And now she's pregnant and stressed and—"

"I need to see her," I interrupted, desperation creeping into my voice. "Please, Maya."

She studied me for a long moment before sighing dramatically. "Fine. But I'm warning you—if you upset her again, I will personally ensure you never see this baby. Ever."

She stepped aside reluctantly, allowing me to approach Serena's room. Through the small window in the door, I could see her lying in bed, face turned toward the window. Even from here, I could see how pale she looked, how fragile. ***freewebnovel.com***

My child was inside her. Our child.

I entered quietly, not wanting to startle her.

But I noticed the faint shift of her breathing and the subtle flutter of her eyelids—signs that she had woken. She didn't turn to face me, and I could tell she didn't want to see me.

"Serena," I said softly.

Her body tensed visibly, but she didn't turn around. The silence between us felt heavy with all our unspoken words.

"Why are you here?" she finally asked, her voice small but sharp.

"I heard you collapsed. I came as soon as I found out." I moved closer, cautiously. "Why didn't you tell me about the baby?"

That got her attention. She turned finally, her eyes rimmed red from crying. The sight of her tears hit me harder than I expected.

"When exactly should I have told you? Before or after your girlfriend announced her pregnancy on national television?"

"Ivy is not my girlfriend," I said firmly, sitting in the chair beside her bed. "It was all a setup, orchestrated by my uncle."

Her eyes flashed with doubt. "Your uncle? What would he gain from that?"

I pulled out my phone, showing her the evidence my team had gathered. "Ivy and my uncle have been in contact for weeks. The pregnancy claim was completely fabricated—we have the doctor's confession. My uncle is trying to destroy me, and he's using you to do it."

Serena looked at the evidence, her expression unreadable. I continued, needing her to understand.

"Since my parents died, he's been waiting for a chance to take control of the company. He sees you as my weakness." I hesitated before adding, "And he's right."

Her eyes snapped to mine, surprise evident in them.

"You are my weakness, Serena. Always have been."

She looked away again, but not before I caught the conflicted emotion in her eyes.

"Even if that's true, it doesn't change anything between us," she said finally. "We're divorced. This baby doesn't automatically fix what went wrong."

"I know that," I admitted, leaning forward. "But it does mean we'll be connected for life. And it means I have the right to protect both of you from my uncle's schemes."

"I don't need your protection," she said, but the words lacked conviction.

"My uncle isn't going to stop," I warned. "This was just his opening move. If he's willing to use Ivy this way, he'll do worse. Much worse."

Fear flashed briefly across her face before she masked it. She unconsciously placed a hand over her stomach—a protective gesture that made something primal stir within me.

"What do you propose?" she asked cautiously.

"Let me help you. Let me be there for our child." I reached for her hand but stopped myself. "We don't have to reconcile romantically if that's not what you want. But we need to present a united front against my uncle."

She studied me for a long moment, suspicion and calculation in her eyes. Finally, she sighed.

"This doesn't mean I forgive you," she said. "And it doesn't mean I'm moving back in with you."

"I understand," I assured her, relief flooding through me. It was a start.

"This is about protecting our baby," she continued firmly. "Nothing more."

I nodded, though inside I knew differently. This was my chance—perhaps my only chance—to prove myself to her again.

To show her that I could be the man she deserved, the father our child needed.

"Nothing more," I agreed outwardly.

But as I watched her drift back to sleep, exhaustion finally claiming her, I made a silent vow. I would earn back her trust.

I would keep her and our child safe.

And somewhere along the way, I would make her fall in love with me again.

Chapter 60: Chapter 60 Joint layout

Ivy's POV

I couldn't believe how well my plan was working.

The rumors were everywhere online now—everyone was talking about me being pregnant with Ryan's child. I imagined Kane would be thrilled.

Just then, my phone lit up with a call from Kane.

"Well, well," his voice dripped with smugness. "I'm impressed. Didn't think you had it in you, pulling off something this clever."

I beamed at his praise, relief washing over me. Finally, I was safe from his threats.

"Is there anything else you'd like me to do?" I asked sweetly, twirling my hair around my finger. No harm in showing my eagerness to please him.

"Go to the Blackwood mansion," Kane instructed. "Tell Ryan's grandmother about your pregnancy. Evelyn has been desperate for a great-grandchild for years."

My stomach knotted at the thought. Evelyn Blackwood had always seen right through me, making no secret of her distaste.

"She won't accept me," I protested, my voice smaller than I intended. "She... she doesn't like me."

"The baby changes everything," Kane assured me confidently. "Trust me, I know my mother. Just go."

I bit my lip, weighing my options. If this worked—if I could actually marry into the Blackwood family—I'd have everything I'd ever dreamed of. Wealth, status, security... it was all within reach.

"Fine," I agreed. "I'll go right away."

I hung up and rummaged through my closet, finally finding what I needed—a tight dress with strategic ruching that created the perfect illusion of a small baby bump. I smoothed my hands over the fabric, admiring my reflection. Convincing enough.

An hour later, I stood at the grand entrance of the Blackwood mansion, my heart hammering against my ribs. The butler's face soured when he saw me, but I pushed past his disapproval.

"I need to see Mrs. Blackwood immediately," I insisted. "It's urgent family business."

I was left waiting in the formal sitting room for nearly thirty minutes. Just when I thought she wouldn't see me, Evelyn Blackwood entered, her silver hair perfectly coiffed, her posture regal despite her advanced age.

"Mrs. Blackwood!" I cried, throwing myself dramatically at her feet. "Please help me! I'm carrying Ryan's baby, and I don't know what to do!"

I clutched at the hem of her expensive slacks, forcing tears to stream down my face. Evelyn stared down at me, one eyebrow arched skeptically.

"Is that so?" she asked, her voice cool and measured.

"Yes! I have proof!" I fumbled in my purse, producing the medical reports Kane had arranged. "These are from the hospital. Please, you've always wanted a great-grandchild, haven't you?"

I watched her face carefully as she examined the documents. Kane had been thorough—even the family doctor had been bribed to confirm my story if necessary.

Slowly, the ice in Evelyn's expression melted. Her lips curved into a smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she looked from the papers to my strategically protruding belly.

"Well, well," she murmured, suddenly all warmth and graciousness. "Who would have thought you'd be the one to give this family its next generation? Get up, dear. No Blackwood child should have its mother on her knees."

The transformation was dizzying. One minute I'd been groveling; the next, I was being guided to the most comfortable chair, with Evelyn herself adjusting cushions behind my back.

"Prepare the east guest room for Ms. Hart," she commanded the hovering housekeeper. "And tell the kitchen to prepare some bone broth with ginseng. Order some bird's nest soup as well. The baby needs proper nourishment!"

I could barely contain my elation. Just like that, I'd gone from outcast to cherished vessel. The power was intoxicating.

"It's such a blessing to carry Ryan's child," I said, placing my hands protectively over my fake bump. "I just wish he would acknowledge us."

"Don't you worry about Ryan," Evelyn patted my hand. "He'll come around. For now, you'll stay here where I can keep an eye on you. Whatever you need, just ask."

I smiled demurely. "Thank you, Mrs. Blackwood. You're so kind."

"Call me Grandmother," she insisted, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

After a lavish meal where the staff treated me like royalty, I was shown to a luxurious bedroom suite. As I sank into the impossibly soft mattress, I couldn't help but giggle at how easily I'd manipulated my way into the Blackwood fortune.

This was just the beginning. Soon, Ryan would have no choice but to marry me. His precious Serena would be forgotten, and I'd have everything Sophie had ever wanted but failed to get.

I drifted off to sleep with a smile on my face, dreaming of diamond rings and society galas, never once considering that my house of cards might come tumbling down around me.

Serena's POV

I've been stuck in this hospital bed for three days now, and I'm going absolutely crazy.

The doctor's orders for complete bed rest feel like torture for someone used to running a design studio.

My only entertainment has been watching the shadows creep across the wall and nurses bustling in and out.

Well, that's not entirely true. There's also been Ryan.

Despite my protests, he's barely left my side these past seventy-two hours.

He converted the small couch in my hospital room into a makeshift bed, refusing to go home even when I insisted. "Your security team can watch me," I'd argued on the first night.

"I'm not leaving you," he'd replied simply, his voice leaving no room for debate.

It should annoy me, this possessiveness.

But watching him now, asleep in that uncomfortable chair with his suit jacket draped over his chest and his hair falling across his forehead, I feel something dangerously close to tenderness.

He stirs suddenly, as if sensing my gaze. His eyes find mine immediately, alert despite the early hour.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, voice still rough with sleep.

"Like I'm going to die of boredom before this baby ever has a chance."

A smile touches his lips. "The doctor said you can leave today if your vitals stay stable."

He stands, stretching his tall frame, and my eyes involuntarily trace the way his shirt pulls across his shoulders.

When he catches me looking, I quickly avert my gaze, but not before noticing the knowing glint in his eyes.

"Hungry?" he asks, reaching for his phone. "I can have something brought in."

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"Hospital food is punishment enough without adding breakfast to the mix."

He chuckles, and the sound does strange things to my insides. "I meant real food. From that French bakery you like on Fifth."

I blink in surprise. "You remember that place?"

He smiles, a quiet, almost rueful expression in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't know any of this about you before, Serena. But now... I know what you like to eat, how you take your coffee, the little habits that make you... you."

The air between us suddenly feels charged. I search for a sarcastic reply but find none.

"You don't have to do all this," I say instead, gesturing vaguely at him, at the room filled with flowers he's had delivered daily.

"I want to." He moves closer, perching on the edge of my bed. The mattress dips under his weight, sliding me fractionally toward him. "You're carrying my child."

"Our child," I correct automatically.

His eyes darken at my words. "Our child," he repeats, and there's something possessive in the way he says it that sends a shiver up my spine.

His hand reaches out, hovering questioningly above my stomach. I hesitate, then nod. His palm settles gently over where our baby grows, warm even through the hospital blanket.

"Have you felt movement yet?" he asks, his voice hushed with wonder.

"No, it's too early. Another month, maybe."

His thumb strokes absently over the blanket, and I try desperately to ignore how intimate this feels, how natural. For a moment, I let myself imagine what it would be like if things were different between us—if we were just a normal couple excited about our first baby.

But we're not normal. We're divorced. He lied to me for years. He kept me hidden away like a shameful secret.

And yet... the way he's looking at me now...

"Ryan," I say, my voice wavering slightly. "What are we doing here?"

He knows I don't mean in the hospital.

"To win you back," he answers honestly, his eyes fixed on mine. "To make you fall in love with me again."

I open my mouth to argue, but his phone buzzes, cutting the moment short. He frowns as he checks it.

"What is it?" I ask.