

# CEO's Regret After I Divorced

## - Chapter 61 The Child Stays, the Mother Leaves

*Chapter 61: Chapter 61 The Child Stays, the Mother Leaves*

Serena's POV

"My grandmother. She's been calling non-stop, demanding I come to the mansion." He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "She's probably seen those fake pregnancy rumors with Ivy."

I feel a spike of jealousy at the mention of Ivy's name, which irritates me. I shouldn't care. I don't care.

"You should go," I say, pulling the blanket higher. "Tell her the truth."

Ryan studies me for a long moment. "Come with me," he says suddenly.

"What?"

"Come with me to the mansion. Let's tell her about our baby together."

I stare at him in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

He continued. "My grandmother doesn't know about our marriage, our divorce, or this baby. But if my uncle is involved in this scheme, she needs to be told everything before he twists the narrative to her."

I swallowed hard. Evelyn Blackwood had always been this mythical figure in my mind—the formidable matriarch Ryan spoke of with equal parts respect and wariness.

The thought of facing her, pregnant with her great-grandchild after a secret marriage and divorce, was terrifying.

"She'll hate me," I whispered.

Ryan surprised me by actually laughing. "Quite the opposite. If anything, she'll be furious with me for keeping you a secret all this time."

I studied his face, searching for any sign of deception. Finding none, I slowly nodded.

"Fine," I concede reluctantly. "But only to set the record straight. This doesn't mean I'm moving back in or that anything's changed between us."

The smile that spreads across his face is triumphant enough to make me immediately regret my decision.

"Of course not," he agrees, but his eyes tell a different story. "I'll make the arrangements for your discharge."

As he strides from the room, phone already at his ear, I can't help but watch him go. The confident set of his shoulders, the purposeful stride—he moves like a man who always gets what he wants.

And God help me, part of me still wants to be what he wants.

I place my hand over my stomach, whispering to our child. "Your father is the most infuriating man I've ever met." I pause, remembering the tenderness in Ryan's eyes when he touched my belly. "But he already loves you. That's something, isn't it?"

It has to be enough for now. Because despite the way my heart races when he's near, despite the electricity that crackles between us when our eyes meet, I can't let myself fall back into his arms. Not until I'm certain this time will be different.

Not until I'm certain he truly sees me.

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The discharge process took longer than expected. By the time we left the hospital, afternoon shadows were already stretching across the city.

I sat quietly in Ryan's car, my hand unconsciously resting on my stomach as I stared out the window.

"Nervous?" Ryan asked, his eyes flickering between me and the road.

"No." I replied.

The moment Evelyn Blackwood sees us entering the mansion, she rushes forward and grabs my arm with surprising strength for a woman her age. I'm still unsteady on my feet after three days in the hospital, but she pulls me along like an excited child with a new toy.

"My darling daughter-in-law! Come quickly, I've prepared something special for you," she gushes, leading me toward the grand dining room.

I freeze at her words. Daughter-in-law? I shoot a panicked glance at Ryan, who looks equally confused. We haven't even told her about our past marriage, let alone our divorce or pregnancy.

The dining table is set with an elaborate spread that includes bird's nest soup and ginseng—traditional remedies for... pregnant women. My stomach drops as I spot the half-eaten bowl that definitely wasn't meant for me.

"Grandmother," I say carefully, "have you heard about Ivy claiming to be pregnant?"

Evelyn's smile doesn't falter as she pats my hand. "Not just heard, dear. She's already visited me personally about it."

"And you..." I trail off, uncertain how to continue.

"Don't worry yourself, Serena. I actually have something important to discuss with both of you. Come, sit down."

I allowed myself to be pulled onto an antique sofa, Ryan taking a seat beside me. What Evelyn said next made my blood run cold.

"Though Ivy may be carrying Ryan's child, I'll never accept her as part of this family. A woman like that doesn't deserve the Blackwood name."

I felt Ryan stiffen beside me.

"So I've thought of a compromise," Evelyn continued, her voice pleasant as if discussing the weather. "We'll take the child when it's born and raise it as yours. You'll be listed as the mother on all documents. It will be as if the baby is your own biological child. What do you think?"

I stared at her in horror, suddenly seeing the calculating woman beneath the grandmotherly facade.

"Haven't you been trying for a child without success?" she pressed on. "Serena, marriage is about compromise. There's no need to separate over something like this. Now that there's a child, you can simply raise it as your own. No need to stay angry with Ryan."

Ryan's voice cut through the room. "Grandmother, what are you saying?"

"Be quiet!" Evelyn snapped. "You've made your mistakes. I'm trying to help you reconcile with Serena!"

She turned back to me, her expression softening. "Serena, I've lived a long life. What man doesn't make mistakes? Don't be difficult. You're the only granddaughter-in-law I recognize in this family. It's only ever been you."

Looking at her kindly face, I felt nothing but cold dread in my heart.

"Grandmother, actually Serena is—" Ryan began.

"—fine with the arrangement," I interrupted before he could reveal my pregnancy. I forced a smile, agreeing to her outrageous proposal.

Evelyn beamed. "Serena, you truly are the perfect daughter-in-law! I knew you were a magnanimous woman who wouldn't hold Ryan's mistakes against him."

I withdrew my hand from hers. "Mrs. Blackwood, I need to leave now. I have matters to attend to."

Despite my obvious rejection, Evelyn didn't seem offended. In her mind, my agreement to her scheme was already more than she expected. A little attitude was to be anticipated.

Ryan glanced at his grandmother before following me out.

"Why did you agree to that?" he demanded once we were in the hallway.

I turned on him, my face cold. "Would you rather I let you announce my pregnancy? Your grandmother has been hoping for a great-grandchild, but I never imagined she would be so... ruthless."

I looked at him, disappointment evident in my eyes. "If my child is born into a family like this, I can't imagine what kind of person they'll become."

Ryan seemed stunned into silence before recovering. "We'll live separately from her. I won't let her interfere. I promise our child will grow up in a happy environment."

I didn't want to hear his empty promises. I walked straight to the car.

"Take me home," I demanded.

Ryan followed, sliding into the driver's seat. "I'm coming with you."

I don't have the energy to fight him on this.

*Chapter 62: Chapter 62 Putting on a show for my uncle*

Author's POV

The drive back from the Blackwood mansion was shrouded in tense silence. Ryan tried several times to speak, but Serena's icy demeanor shut down every attempt.

Eventually, he gave up, focusing instead on the more pressing matter of dealing with Kane.

Based on the suspicious relationship between Ivy and Kane, Ryan had little doubt who was behind this pregnancy scheme.

He decided to play along with their game. After all, Ivy wasn't actually pregnant—when the truth eventually came to light, Grandmother Evelyn would handle her punishment personally.

After wrapping up his business affairs in Chicago, Kane hurried back to New York City. Ivy had already set the stage for their performance, and he was eager to play his part.

Thanks to his successful handling of the Chicago branch, Kane smoothly integrated into the headquarters of Blackwood Enterprises.

Although Ryan kept the company's confidential information well-guarded, Kane managed to piece together Ryan's next strategic moves through various hints and clues.

Using his newly acquired position, Kane began contacting Blackwood's competitor companies, offering his assistance.

Their bidding prices consistently came in ten percent lower than Blackwood's offers.

What Kane didn't realize in his smugness was that everything was proceeding exactly as Ryan had planned.

The development project that appeared so profitable on paper was actually riddled with complications.

The governmental approvals alone would take at least six months to secure, by which time the property would lose significant value.

For now, though, the land still appeared to be an irresistible opportunity. Kane even invested his own savings in the project, convinced that once the bidding results were announced, his fortunes would transform overnight.

Ryan maintained complete control of the situation, patiently and methodically tightening his net around Kane. This time, he was determined to make his uncle pay for his treachery.

A tense atmosphere permeated New York as everyone awaited the bidding results.

Meanwhile, Kane and representatives from the competing company had already reserved the top-floor private room at Heaven's Gate, the city's most exclusive club, to celebrate their anticipated victory.

"Mr. Blackwood, you have excellent foresight. This deal will certainly bring us enormous profits," said the competitor's CEO.

"You're too kind, Mr. Wilson. Here's to our successful partnership!" Kane replied, raising his glass. The room buzzed with excitement and laughter. Sitting in his wheelchair, Kane could barely contain his elation.

On such a momentous night, it would be a shame not to pay a visit to his dear nephew, he thought.

Excusing himself early from the celebration, Kane had his driver take him to Blackwood Enterprises. *freewebnovel.com*

Ryan was known as the company workaholic, and sure enough, the lights in his office were still on. Kane imagined him frantically struggling with the project they were about to lose.

With a satisfied smirk, Kane wheeled himself into the office.

"Still working so late, nephew?"

Ryan's POV

I heard the distinctive squeak of Kane's wheelchair before I even saw him.

I kept my eyes on the financial report in front of me, deliberately making him wait for my acknowledgment.

Only after I finished reviewing the page did I finally glance up.

"Uncle," I said flatly, immediately returning to my work.

The less attention I gave him, the more it would irritate him.

The wheels squeaked closer.

"After managing Blackwood for so long," Kane continued smugly, "have you ever considered that one day all your efforts might end up benefiting someone else?"

I fought back a smile. He was so predictable—couldn't even wait until the official announcement to gloat.

I set down my pen and leaned back in my chair, studying him.

The years hadn't been kind to Kane. Bitterness had carved permanent lines into his face, and hatred had dulled what might once have been intelligent eyes.

"I'm not sure about benefiting others," I replied, deliberately letting my gaze drop to his useless legs. "But I do know a cripple has no business running Blackwood Enterprises."

The change in his expression was instant and gratifying—rage flashed across his features, twisting them into something ugly.

His disability had always been his weak point, and I had no qualms about exploiting it.

"After all," I continued, my voice deceptively casual, "your legs missed the optimal treatment window. They're beyond repair now."

I tilted my head, as if considering a genuine solution. "Perhaps amputation would be best? I could arrange for some perfect prosthetics—no one would even notice the difference."

The temperature in the office seemed to drop below freezing. I could practically hear Kane's teeth grinding together. Good. Let him feel a fraction of the pain he'd caused others.

"Uncle," I smiled, "you shouldn't be so confident. The results aren't announced yet—how can you be sure you'll win?"

Kane's knuckles whitened as he gripped the arms of his wheelchair. "I admire your composure," he spat out. "Even now, you maintain this stubborn front."

I said nothing, watching him squirm under my steady gaze.

"If you don't believe me," he continued, gaining confidence from my silence, "just wait for tomorrow's bidding results. When Blackwood falls short, you'll be crying."

I deliberately furrowed my brow just slightly—enough to give him the reaction he was looking for.

The small gesture had the intended effect; I could see the excitement building in his eyes, the certainty that he'd caught me off guard.

"We'll see," was all I said.

Kane's smile was triumphant as he wheeled himself toward the door. He thought he'd won this round.

Only after the door closed behind him did I allow myself a genuine smile. The trap was set, and my uncle had walked right into it.

The higher you push someone to the clouds, the harder they fall.

I had patience. I had time.

*Chapter 63: Chapter 63 You need to know about your position here*

Author's POV

The sealed bidding results were announced Tuesday afternoon in the vast marble atrium of City Hall.

Representatives from all major development companies sat in tense silence as Commissioner Andrews approached the podium.

"After careful consideration of all submitted proposals," the Commissioner announced with practiced formality, "the West City redevelopment contract is hereby awarded to Wilson Corporation, with their bid of \$327 million."

A collective gasp rippled through the Blackwood contingent.

Several members of Ryan's executive team exchanged worried glances. The project they had spent months preparing for—gone.

Ryan Blackwood maintained his perfect poker face, betraying nothing as Wilson's team erupted in celebration across the hall.

Mr. Wilson himself made a show of victory, pumping hands with anyone within reach. When his gaze briefly met Ryan's across the room, his smug satisfaction was unmistakable.

Back at Blackwood Enterprises, the news spread like wildfire. Whispers filled the halls. Departments fell into uneasy silence. No one knew what would happen next—but everyone felt the shift.

The entire company was on edge.

And yet, in the center office on the top floor, Kane Blackwood could barely contain his glee. The emergency board meeting called that afternoon became his stage for attack.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the board," Kane declared as he wheeled himself to a prominent position at the polished mahogany table, "I believe today's embarrassing defeat demands immediate discussion."

The air in the boardroom grew thick with tension as several board members shifted uncomfortably in their leather chairs.



"With all due respect to my nephew," Kane continued, his voice carrying false concern that fooled no one, "this strategic failure highlights fundamental weaknesses in his leadership.

We've invested millions in preparation for a project we've now lost. I formally move that Ryan be immediately removed from his position as CEO."

His accusations hung in the air for several uncomfortable seconds.

The board members exchanged worried glances—they'd all heard rumors about the strained relationship between uncle and nephew, but witnessing Kane pounce on a single project failure seemed grossly disproportionate.

Richard Hartwell, one of the senior board members, finally broke the silence, nervously adjusting his silk tie. "For God's sake, everyone makes mistakes. Blackwood Enterprises has reached its current standing because of Ryan's exceptional leadership. We can't negate years of achievements just because one project fell through."

"I absolutely agree," Patricia Morgan added, her Boston accent becoming more pronounced as she grew animated.

"Blackwood isn't some mom-and-pop shop. Replacing the CEO of a corporation this size isn't something you decide on a whim after one setback."

Thomas Reynolds, with his gray temples and decades of experience, didn't bother softening his words.

"Mr. Kane, you've only just returned to headquarters. You're not familiar with many operational aspects of this company. Perhaps you should refrain from making such bold statements in board meetings to avoid embarrassing yourself."

Ryan, who had remained silent throughout the exchange, finally spoke. His voice was calm, almost amused.

"Uncle," he said, the single word carrying the weight of disdain, "Catastrophic, you say? Interesting—because the board seems to disagree. They've reaffirmed their loyalty to me, not you."

A slow, cutting smile tugged at his mouth. "Perhaps you've overestimated your... influence, Kane. That should tell you all you need to know about your position here."

Color rose angrily in Kane's face, his knuckles whitening against the arms of his wheelchair.

Before he could spit out a retort, Ryan rose smoothly to his feet, fastening the button of his suit jacket with effortless composure.

"If there's nothing else of actual substance to discuss, I have a company to run."

"Don't get cocky, boy!" Kane snarled, jerking his wheelchair toward the door.

"This isn't over," he hissed as he rolled past.

"Oh, I assure you it is," Ryan murmured, his words low but sharp enough to cut, just loud enough for Kane alone to hear.

This meeting had revealed something crucial to Kane—he could clearly see who stood firmly in Ryan's corner.

Those who avoided taking sides in the discussion were potentially the ones he could sway to his advantage.

Before Kane's plan could even begin to unfold, Mr. Wilson from the West City project stormed into his office, face flushed with rage.

"You told me Ryan had been preparing for this bid all along!" Wilson shouted, his Boston accent thickening with anger. "So why the hell does this land require multiple additional approvals that weren't disclosed?"

He hurled a stack of documents across the desk. Kane's face hardened as he glared at Wilson.

"What nonsense are you talking about?" Kane demanded.

"See for yourself!" Wilson jabbed his finger at the scattered papers. "I invested millions in this deal! If we take a loss, my entire company's survival is at stake!"

Kane's assistant quickly gathered the documents and handed them to him. As Kane flipped through the pages, his expression visibly darkened.

The environmental impact assessment alone would cost nearly \$2 million, and the historical preservation requirements would delay construction by at least eight months.

How could this be happening?

Wilson, noticing the change in Kane's demeanor, became even more agitated. "Kane, are you and your nephew playing me? Was this some kind of setup between you two?"

"I'll kill you for suggesting that!" Kane snarled, slamming his fist on the desk.

As Wilson lunged across the desk, Kane's security team rushed forward.

The office instantly erupted into chaos, both sides exchanging blows in the confined space. Glass shattered, furniture toppled.

Kane was pushed back into his inner office while his security handled Wilson.

Through the frosted glass, he could see shadows grappling as he continued examining the documents more carefully.

Wilson's rage was understandable.

What had seemed like a guaranteed profit had turned into a nightmare. The metaphorical cake they thought they were getting was filled with sand.

Kane's eyes darted across the pages, his mind racing. The truth dawned on him quickly—this had been Ryan's trap all along.

He'd invested heavily himself, and now that money would vanish like smoke.

Fifteen minutes later, his head of security entered the office, sporting a bloody lip and disheveled suit.

"Mr. Blackwood, Mr. Wilson and his people have left the premises," he reported, straightening his tie.

Kane tossed the documents aside and immediately headed for the family mansion.

At this point, Grandmother Evelyn's side was his only safe haven. Even if Ryan made a move, he'd have to consider his grandmother's feelings.

What Kane hadn't anticipated was the speed of Ryan's counterattack. Ryan had already reported him for embezzlement and leaking company secrets.

Kane had barely settled into the mansion when his phone buzzed with an alert from his lawyer—he was now a wanted man, and law enforcement officers were already on their way to the estate.

Real fear finally surfaced in Kane's eyes as he grabbed his mother's arm.

"Mother, help me!" His voice cracked with desperation.

Grandmother Evelyn hadn't been aware of what was happening until Kane explained about the warrant. Her face paled with shock.

"Kane, how could you do such things?" she demanded, wrinkles deepening with worry.  
"What were you thinking?"

"Mom, there's no time for lectures," he hissed, glancing anxiously toward the window. "Help me get away before it's too late."

Evelyn's expression hardened. After a moment of contemplation, she led her son to the basement. She had secretly constructed this hidden space years ago, with mechanisms so intricate that no one could find it without her guidance.

"Kane, hide here for now," she instructed, her voice low as she activated the concealed panel. "Once they've gone, I'll find a way to get you out of the city."

Kane nodded, sweat beading on his forehead.

After closing the hidden door, Evelyn sighed heavily. She had only two sons in her lifetime. Kane, her younger son, had been born late in her life, and she'd always indulged him excessively.

She never imagined he would engage in actions that harmed others without even benefiting himself. Was power worth such desperate measures?

Her mind in turmoil, Evelyn returned to the living room and composed herself. Barely five minutes later, Ryan arrived with law enforcement officers.

The estate was completely surrounded—front gates, back doors, even the garden exits. Not even a fly could escape.

Ryan noticed the tea cups on the table and frowned.

"Grandmother, you already know what's happening?" he asked carefully.

Evelyn shook her head, sighing. "Ryan, what do you think you're doing? Surrounding your own family home with officers?"

"Grandmother, you've seen Kane, haven't you? Where is he?"

"Mind your manners!" she snapped. "He is your uncle. Even if he's only a few years older than you, he's still your flesh and blood!"

Ryan's chest rose and fell with controlled breathing. He couldn't speak harshly to his grandmother, no matter the circumstances.

"He's committed crimes, Grandmother," Ryan said, softening his tone. "If you help him escape, you could face accessory charges yourself."

Evelyn slammed her hand on the table. "How dare you! Is this how you speak to your grandmother?"

Ryan clenched his jaw and, seeing he wouldn't get answers this way, instructed the officers to begin their search.

Despite searching several times, they couldn't locate Kane anywhere in the mansion.

What was happening? Had he somehow grown wings and flown away?

The commotion woke someone upstairs. Serena came down, rubbing sleep from her eyes, her silk robe wrapped tightly around her.

Ryan strode forward and pulled her aside. *freewebnovel.com*

"Where's Kane?" he demanded, his patience wearing thin.

*Chapter 64: Chapter 64 Winning back the woman I loved.*

Ryan's POV

I snapped my head toward Ivy, my patience wearing impossibly thin. "Where is Kane?" I demanded, gripping her arm tighter.

"What do you mean, Kane? I've... I've been sleeping upstairs the whole time..." Ivy stammered, her eyes wide with fear.

I tightened my grip on her arm. She had been staying at the mansion for months now, under Grandmother's special care due to her supposed "pregnancy."

The irony wasn't lost on me—she'd actually gained weight from all the pampering.

"Where the hell is Kane?" I demanded, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "If you tell me now, I'll forget about your involvement. Truth is, Kane's now a wanted man. He's finished."

Ivy's eyes widened like she'd been struck by lightning. Then, surprisingly, her expression shifted to excitement.

"Really? That's wonderful! I won't have to live under his thumb anymore!"

She seemed to realize her mistake immediately after the words left her mouth, but I'd already gotten what I needed. I released her arm, stepping back.

Maybe this woman had no reason to hide Kane—despite being former lovers, he'd become her constant threat.

Grandmother's sharp eyes flickered between us, decades of cunning visible in her gaze.

"What did you say? You've been sleeping with Kane too?"

I almost laughed. Of course she didn't know. My uncle's womanizing habits were legendary, but he never paraded his conquests before his mother.

"Grandmother," I said, deliberately softening my tone while keeping my eyes hard, "you don't know the half of it. Ivy isn't pregnant at all. The family doctor was bought by your precious son. This entire charade was Kane's scheme."

I stepped closer to my grandmother, watching her face carefully.

"If you don't believe me, you can ask her yourself. Kane has endangered the entire Blackwood Enterprise and tried to use his lover to drive a wedge between me and Serena."

The mention of Serena's name sent a familiar ache through my chest, but I pushed it aside. "Is this really the son you want to help escape justice?"

Grandmother's body trembled slightly, disbelief washing over her face. The realization that her favorite son had manipulated even her must have been devastating.

I waited for several long moments, but she remained silent, her eyes distant. There was nothing more to be gained here.

I nodded to the officers and left, my footsteps echoing through the marble hallway as I exited my childhood home.

Later that night, Simon called with updates. Ivy had been caught trying to flee with valuables and jewelry.

Grandmother had her severely beaten before throwing her out onto the street. Meanwhile, Kane had disappeared—obviously with Grandmother's help.

"Should we look for him, sir?" Simon asked.

"No," I replied, staring out at the city lights from my penthouse window. "He won't get far. I've already alerted border security and frozen all his known accounts."

I disconnected the call, pouring myself two fingers of whiskey.

The amber liquid caught the light as I swirled it in the crystal tumbler. I should have been satisfied, but something felt hollow about this victory.

By morning, my contacts confirmed Kane had escaped the city. Grandmother had obviously orchestrated it, using connections I hadn't anticipated. The old woman had more resources than I'd given her credit for.

As for Ivy, my men reported she'd somehow made it back to her old apartment—the one I had arranged for her.

My jaw clenched involuntarily.

God, what a fool I'd been. Every time I thought about how easily I'd believed Ivy's act, rage burned through me.

If not for her manipulations, Serena and I might still be together, building the life we were meant to have.

The thought of what I'd done—how I'd treated Serena based on Ivy's lies—made my stomach turn.

I'd driven away the only woman who truly mattered to me, all because I was too blind, too stubborn to see through a simple deception.

"Simon," I barked into the phone. "Get her out of that apartment. I don't care how you do it. Use whatever methods necessary."

"Sir?" Simon sounded hesitant. "What about her belongings?"

"I don't give a damn about her things," I snapped, pacing across my office. "She can take whatever she can carry in one suitcase. The rest stays. I want her gone by this afternoon." *freeweb&novel.com*

"Understood, sir."

I hung up and walked to the window, pressing my forehead against the cool glass. With Kane on the run and Ivy about to be homeless, I'd eliminated the immediate threats. The board was firmly behind me. Blackwood Enterprises was secure.

But none of it mattered without Serena.

I pulled out my phone, scrolling to her name for what felt like the thousandth time. My finger hovered over the call button before I locked the screen and slipped it back into my pocket. No, a phone call wouldn't be enough. After everything that had happened, I needed to see her face to face.

It was time to start fighting for my wife. For real this time.

I grabbed my keys and headed for the elevator. The time for plots and business maneuvers was over. Now came the hardest battle of all—winning back the woman I loved.

*Chapter 65: Chapter 65 I have no place to stay*

Ivy's POV

I'd been so pleased to see Kane get what he deserved, but as Ryan stormed out, the reality hit me hard – I had no place in this house anymore.

I frantically rushed upstairs to my room, changing into my newest designer dress and fastening every piece of expensive jewelry I owned.

If the old lady was going to throw me out, I'd at least take something valuable with me.

I'd barely clasped the last diamond bracelet when Martha—that old witch who'd been the grandmother's most loyal servant for decades—burst through my door.

Her wrinkled face twisted into something feral, hissing like an angry snake.

"You filthy little whore, seducing Young Master Kane! You deserve worse than death!" she shrieked, grabbing a fistful of my hair so violently my scalp burned.

Before I could even scream, three or four sturdy maids charged in, pouncing on me like hungry beasts, tearing at my clothes.

I struggled desperately, my voice caught in my throat. My dress ripped apart under their hands while they yanked off every piece of jewelry I'd just put on.

The cold air stung my exposed skin as shame washed over me like a tidal wave.

I curled into myself, trying to cover my body with my hands when I heard Grandmother Evelyn's cruel voice from the doorway.

"Beat her! Then throw her out into the street when you're done!"

When the first whip fell across my back, pain shot through me like lightning. I screamed out, only to receive an even harder lash in response.

"Please stop... please..." I sobbed, my voice breaking into pieces.

Nobody listened. The whip kept falling, and my consciousness started to fade. In my last clear thought, I realized my only chance was to pretend to faint.

I went limp, allowing myself to collapse to the floor. I could still hear their mocking laughter, but at least the whipping stopped.

"The slutty bitch passed out," someone sneered.



Rough hands forced me into a dress so thin it was practically transparent, then dragged me across the floor. I was thrown out the front gate like garbage.

The biting wind cut through me – October nights already carried winter's chill. I lay motionless on the freezing ground until I was sure I couldn't hear any sounds from the mansion before daring to open my eyes.

Every inch of my body felt like it had been run over by a truck. The whip marks burned against my skin.

Gritting my teeth, I dragged myself step by painful step toward my old apartment. Not a single passerby offered to help a woman with torn clothes and covered in wounds.

They just avoided my eyes and walked faster.

The most terrifying thing in this world isn't the attack of evil people—it's the indifference of good ones.

By the time I reached my apartment, it was deep into the night.

My fingers trembled as I unlocked the door and crawled into the bathroom. When warm water touched my wounds, I finally allowed myself to cry out loud.

I'd permit myself this one time to cry. Just this once.

The next morning, just after I'd changed into clean clothes, someone pounded on my door.

My landlord's distorted face appeared when I opened it. "Get out now! I'm ending your lease!"

"Please, this place was arranged by Mr. Blackwood himself. You can't just kick me out," I tried reasoning, though I already knew—Ryan had decided to completely destroy me.

He laughed coldly. "It's exactly you I'm kicking out. I don't care if you pissed off your sugar daddy or whatever happened. Move out immediately. You have until 1 PM. If you're still here, I'll throw all your stuff onto the street!"

I closed the door and leaned against it, feeling dizzy. Last night's wounds still throbbed, and now I was about to lose my home too.

Everything was happening so fast—three months ago I thought I'd become part of the Blackwood family, and now I was about to be homeless.

I forced myself to pull it together and started packing my valuables.

I had some savings in my bank account, but not nearly enough to rent a decent apartment in this city. All those beautiful clothes I'd carefully chosen would have to stay behind.

Tears welled up again as I folded clothes while crying silently. freewe**bn**ov@1.com

This was the second time I'd cried.

At noon, a commotion erupted outside my door. The landlord had arrived early with several burly men.

"You said I had until 1 PM! It's only noon!" I pointed at the clock, trying to maintain my last shred of dignity.

The landlord shoved me aside so hard I stumbled. "Shut up, bitch! Don't talk back to me! I brought people to help you move – shouldn't you be grateful?"

The men barged in, roughly handling my belongings. My neatly folded clothes became crumpled heaps in their hands.

One of them stared at me, his eyes lighting up when he noticed the marks peeking from beneath my collar.

"Well, well... you look so innocent, but you're into some kinky stuff, huh?" He licked his lips. "Why don't you play with big brother here? If I enjoy it, maybe I'll let you stay at my place!"

His filthy hand slapped my ass. Revulsion surged through me as I screamed, grabbed my suitcase, and bolted out the door. I'd rather be homeless than spend another second in that place.

I walked several blocks, making sure no one followed before stopping to catch my breath. Sitting on a park bench, I felt a despair I'd never known before.

Three months. In just three months, my life had plummeted from heaven to hell.

And it was all because of that Serena! If she hadn't suddenly filed for divorce, Ryan would never have noticed me. Her retreat was just an advance in disguise—brilliant strategy!

Now she and Ryan were back to being the perfect couple, while I was left with nothing.

My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten in ages. I sighed, taking out my phone with my finger hovering over a contact I hadn't reached out to in years—S, my "dead" sister Sophie.

How long had it been since we'd spoken?

Since she faked her death and left this city, our contact had become increasingly rare. She'd chosen a brand new life while I was still struggling here.

Now, I had no other choice.

Taking a deep breath, I pressed the call button. The phone rang three times before someone answered.

"Hello?" The voice was familiar yet strange.

"Sis... it's me." My voice trembled. "I need help."

*Chapter 66: Chapter 66 His Journey to Win Her Heart<sup>1</sup>*

Ryan's POV

I moved into the apartment next to Serena's today. The idea of being this close to her again made my heart race in a way I hadn't felt in months.

My assistant Simon had everything arranged perfectly in just one afternoon—furniture delivered, kitchen stocked, even the damn throw pillows color-coordinated.

Not that I cared about any of that. The only thing that mattered was being near her again.

When I heard footsteps in the hallway, I deliberately left my door open. Serena appeared moments later, her eyes widening when she spotted me.

God, even in casual clothes she looked breathtaking. The afternoon light caught in her brown hair, highlighting those golden strands I used to run my fingers through.

"What are you doing here?" Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Please don't tell me you're my new neighbor."

I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. "Guilty as charged. Hope you don't mind."

Taking a few confident strides toward her, I closed the distance between us. The subtle scent of her perfume—jasmine with a hint of vanilla—hit me immediately. It took everything in me not to reach out and touch her.

"Today's my housewarming," I said casually, as if buying the apartment next to my pregnant ex-wife was the most normal thing in the world. "Would my new neighbor care to join me for dinner?"

"Housewarming?" Serena's lips twitched like she was fighting back laughter. The sight made my chest tighten—it had been so long since I'd seen her smile because of me.

"Dinner's already prepared," I continued. "I don't exactly have a social circle these days. Would you do me the honor?"

Right on cue, the aroma of Chef Milton's cooking wafted into the hallway. I watched Serena's expression change as recognition dawned on her face.

Her eyes softened just slightly—a small victory.

"That's Chef Milton's cooking, isn't it?" I said, pressing my advantage. "You haven't had it in months. I thought you might miss it."

I'd spent hours questioning the mansion staff about Serena's preferences, determined to get this right.

The chef had been particularly helpful, listing every dish she'd ever enjoyed. Now I watched her resolve crumble exactly as I'd predicted.

"Well," she said with a shrug that was trying too hard to be casual, "since it's already prepared, it would be wasteful not to eat it."

Then she looked me dead in the eyes, that fiery spirit I'd grown to admire flashing in her expression. "Just so we're clear—I'm here for the food, not for you. Don't flatter yourself."

"After you," I gestured toward my open door, fighting to keep my expression neutral while triumph surged through me.

Serena walked in, her eyes scanning my new place with undisguised curiosity.

I watched her take in the minimalist decor, the charcoal gray furniture, the abstract art on the walls—all carefully selected to project sophisticated bachelor rather than desperate ex-husband.

"When did you buy this place?" she asked, running her fingers along the marble countertop.

I shook my head. "I honestly don't remember. Simon handles those details."

The truth was more complicated. I'd bought several properties in this area as investments years ago. These two adjacent apartments were the only ones I'd kept.

When I'd given Serena one after our marriage, had some part of me always planned to be close to her like this? I couldn't say for sure, but now I was damn grateful for whatever foresight I'd had.

Serena sat down at the dining table without waiting for an invitation, eyeing the spread Chef Milton had prepared.

Every dish was one of her favorites—the seafood risotto she'd ordered on our third date, the truffle mac and cheese she'd craved during late nights working, the roasted brussels sprouts with balsamic glaze she claimed were the only vegetables worth eating.

Chef Milton emerged from the kitchen, beaming at the sight of her. "Mrs. Blackwood! It's been too long. No one at the mansion appreciates my cooking the way you did."

Serena smiled warmly at him as she picked up her fork. "I'll make sure to clean my plate tonight, then."

She started eating with enthusiasm, completely unconcerned with decorum. Halfway through demolishing the risotto, she suddenly looked up.

"Don't call me Mrs. Blackwood anymore. I'm divorced, remember?"

Milton sighed dramatically. "Mrs. Blackwood—forgive me—but don't all couples fight? As they say, argue at breakfast, make up by dinner. You two were perfect together. You'll always be the lady of the Blackwood house to me."

He shot me an obvious look that made me want to groan. Subtle, Milton was not.

"Mr. Blackwood has been absolutely miserable without you," he continued, ignoring my warning glare. "Nobody else sees it, but I do. He hardly eats at home anymore. At least before, he would come home for dinner with you."

Serena swallowed her food and snorted. "That's because he was out having fun elsewhere. After all, restaurant food must be more appealing than home-cooked meals."

She turned to Milton with a mischievous smile. "It must be exhausting catering to such a demanding boss. When I save up enough money, why don't you come work for me instead?"

She was poaching my chef right in front of me. The sheer audacity made me want to laugh and scowl simultaneously.

Milton chuckled nervously. "You're joking, Mrs.—I mean, Ms. Quinn. Working for either of you is still working for the Blackwood empire, isn't it? It's all the same."

Serena sampled each dish methodically, obvious pleasure written across her face with every bite. When she finished, she dabbed her mouth with a napkin and turned to the chef.

"That's where you're wrong. We're divorced now. If you became my personal chef, you'd be working next door."

She emphasized the word "divorced" like it was her favorite new vocabulary term.

Poor Milton was sweating bullets. He glanced at me with panic in his eyes. I waved my hand dismissively.

"Make Serena that lung-cleansing soup she likes," I said, giving him an escape route.

"Right away, sir!" He practically sprinted back to the kitchen.

Serena took a long sip of her freshly-squeezed juice, closing her eyes in contentment.

The soft sound of satisfaction she made sent a jolt through me, memories flooding back of other times I'd heard similar sounds from her.

"I'm stuffed," she announced, patting her stomach gently. "Thanks for the meal. And congratulations on your new place, Mr. Blackwood."

She belched softly—deliberately unladylike—then stood up and walked out with the casual confidence of someone who had just successfully dined and dashed.

The door closed behind her before I could even respond.

Milton returned moments later, soup tureen in hand. "Where's Mrs.—I mean, where is she?"

"Gone home," I said, staring at the closed door. "Your soup took too long."

"Would you like it instead, sir?"

I sighed. "Take it away."

He nodded, starting to gather the dishes to return to the mansion.

"Actually," I said, stopping him, "you'll be working here from now on. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner—all delivered to Serena."

Milton froze. "I won't be returning to the mansion?"

"No. I'm staying here for the time being. If the commute is inconvenient, you can have the guest room. Just make sure Serena gets your cooking for every meal."

I leaned forward, fixing him with a serious look. "And remember, Serena is pregnant now. Everything needs to be nutritious. Nothing too spicy or heavy."

Milton's eyes lit up like Christmas had come early. "She's pregnant? Oh, that's wonderful news!"

"Yes," I confirmed, trying not to let my pride show too obviously.

"Sir, if I may," Milton ventured, practically bouncing on his feet, "you should really bring her back to the mansion. Make amends properly. And she shouldn't be working so much in her condition."

I frowned. "That's enough commentary from you."

Milton immediately closed his mouth, but the excitement remained in his eyes as he nodded vigorously. "I'll take care of everything, sir. Mrs.—I mean, Ms. Quinn loves my cooking. She won't be able to resist."

As I watched him hurry back to the kitchen, I allowed myself to hope for the first time in months. This wasn't just about the baby anymore. Seeing Serena today, watching her laugh and eat and simply exist in my space again—I wanted her back. All of her.

And I was willing to play the long game to make it happen.

*Chapter 67: Chapter 67 His Journey to Win Her Heart*<sup>2</sup>

Serena's POV

I woke up way too early this morning, rushing to get ready for work. When I opened my door, there was Milton standing in the hallway, holding what looked like a gourmet breakfast spread.

I pretended not to see him, hurrying past with my purse clutched tightly against my side.

The pregnancy was making me nauseous in the mornings anyway—the last thing I needed was Ryan's personal chef hovering around me like some kind of food-wielding guardian angel.

"Ms. Quinn! I've prepared a nutritious breakfast with extra folate! Very important for the baby!" Milton called after me, his voice echoing down the hallway.

I quickened my pace, jabbing the elevator button repeatedly. "Not hungry, thanks!" I called back, relief washing over me when the doors finally slid open.

Little did I know, Milton wasn't going to take no for an answer.

I'd been at my desk for barely an hour when the receptionist buzzed me. "Ms. Quinn, there's a Chef Milton here with what he calls your 'essential prenatal nutrition package'?"

My hand froze over my keyboard. "Tell him I'm in a meeting."

"He says he'll wait. And... he's already setting up in the break room."

I groaned, dropping my head into my hands. By lunchtime, the entire studio was buzzing with whispers and sideways glances. Maya cornered me in the supplies closet, her eyes wide with excitement.

"So it's true—he moved in next door?" she demanded, barely containing her excitement. "You were really going to keep this from me?"

"Could you say it a little louder? I don't think they heard you in CHINA," I hissed, looking around nervously.

"Is that why he sent his personal chef? Oh my god, are you two getting back together? The whole office is talking about it!"

I winced, imagining the gossip spreading through every department. "We are NOT getting back together. He's just being... considerate."

Maya raised an eyebrow. "Considerate enough to move next door and send his chef to feed you daily? That's not consideration, honey, that's a full-blown reconciliation campaign."

I couldn't argue with her logic, but I wasn't ready to admit it either.

When I finally emerged from hiding, Julian was standing by my office, his expression unreadable. His usually warm eyes had turned cold, his shoulders stiff under his perfectly tailored blazer. *freewebnovel.com*

"Congratulations on your pregnancy," he said formally, his voice devoid of its usual warmth. "I wasn't aware you were planning to reunite with your ex-husband."

Before I could correct him, Maya leaned against my office doorway, sighing dramatically. "Such a shame, really. Poor Julian, so faithful and devoted, all for nothing."

I shot her a withering glare. "Don't you have work to do? Those sketches for the Hanover account were due yesterday."



Julian walked away without another word, leaving me feeling oddly guilty despite having nothing to apologize for.

The next few weeks flew by in a whirlwind of success.

Dreamland Studio was thriving—we'd secured contracts with three major retailers, and my designs were being featured in fashion magazines across the country.

As our reputation grew, so did my belly, becoming harder to disguise under loose-fitting clothes.

One evening, scrolling through news updates while resting my swollen feet on the coffee table, a headline caught my eye: "Children with Congenital Diseases Abandoned, Living Out Short Lives in Orphanages."

I clicked on the article, my heart squeezing painfully as I read about children born with genetic disorders, abandoned by families unable or unwilling to care for them. These kids were growing up without proper medical care or family support, many not expected to reach adulthood.

The photos hit me hardest—tiny faces peering out from hospital beds, brave smiles despite their circumstances. I ran my hand over my growing belly, tears welling in my eyes.

"This isn't right," I whispered to myself, reaching for my phone.

Within minutes, I was texting WhisperStream, the social media influencer who'd helped me before.

"I want to start a foundation for children with congenital diseases. Can you help spread the word?" I wrote.

"On it. This is exactly the kind of cause that gets attention. Dreamland supporting sick kids? People will eat it up," he replied almost immediately.

Within an hour, the hashtag #DreamlandHeals was trending. By morning, it had reached the top of the trending list, with thousands sharing their support.

I was finalizing the details of my two-million-dollar donation when my assistant Lucy knocked on my door.

"Ms. Quinn? Blackwood Industries just announced they're making a substantial donation to the same cause. Mr. Blackwood released a statement saying he's partnering with Dreamland to establish the foundation."

I blinked, surprised. I hadn't told Ryan about my plans.

When I checked my phone, there was a text from him: "Great minds think alike. Let's do this together."

A week later, Ryan and I stood side by side at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Dreamland-Blackwood Children's Foundation. Camera flashes popped constantly as we smiled for the press. I wore a loose-fitting cream silk dress that elegantly disguised my pregnancy, while Ryan looked devastatingly handsome in a charcoal suit.

When handed the microphone, Ryan surprised me by turning to face me directly.

"I want to thank Dreamland Jewelry and specifically Serena Quinn for spearheading this initiative," he said, his eyes never leaving mine. "Serena is the most compassionate woman I've ever known. Her heart for these children inspired all of us to do better."

The raw emotion in his voice made my cheeks warm. When it was my turn to speak, I found myself softening toward him in a way I hadn't allowed in months.

"This foundation represents hope," I said into the microphone. "And I'm grateful to have Blackwood Industries as our partner in providing that hope."

As we cut the ribbon together, Ryan's hand brushed against mine, sending a familiar tingle up my arm. I didn't pull away.

The foundation's success exceeded all expectations. I designed a special jewelry collection with all proceeds going to the children's medical care. When the government awarded me a humanitarian honor, Ryan was in the front row, applauding louder than anyone.

My doctor eventually insisted I reduce my workload, so I reluctantly handed day-to-day operations over to Maya. This left me with more time at home—which meant more time for Ryan's increasingly frequent visits.

One evening, as he brought over dinner (Milton's specialty, of course), Ryan sat beside me on the couch instead of across from me.

"I'd like to take you somewhere," he said quietly. "A babymoon of sorts. Somewhere beautiful where you can relax before the birth."

I hesitated. "Ryan..."

"Just as friends if you prefer," he added quickly. "Separate rooms, no pressure. The doctor said some sunshine and fresh air would be good for you both."

Against my better judgment, I found myself nodding. "Okay."

A week later, we landed on a private island in the Caribbean.

The beachfront villa was stunning—open and airy, with views of turquoise water stretching to the horizon.

My suite had its own terrace overlooking the ocean, where I spent most of my time reading or simply watching the waves.

On our third evening, Ryan found me there, watching the sunset paint the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks.

Without speaking, he came to stand behind me, his presence warm and solid.

"May I?" he asked softly, his hands hovering near my shoulders.

I nodded, and he gently wrapped his arms around me, his hands resting lightly over my belly. The baby kicked against his palm, making us both laugh softly.

"Serena," he whispered against my hair. "Let's start over. I promise to be everything you and our child need. If I ever fail you again, you can walk away—no questions asked."

His voice dropped lower, more intimate. "You're the only one who belongs by my side. You'll always be the heart of the Blackwood family."

The sincerity in his voice made my eyes sting. "I can't live without you anymore," he continued.

I closed my eyes, letting myself lean back against his chest.

For the first time in months, I allowed myself to imagine a future where we were together again—not as the naïve couple we'd been before, but as stronger people who'd found their way back to each other.

The sun dipped below the horizon, bathing us in golden light.

I didn't answer with words, but when his lips brushed against my temple, I turned my face toward his, accepting the kiss he'd been waiting so long to give.

*Chapter 68: Chapter 68 Give him a chance*

Serena's POV

That night, we didn't make it back to our separate rooms.

The kiss on the terrace had melted something inside me—a wall I'd built to protect myself from Ryan and the heartbreak he could cause.

His lips, gentle at first, became more insistent as I responded, my body remembering what my mind had tried so hard to forget.

"Are you sure?" Ryan whispered against my mouth, his hands cradling my face with a tenderness that made my heart ache. "We can stop."

I answered by taking his hand and leading him to my suite, my heart hammering against my ribs. The ocean breeze followed us through the open French doors, billowing the sheer curtains like ghosts dancing in the moonlight.

"It's been so long," I murmured as Ryan's fingers traced the curve of my cheek, down my neck, hovering at the strap of my sundress. His eyes asked permission, and I nodded, suddenly shy despite our history.

"You're even more beautiful now," he said, his voice rough with emotion as the dress slipped from my shoulders. I resisted the urge to cover my changed body—the fuller breasts, the rounded belly where our child grew.

Ryan knelt before me, pressing his lips to my stomach with such reverence that tears sprang to my eyes. "Our miracle," he whispered.

"I'm... different now," I said, gesturing vaguely at my body.

Ryan looked up at me, his eyes darkening. "You're perfect. You've always been perfect."

He stood slowly, his hands carefully exploring every new curve, every change. When he lifted me onto the bed, I laughed softly.

"Careful, I'm heavier than I look."

"I could carry you forever," he answered simply.

The moonlight painted silver streaks across the bed, Ryan undressed, his eyes never leaving mine. The familiar planes of his body made my breath catch—he was still the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

Then he kneeling at my feet. His fingers found the hem of my loose sundress, sliding it slowly up my thighs. I trembled as cool air met my heated skin.

"Is this okay?" he asked, his thumbs tracing circles on my inner thighs.

I nodded, unable to form words as he pushed my dress higher, exposing the delicate lace of my underwear. When his lips pressed against my inner thigh, I gasped.

"Ryan..."

"I want to taste you," he said, hooking his fingers into the waistband of my underwear and drawing them down my legs. "I need to remind you what we had... what we can have again."

My pregnancy had heightened every sensation. When his mouth finally found me, I cried out, fingers clutching the bedsheets. He worked with focused determination, his tongue exploring me with devastating precision.

"Oh God," I moaned, back arching slightly. Ryan's strong hands steadied my hips as he continued his relentless attention.

I felt myself approaching the edge embarrassingly quickly. "Ryan, I'm going to—"

"Let go," he commanded, intensifying his efforts. "Give yourself to me."

My release crashed through me like a tidal wave, leaving me trembling and breathless. Before I could recover, Ryan was moving up my body, carefully positioning himself beside me.

His fingers replaced his mouth, drawing out my pleasure until I was whimpering his name.

"You're so responsive," he murmured, pressing kisses to my neck. "Even more than before."

I reached for him, finding him hard and ready through his trousers. "I want you inside me."

Ryan shook his head, taking my hand and placing it back on the bed. "Not yet. Tonight is about you."

He helped me out of my dress completely, his eyes darkening at the sight of my naked body.

My breasts were fuller now, sensitive to the slightest touch. When he took one nipple into his mouth, I nearly came undone again.

"Careful," I whispered. "They're sensitive."

He lightened his touch immediately, using just his tongue to circle each peak with agonizing gentleness. "Better?"

"Perfect," I breathed.

Ryan took his time exploring my changed body, paying special attention to my rounded belly. When he pressed a reverent kiss just below my navel, tears sprang to my eyes.

"You're carrying my child," he said, his voice full of wonder. "Do you have any idea how incredible that is? How much I love seeing you like this?"

His words unlocked something inside me. Suddenly, I needed him with an urgency that bordered on desperation.

"Ryan, please," I begged, reaching for him again. "I need you now."

This time, he didn't resist. He stripped quickly, his muscled body even more impressive than I remembered. When he returned to me, he positioned himself carefully.

"Tell me if anything hurts," he instructed, serious despite his obvious desire. "We'll go slow."

When he finally pushed inside me, we both moaned at the sensation. He moved with careful restraint, supporting his weight on his forearms.

"Is this okay?" he asked, studying my face for any sign of discomfort.

"More than okay," I whispered, wrapping my legs around him to draw him deeper. "Don't stop."

Our lovemaking was nothing like before. This wasn't the cold, detached coupling of our marriage, nor was it the desperate reunion I'd imagined in my weaker moments.

This was something entirely new—tender yet passionate, careful yet consuming.

Ryan maintained his control throughout, placing my pleasure above his own. When I climaxed for the second time, he followed shortly after, his body tensing as he called my name.

Afterwards, he held me against his chest, one hand protectively cradling my belly. Our child kicked against his palm, making him smile with wonder.

"I want us to be a family," he whispered against my hair. "A real one this time."

I closed my eyes, allowing myself to imagine it—the future I'd given up on months ago suddenly possible again.

"I'm not the same person I was," I warned him, needing him to understand. "I won't ever be that girl again."

Ryan's arms tightened around me.

"I don't want her back. I want you—exactly as you are now. Strong, independent, brilliant. The woman who built an empire from nothing. The mother of my child."

He pressed a kiss to my shoulder. "I was a fool before. I was looking for something that didn't exist, living in a past that wasn't even real. You were right in front of me all along, and I couldn't see it."

I turned to face him, studying the sincerity in his eyes. "How do I know you won't change your mind? That you won't wake up one day and realize I'm still not her?"

"Because I don't want her anymore," he said simply. "I want you. Only you. Forever."

As the ocean waves crashed outside our window, I made my decision.

This time, I'd enter our relationship with my eyes wide open—no illusions, no fairy tales. Just two people who'd found their way back to each other, ready to build something stronger than before.

"Okay," I whispered, pressing my lips to his. "Let's try again."

His smile was like sunrise breaking across the horizon—brilliant, warm, full of promise. As he pulled me back into his arms, I knew that whatever happened next, we would face it together.

*Chapter 69: Chapter 69 Sophie's come back*

Sophie's POV

Two weeks earlier, I was lounging by the pool at my tiny rental apartment, flipping through a fashion magazine I couldn't afford to subscribe to anymore, when my phone rang.

Ivy's name flashed on the screen, and I almost ignored it. My little sister only called when she wanted something, but desperation made me answer.

"What do you want, Ivy?" I asked flatly.

"You need to come back. As soon as possible," she shot back, urgency lacing her tone.

I frowned, confused. "Come back? Why? What's going on?"

"Ryan kicked Kane out again. And—" she lowered her voice for effect, "—he's divorced now. This is your chance, Sophia. The best one you'll ever get."

My heart gave a dangerous little lurch. For a moment, I couldn't breathe.

"Are you absolutely certain they're divorced?" I pressed into the phone, needing confirmation before making my move. "And there's really nothing between them anymore?"

"Yes!" Ivy practically screamed. "They're officially divorced. I saw the papers myself!"

"He's actually the CEO of Blackwood now?" I couldn't keep the excitement from my voice.

My sister's whiny voice came through the phone. "God, Sophie, I've told you a million times already! Why didn't you come back sooner? I've been trying to reach you forever!"

I rolled my eyes behind my sunglasses. Ivy always was dramatic.

"Listen," she continued, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "you need to hurry back. If you wait any longer, Ryan's going to get snatched up by someone else. Your whole 'dead girlfriend' mystique won't mean shit once he's moved on completely."

That got my attention. I straightened my spine, clutching the phone tighter. "Fine. I'm coming back immediately."

I hung up and immediately started packing my things. The few designer pieces I had left would have to do. I'd need to look my absolute best when Ryan saw me again.

Yes, I'm very much alive. Surprise, surprise. [freewebnovel.com](http://freewebnovel.com)

The "death" thing was purely strategic. Ryan's uncle Kane was getting too aggressive in the company succession battle, looking at me like I was a pawn to be eliminated. So I faked my death, and married a wealthy old man in Europe.

Best decision ever. Not only did I get to live in luxury, but I became Ryan's perfect, untarnished memory - the girlfriend he'd never get over.

For years, life was good. My elderly husband was loaded and spoiled me rotten. I had servants, jewelry, vacations - everything I deserved.

Then two months ago, the old fool had the audacity to drop dead from a heart attack. Just like that, my meal ticket was gone.

His children - all older than me, can you believe it? - united against me immediately. They froze accounts, challenged the will, and eventually forced me out with barely enough to maintain appearances.

I've been living in limbo, selling jewelry piece by piece just to survive. I was about to target another wealthy old man when Ivy's call changed everything.

Ryan Blackwood is CEO now. And divorced.

The position of Mrs. Blackwood is vacant, and who better to fill it than his resurrected first love?



The moment I stepped off the plane, I knew I was back where I belonged.

America—land of opportunity, especially for women who know how to play their cards right.

Standing in the airport in my custom-made cheongsam, I adjusted my sunglasses and smirked as I caught men staring. Even after all these years, I still know how to command attention. My body's curves drew their eyes like magnets - exactly as I intended.

I slipped my sunglasses off, and caught the eye of a gorgeous blond man standing nearby. I threw him a flirtatious look, watching with satisfaction as he immediately made his way over.

"Can I get your number?" he asked in a hopeful tone, his blue eyes drinking me in.

"Sorry, darling," I replied in perfect English, my rejection soft enough to keep him hoping. "I'm afraid I'm spoken for." I offered a secretive smile before walking away, pulling my designer suitcase behind me.

Once I was safely in my taxi, I called Ivy again. "I've landed. Where's Ryan now?"

"You just missed him," she whined, and I could practically hear her pouting through the phone. "He's gone on vacation with that pregnant bitch."

My blood ran cold. "What did you just say? Pregnant?"

"Yeah, didn't I mention that? She's carrying his kid. They're at some fancy private island resort—I got the details from Kane's assistant."

I nearly crushed my phone in my hand. A baby complicated things significantly. But I'd come too far to back down now.

I changed my flight destination to his city within twenty minutes.

During the flight, I rehearsed a hundred different reunion scenarios. Maybe I'll claim amnesia? Or perhaps I was in witness protection? The possibilities are endless, and with Ryan's devastatingly handsome face and billions in the bank, I'm willing to play whatever role necessary.

God, I should have waited before running off. If I'd known he'd become this successful, this quickly... I wouldn't have given that Serena girl any chance at all.

When I learned they were vacationing on a private island, I followed. For days, I've been watching them from behind oversized sunglasses, pretending to sunbathe while plotting my return.

It kills me to see him smiling at her. Ryan used to look at ME that way. And she's pregnant! With HIS child! The sight makes my stomach turn.

Tonight, I finally spotted Ryan walking alone along the beach. Perfect timing.

I changed into a white dress - angelic, innocent, just how he remembers me - and waded into the surf. When he was close enough, I let out a perfectly calibrated cry for help.

"Help! Please help me!"

Just loud enough for him to hear, not so loud as to attract others. I thrashed in the waves, making it look convincing.

Ryan didn't hesitate. He rushed into the water, strong arms pulling me to shore. When we reached the beach, the recognition hit him like a physical blow.

Under the moonlight, I watched his face transform from concern to shock to disbelief.

"Sophie?" he whispered, his voice breaking. "Is that really you?"

I'd practiced this moment for weeks. With water dripping from my hair and my white dress clinging to my body, I looked up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

"Ryan?" I whispered back, reaching a trembling hand to touch his face. "Oh my god, Ryan... I finally found you."

*Chapter 70: Chapter 70 Sophie? Is it really you?*

Ryan's POV

I watched the sunset paint the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks as I walked along the beach, my mind consumed with plans for Serena.

These past days with her had been transformative. The walls she built after our divorce were finally crumbling, and I wanted to create something special to celebrate this new beginning.

My fingers touched the small velvet box in my pocket.

Not an engagement ring—we weren't ready for that yet—but a custom-designed pendant that symbolized our journey.

A crescent moon cradling a small star, representing her and our child. The jeweler had rushed it specially for me, and I couldn't wait to see her face when she opened it.

I'd arranged for a private dinner on the beach, with lanterns strung up and her favorite foods prepared. Everything had to be perfect. [freewebnovel.com](http://freewebnovel.com)

For once in my life, I wanted to do something purely for her happiness, not mine.

The sound came suddenly—a desperate cry cutting through the peaceful evening air.

"Help! Please help me!"

I turned toward the ocean, squinting against the fading light. Someone was thrashing in the water, arms flailing against the waves.

Damn it. I glanced back toward the resort where Serena was resting, then at the struggling figure in the water.

No choice. I couldn't ignore someone drowning.

I sprinted into the surf, pushing against the resistance of the water.

The waves were stronger than they appeared, slapping against my chest as I swam toward the panicking woman.

When I reached her, I wrapped my arm around her waist and began pulling her toward shore, fighting the current all the way.

By the time we reached the beach, I was breathing heavily. I gently laid the woman on the sand, and only then, in the soft glow of the beach lamps, did I get a clear look at her face.

My heart nearly stopped.

"Sophie?" The name left my lips as a strangled whisper. It couldn't be possible. My mind had to be playing tricks on me.

But it wasn't. The woman lying before me—wet hair splayed across the sand, white dress clinging to her body—was unmistakably Sophie Hart.

My first love. The woman whose death had haunted me for years.

A storm of emotions crashed through me. Confusion.

Disbelief. Shock. The Sophie I knew had been buried—well, not her body, since they never found it after the mudslide.

Her grave contained only symbolic possessions. I'd searched for weeks, hired private investigators, scoured hospitals and morgues. Nothing. Eventually, I'd accepted the impossible truth that she was gone forever.

Yet here she was, lying in my arms, eyes closed.

After a few seconds, her eyelids fluttered open, revealing those hazel eyes I once thought I'd never see again. They were misty, vulnerable—exactly as I remembered from the first time we met.

"Sophie? Is it really you? Or am I dreaming?" My voice came out barely above a whisper, as if speaking too loudly might shatter this impossible moment.

Her eyes immediately welled with tears. Her hand reached up, trembling as she touched my cheek.

"Ryan? Is it you? Am I dreaming?" Her voice broke. "I've missed you so much."

That soft sigh hit me like a physical force, stirring memories I'd long buried.

"It's really you? You're not dead?" My brow furrowed as my tone shifted abruptly.

Sophie looked startled for a moment before dissolving into tears.

"I can't believe I'm seeing you again, Ryan," she sobbed. "I missed you so much. I thought I'd never see you again in this lifetime."

"This isn't possible," I said quietly. "You... you died. They never found your body, but—God, Sophie, I mourned you for years."

Her eyes glistened with tears. "I survived, but lost my memory. A man found me and took me to a small island. A kind family took me in. It's only recently that I've remembered who I am."

The words flowed too smoothly from her lips. Something tightened in my chest, but it wasn't the joy I might have expected years ago.

"When did you remember?" I asked carefully.

"Only recently," she leaned against me, her voice catching. "Images started coming back—your face, our love. When I finally remembered everything, I knew I had to find you."

"How did you know I'd be here?" My question hung in the air.

For a heartbeat, she froze. Her gaze darted away, her lips trembled as she whispered, "I didn't know. I was just... here on vacation. Pure chance."

"You need medical attention," I said, standing and gently helping Sophie to her feet. "You nearly drowned."

She clung to me tightly. "I feel fine now that I've found you. Thoughts of you kept me going all these years."

I stepped back, creating distance between us. "Sophie, it's been five years. Things have changed."

Her gaze deliberately fell to her soaked dress, her voice husky. "Some things never change. What we had was special."

Special. Perhaps it was, once. But now my heart belonged entirely to Serena.

"Let me help you to the resort medical center," I said firmly, offering my arm for support but keeping proper distance.

As we walked, Sophie suddenly stumbled. "Ow!" she cried out, collapsing against my chest. "My ankle—I think I twisted it."

I instinctively caught her, my hands automatically steadying her waist. And that's when I heard it—a sharp intake of breath that wasn't Sophie's.

I looked up to see Serena standing just a few yards away, her eyes wide with hurt and confusion.

Damn it. This was going to be a mess to explain.