

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

- Chapter 71 I'm his ex-wife

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Serena's POV

The entire day, Ryan had been acting strange. Secretive glances, hushed phone calls, and an air of anticipation that made me wonder what he was planning.

When he disappeared for a "walk" along the beach at sunset, my curiosity finally got the better of me.

I followed his footprints in the sand, admiring how the fading sunlight painted everything in soft gold. Maybe he was arranging a surprise dinner? The thought made me smile.

These past few days had been magical between us—almost enough to make me forget our painful history.

As I rounded a curve of the shoreline, I froze.

There, in the distance, was Ryan. But he wasn't alone. A woman with soaking wet clothes clung to him, her body pressed intimately against his chest.

My first instinct was to march over and pull this brazen stranger off my—well, off Ryan. We weren't officially back together yet, but still.

I stepped closer, ready to make my presence known, when I heard his voice, soft with disbelief.

"Sophie? Is it really you?"

My blood turned to ice.

Sophie. The name hit me like a physical blow. Sophie Hart—Ryan's precious first love, his white moonlight, the woman whose memory had haunted our entire marriage. The woman who was supposedly dead.

I watched, unable to move, as the woman struggled to stand from Ryan's embrace. She made a show of wobbling on unsteady legs before conveniently collapsing back into his arms.

If I hadn't been so shocked, I might have slow-clapped for her performance.

The Hart sisters certainly shared similar features—that much was true.
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But where Ivy was obviously calculating, Sophie had mastered the art of appearing completely innocent while manipulating everyone around her. A true white lotus blossom, seemingly pure but ultimately toxic.

I stood there observing her tactics with cold eyes. She didn't need to directly ask for anything—men like Ryan would trip over themselves to give her whatever she wanted.

This was what separated amateurs from professionals in the manipulation game.

Ryan finally helped her stand steadily, then turned and spotted me. The panic that flashed across his face told me everything I needed to know.

Before he could open his mouth, Sophie stepped forward, still leaning heavily on his arm.

"And who might this be?" she asked with a tilt of her head.

"I'm his ex-wife," I replied with a smile that didn't reach my eyes. "Don't let me interrupt your touching reunion. Please, continue."

Why deny them their moment? Wouldn't that be unkind of me? The sarcasm burned bitter in my throat.

Sophie's eyes widened slightly. "Oh! You misunderstand. I...I was just rescued by Ryan. We haven't seen each other in years, so I got a bit emotional."

She glanced between us, her expression perfectly calibrated to show innocence.

"Ryan and I were just friends. Please don't misinterpret."

"I'm not misinterpreting anything," I said coolly. "I'm just his ex-wife. Whether you're his old flame or current mistress makes no difference to me."

"Serena," Ryan's voice was urgent. "It's not what you think. I just want to understand what happened back then."

Sophie's eyes immediately welled with tears, right on cue. "Back then... I got caught in a mudslide. I thought I was going to die, but a man saved me."

She dabbed at her eyes delicately. "I lost my memory and spent years recovering. When I finally remembered everything about New York, I wanted to return, but then my husband—the man who saved me—passed away. I had to observe the mourning period for him."

I stared at her pitiful, heartbreaking performance.

If I could ignore the facts, I'd give her a standing ovation. She was mourning her late husband by... vacationing at a luxury beach resort? If her dead husband knew, he'd probably roll in his grave.

But I didn't call her out. Instead, I waited in silence, watching Ryan's reaction.

If he chose his "white moonlight" over me again, then this relationship wasn't worth continuing. I'd made that decision the moment I saw them together.

"Ryan," Sophie said softly, "considering our past... our friendship, could you help me return to the States? Maybe find me a job? I'm all alone now, and it's so difficult."

She turned to me again. "You haven't misunderstood us, right? Ryan and I really are just friends."

Her repeated emphasis on "just friends" while playing the damsel in distress was textbook manipulation. And it was working—I could see Ryan's guard lowering.

"You should change into dry clothes," he said to her. "The ocean breeze is chilly at night. As for returning to the States..."

He hesitated. Sophie's eyes flickered with worry, though she hid it quickly.

"If it's too much trouble, forget I asked," she said, lowering her head in practiced submission. "I don't want to cause misunderstandings. I'll go now."

The perfect martyr act. It was almost impressive how effectively it could trigger protective instincts.

Ryan sighed. "Come back with us tomorrow. I'll make arrangements once we're home."

Sophie nodded with perfectly calibrated gratitude. "Thank you. I'll see you tomorrow."

She walked away toward the opposite direction, maintaining her fragile, vulnerable demeanor until she was out of our sight.

As soon as Sophie disappeared, Ryan moved closer to me.

"Serena, you're the only one in my heart now. Yes, she's alive and suddenly back, and I have questions—you can understand that, right?"

I didn't answer him. Instead, I turned and walked away, leaving him standing there on the beach.

I didn't care about his questions. I cared about his actions. And his response to Sophie's reappearance had failed my test spectacularly.

What hurt most was that our perfect vacation, those sweet moments of reconnection, had shattered in an instant. My chest felt tight with disappointment.

That night, I locked Ryan out of our room. I needed space to think, to process what had happened. Sleep came fitfully, my dreams haunted by Sophie's calculated performance.

The next morning, I slept late, exhausted from a night of tossing and turning. When I finally opened the door, both Ryan and Sophie were waiting outside.

She had transformed overnight, dressed in a breezy island-style dress that looked both elegant and casual. Her long hair fell in gentle waves, and her entire demeanor radiated warmth and grace.

No wonder Ryan couldn't forget her. She was beautiful in that effortless way that seemed designed to make other women feel inadequate.

"Good morning!" Sophie smiled brightly. "Did you sleep well? You look a little pale. Should we go downstairs for breakfast?"

The familiarity in her tone made it sound like we were longtime friends. At least she had enough restraint not to touch me, limiting herself to simple expressions of concern.

I acknowledged her with the barest nod, having no desire to engage with this white lotus act.

"Is it time to leave?" I asked instead.

Ryan nodded. "Don't you want breakfast? I could have something sent to the room."

"I've had milk. That's enough."

I pulled sunglasses from my bag and put them on, creating another barrier between myself and them.

Every second in Sophie's presence felt like bad luck, and I couldn't wait to leave this place behind.

Throughout the entire flight, I kept my eye mask on, feigning sleep to avoid conversation with Ryan.

I could sense his frustration, but that was the consequence he deserved.

When we finally landed in New York, Maya was waiting for me at the airport. I headed straight for her car without even a goodbye to Ryan, instructing the driver to leave immediately.

Maya hadn't even gotten a good look at the woman beside Ryan before we were pulling away.

"What happened?" she demanded. "You two seemed fine when you left. Now you're back with some random woman? Did Ryan have a fling?"

"Don't even get me started," I groaned. "That woman is Sophie Hart."

Maya's jaw dropped in shock. "You're kidding me."

"I wish. The supposedly dead 'love of his life' has miraculously returned from the grave."

"What's Ryan's attitude about all this?"

"He brought her back with us, didn't he? What do you think?"

Maya made an indignant sound. "That bastard! I told you not to reconcile with him! You know, Julian is still waiting for you—that devoted puppy. Doesn't that tempt you at all?"

I waved her suggestion away. "Please. I'm about to have a baby. I'm not going to lead poor Julian on."

I sighed heavily. "I'm so tired of all this. Can I stay at your place for a few days? I can't face Ryan right now."

"Of course, but are you sure he won't show up at the studio making a scene looking for you?"

I laughed bitterly. "He's too busy settling his precious Sophie into her new life. Trust me, he won't be looking for me."

Maya glanced at me, noticing my dejection. She quickly changed the subject.

"So, what goodies did you bring me from your tropical paradise? If you forgot my souvenirs, I'll never forgive you!"

"As if I could forget you," I smiled despite myself. "I've got gifts for you and everyone at the studio. You can distribute them tomorrow."

"Look at you! Such a generous boss-lady," Maya grinned. "You've got that rich socialite energy now, and I'm here for it!"

As Maya continued her playful banter, I felt the tension in my shoulders begin to ease. The knot in my stomach remained, but at least I could breathe again.

No matter what happened with Ryan and his resurrected first love, I had my friends, my work, and the baby growing inside me. If I had to face the future alone, I would—just as I'd done before.

Chapter 72: Chapter 72 This time, I'd get it right.

Ryan's POV

I watched the city lights blur past my window as Simon drove us away from the airport. The heavy silence in the car felt suffocating.

All I could think about was Serena's retreating figure as she walked away from me without a backward glance. Her silent treatment during the entire flight home had been excruciating.

Sophie sat beside me, close enough that I could smell her familiar perfume—the same one she'd worn years ago.

It should have triggered something in me, some echo of the feelings I once had. Instead, it just made me more aware of how much I missed Serena's scent.

"Ryan, is Serena misunderstanding our relationship?" Sophie's voice was soft, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

I turned to face her, noticing how she'd positioned herself to catch the light in the most flattering way possible. A skill she'd always had.

"Sophie, don't worry about it. Serena's pregnant—her emotions are more sensitive right now."

The words sounded hollow even to my own ears.

This wasn't just pregnancy hormones. I'd hurt Serena deeply, and I knew it. The memory of her face when she first saw Sophie clinging to me on the beach made my chest tighten.

Sophie sighed delicately. "I'm so sorry, Ryan. I've only just returned and already I'm causing problems for you."

"I've arranged accommodations for you," I said, checking my phone to avoid her gaze. "As for work, you can start at the Blackwood subsidiary in Chicago."

I needed distance between us. Between her and Serena. Between her and me.

Sophie's smile flickered for just a moment—so briefly I almost missed it—before she composed herself.

"Ryan, I'd rather stay in New York. This city holds so many memories for me, and I'm afraid I'd feel completely out of place somewhere new after everything I've been through."

I hesitated, torn between my desire to keep her at arm's length and not wanting to appear cruel. "Fine. You can stay in New York."

Before she could celebrate this small victory, I signaled to Simon to pull over. We'd reached the hotel I'd arranged for her.

"Sophie, this is your stop. The room has already been prepared for you, you can just go and settle in. I need to go."

I needed to find Serena. Every second away from her felt like wasted time.

Sophie froze, her eyes wide and glistening. "You...you're leaving me here?" Her voice trembled, almost fragile. "After everything...after coming all this way...am I just...nothing to you?"

Before I could respond, she collapsed into my arms, her body clinging as though I were the only anchor in her world. Tears streamed freely down her cheeks, her sobs muffled against my chest.

"Ryan...I've only had you," she whispered, her lips brushing my collarbone. "All these years...I've waited. I thought...I'd never see you again. I can't...I can't go back to being alone."

Her arms wrapped around my neck, squeezing tight as if she could fuse herself to me. I tried to pull back, but she only clung harder, her forehead resting against mine.

"We lost so many years," she continued, her voice breaking in perfect rhythm with her tears. "I just...I just want to be near you. I promise I won't get in the way. I won't make Serena uncomfortable, I swear."

Her gaze lifted, wide, pleading, almost unbearably vulnerable. "Please...let me stay. Let me be close to you...even as your secretary. Just...let me be near you."

For a heartbeat, I felt my resolve waver. The raw desperation, the way she made herself so small, so needy...it tugged at something I thought I'd locked away.

But then Serena's face filled my mind.

How would she feel if she knew Sophie was making this request? How much more would it hurt her if I agreed?

The moment of weakness vanished, replaced by a cold clarity.

"No."

I pulled her arms away from me firmly, no longer concerned about appearing gentle. Something had shifted in me, and the ice in my voice seemed to shock even Sophie.

"You need to get out of the car now. If you need financial assistance or anything practical, I'll help. But that's all."

"Ryan," she whispered desperately, "have you forgotten everything we once shared?"

Looking at her, I felt nothing but certainty. The woman I once thought I couldn't live without now seemed like a stranger—or worse, someone I no longer wanted to know.

"That was the past, Sophie. My heart belongs to Serena now."

The words came easily because they were true. Perhaps they had always been true, even when I was too blind to see it.

"We can only be friends. Nothing more."

Sophie's face hardened for just an instant before she caught herself.

"I understand," she said finally, her voice small. "I just... I thought you still cared."

"I do care," I replied honestly. "Enough to be clear about where we stand."

After Sophie finally left the car, I leaned back against the seat, exhaustion washing over me. Simon glanced at me in the rearview mirror.

"Where to now, sir?"

I didn't hesitate. "Dreamland Studio."

If Serena wouldn't answer my calls, I'd go to her. I needed to fix this before the distance between us grew any wider.

"Sir," Simon began cautiously, "perhaps it might be better to give Ms. Quinn some space right now?"

"Space is the last thing we need," I said firmly. "Every second I'm not explaining the situation is another second she's misunderstanding what happened."

Simon nodded, though I could tell he wasn't convinced. "As you wish, sir."

As we drove through the city toward Dreamland Studio, I rehearsed what I would say to Serena. How could I explain that seeing Sophie again had only confirmed what I already knew? That she—Serena—was the only woman I wanted in my life?

That watching her walk away at the airport had felt like someone was ripping my heart from my chest?

I pulled out my phone and tried calling her again. Straight to voicemail.

"Serena," I said after the beep, "I know you're angry. You have every right to be. But please, give me a chance to explain. Sophie means nothing to me—not anymore. You're everything. You and our baby."

I hung up, knowing my words probably sounded hollow to her right now. Words were cheap. I needed to prove myself through actions.

As we approached the studio, I straightened my tie and took a deep breath. I would fight for Serena with everything I had. I wouldn't lose her again—not to Sophie, not to misunderstandings, not to my own stupidity.

This time, I'd get it right.

Chapter 73: Chapter 73 You and Mr. Blackwood are close?

Sophie's POV

I stare at the disappearing luxury car until it completely vanishes into the night.

Only then do I let my carefully maintained fragile expression completely collapse. Rage burns from my chest all the way to my throat, and I almost want to scream.

"Damn it!"

I furiously pull out my phone and dial Ivy's number. The moment the call connects, I can't help but explode.

"Didn't you say Ryan cared about me? That's not what's happening at all! Who the hell is this Serena, and she's pregnant with his child?"

I grit my teeth, my nails digging deep into my palm. *freewebnovel.com*

This isn't the reunion scenario I imagined. I should be the princess welcomed back by Ryan, not some unwanted extra dumped at a hotel entrance.

Ivy sounds obviously guilty on the other end, her voice suspiciously soft.

"Sophie, don't be angry. Ryan really has missed you—he even visits your grave every year. You just need to try a little harder, and you'll definitely make him fall in love with you again."

She's always like this—making empty promises and telling lies, as long as she can manipulate me into doing what she wants.

"Listen, this hotel is absolutely terrible," Ivy complains, her voice suddenly urgent. "It's so noisy, I don't want to stay here anymore. What kind of place did Ryan arrange for you? Come get me quickly, I've had enough of this environment."

I let out a cold laugh. Of course, she always wants a piece of the pie. Even when I've just experienced this kind of setback, all she cares about is whether she can hitch a ride.

"Fine, I'll contact you after I get settled."

I hang up directly, not wanting to hear her prattle on. I stare at this irritatingly ordinary business hotel, feeling deeply insulted. Me, Sophie Hart, once his most beloved woman, only deserves this kind of treatment?

I force myself to call Ryan. His voice is cold as he simply says Simon will arrange an apartment for me tomorrow. After hanging up, I feel tears welling up but stubbornly force them back. I can't break down here, can't let anyone see my vulnerability.

The next day, Simon comes to pick me up. When he drives me to my destination, I can hardly believe my eyes.

"What kind of place is this?" I stand in front of an apartment building so plain it's depressing, with fury nearly bursting from my chest.

The building is incredibly basic, located in some ordinary neighborhood on the edge of the city, far from downtown, far from anywhere with any taste.

This is what Ryan prepared for me?

"This is the accommodation Mr. Blackwood arranged for you," Simon says calmly, not even bothering to look up.

"It's very close to the Blackwood subsidiary where you'll be working, about ten minutes walking distance."

"Walking?" I can't believe my ears, my voice uncontrollably rising. "What did you say?"

I, Sophie Hart, never walk to work! That's what common people do. I should be sitting in the back of a luxury car, being driven to the main company entrance, walking on gleaming marble floors.

"I think you've made a mistake," I force myself to calm down, raising my chin. "Ryan and I have a special relationship. How could he possibly make me live in a place like this? Blackwood headquarters is downtown, and that's where I should be working."

Simon finally looks up at me, but his eyes are cold as ice.

"Ms. Hart, these are indeed Mr. Blackwood's instructions. He specifically emphasized that this is best for both him and you—after all, friends should maintain an appropriate distance."

Friends? The word stabs into my heart like a knife. Ryan and I are just friends? After our shared past, after all our promises?

"He used the word 'friends'?" I ask through clenched teeth, my voice almost hoarse.

Simon nods, his expression infuriatingly calm. "Yes. Tomorrow you can report directly to the subsidiary. The HR department has been notified. If there's nothing else, I'll be going now."

He doesn't even wait for my response before turning to leave. I stand on the unfamiliar street, dragging my suitcase, feeling humiliated like never before.

My phone rings—it's Ivy. I really don't want to answer, but finally press the accept button.

"Sophie!" she calls excitedly. "Where are you now? What place did Ryan arrange for you? It must be a mansion, right?"

Looking at the suffocatingly ordinary apartment building in front of me, I suddenly don't want her to know the truth. She would definitely gloat, as is her style.

"Don't come over yet," I say coldly. "Ryan has other arrangements."

"What?" She almost screams. "Don't tell me you've already moved into the Blackwood family mansion?"

I grip my phone tightly, almost hearing the jealousy in her voice.

"It's not what you think. Don't ask now, I'll contact you later."

After hanging up, I take a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down. This is only temporary, I tell myself. Ryan couldn't possibly just give up our past like this. It must be

that pregnant woman's doing. She's trapped him with the baby in her belly, but how long can such a trick last?

As long as I'm still in this city, there's a chance to win Ryan's heart back.

The next morning, I spend two hours meticulously grooming myself. Even though I'm just going to work at some insignificant subsidiary, I know how important first impressions are. I put on a classic Chanel suit paired with a limited edition LV handbag. The woman in the mirror is flawless, exuding class—exactly the image I need to project.

The HR department sends a minor clerk to receive me and show me around. This place is downright pitiful—old office furniture, dated decor, and air saturated with the stale smell of cheap coffee.

What's even more infuriating is the position they've assigned me—neither high nor low, with no real power and no challenges. Clearly a cushy job created for someone with connections.

"This is your workstation," the clerk points to an incredibly ordinary desk. "Someone will come by shortly to hand over your duties."

As he prepares to leave, I immediately grab his arm. I need to quickly establish my influence here, need everyone to know about my special relationship with Ryan.

"Wait," I flash the sweet smile I've practiced countless times. "Since it's my first day, I'd like to treat everyone to a meal to build relationships. Are there any good restaurants nearby?"

The man widens his eyes in surprise: "Treat everyone? There are over a hundred people in this company."

I don't care about this small expense. Any investment is worth it if it helps me get closer to Ryan.

"That's fine," I wave dismissively, as if discussing an insignificant sum. "I haven't worked for a while, and Ryan said I should handle interpersonal relationships well. It's a good chance to make friends."

I deliberately use Ryan's name without any title, implying our intimate relationship. Sure enough, the man's expression immediately changes.

"You and Mr. Blackwood are close?" he asks cautiously, his eyes sparkling with gossip.

This is exactly the reaction I want.

"That's our little secret," I playfully wink and lower my voice. "Ryan wants me to come to the subsidiary to see how things are going, and to train myself a bit. You understand."

His eyes instantly light up, barely concealing his excitement.

I know my words will spread through the company like wildfire, possibly even reaching headquarters.

But that's exactly what I want—to let Ryan know that Sophie Hart isn't so easily dismissed. I will find a way back to his side, whatever it takes.

That pregnant woman thinks she's won? How naive. The game has just begun.

Chapter 74: Chapter 74 The past is the past

Ryan's POV

I stare at her through the glass door of Dreamland Studio, my heart sinking as her assistant firmly but politely denies me entry.

"Ms. Serena isn't available today, Mr. Blackwood." The words hang in the air like a sentence. I've been rejected three times this week alone.

Walking back to my car, I clench my fists in frustration. How did we get here? Just days ago, on that island vacation, everything had felt perfect—Serena and I laughing under the sun, our hands entwined as the waves lapped at our feet.

We were happy, completely in sync. And now...she won't even take my calls.

"Simon," I turn to my assistant who's waiting by the car. "What would you do to make someone forgive you? Especially when they've completely shut you out?"

Simon adjusts his glasses thoughtfully. "Honestly, sir? I'd find out what matters to them and invest in that. People appreciate when you show interest in their passions."

I fall silent, turning the small jewelry box over in my hand—the gift I'd originally planned to give Serena during our vacation.

"Thank you, Simon," I say, pocketing the box. "That's actually helpful."

The next day, I'm knee-deep in quarterly reports when my phone lights up with Sophie's name. My jaw tightens instinctively.

"Ryan, I'm at headquarters handling some work transitions and haven't eaten yet. How about we grab lunch together?" Her voice is sweet, familiar yet somehow wrong now.

I hesitate, about to refuse, when she continues pushing.

"Ryan, even just as friends, I've been back for several days now. Surely you can welcome me back properly?"

Her reasoning makes it difficult to refuse without seeming rude. I check the time - just a quick lunch, then back to work. "Fine. Twenty minutes, at the restaurant across the street."

Sophie is already seated when I arrive, her eyes lighting up as I approach. Throughout the meal, her gaze rarely leaves my face, her words dripping with concern.

"Ryan, you look thinner. Are you working too hard?"

I shake my head. "I'm fine."

"You should eat more then," she insists, leaning forward slightly.

I nod without engaging further. The steak arrives, and Sophie sighs dramatically.

"Remember how you used to cut my steak for me? My, how times have changed."

I feel a heaviness settle in my chest and frown slightly. This nostalgia serves no purpose except to complicate things further.

"Sometimes I really envy Serena," Sophie says, her eyes suddenly glistening with tears. "She gets to be with you every day."

"Sophie," I say firmly, looking away from her eyes. "The past is the past. Let's not revisit it."

"You're right," she quickly recovers. "Let's not talk about sad things. Ryan, I actually wanted to thank you for helping me settle back in New York."

"No need for thanks," I say flatly.

"It's just that the subsidiary is so far from downtown," she continues, her hint painfully obvious. "It makes it difficult to do anything... including seeing you more often."

I pretend not to understand her implication. The last thing I need is to give Serena more reason to doubt me. I've already caused enough damage to our relationship.

Throughout lunch, I can see Sophie growing frustrated with my unresponsiveness. Good. Maybe she'll finally understand that whatever we had is over.

As we finished eating, she stood up and said she needed to use the restroom. But barely two steps in, she cried out sharply, clutching her stomach in pain.

"Ouch!"

I walk over, maintaining a proper distance. "What happened?"

"I think I twisted my ankle," she whimpers, clutching at my arm. "It hurts so much, I can't stand."

Her body presses against mine in a way that makes me uncomfortable.

"Let's get you to a hospital," I say, helping her up while keeping as much space between us as possible.

Sophie grimaces, continuously hissing in pain. "Ryan, I don't think I can walk. Could you carry me?"

I frown at her request. "The car's right outside. You can make it that far."

Her pleading eyes don't move me. I've seen this act before, and I'm not falling for it again.

At the hospital, after a quick examination, I prepare to leave.

"I'll have my assistant take you home," I say firmly. "I have a meeting this afternoon that I can't miss."

Despite her pitiful expression, I walk out of the hospital with no intention of attending any meeting. Instead, I head straight to Dreamland Studio. Serena has been ignoring my calls since we returned from the island, and I need to see her.

I stop to buy a bouquet of vibrant Violets—her favorites. The moment I walk into the studio, all eyes turn toward me. Maya Carter immediately rushes over, blocking my path.

"Well, well! Is the sun rising in the west today? The great Mr. Blackwood gracing us with his presence—what an unexpected honor," she says sarcastically.

"I'm here for Serena. Is she in?" I ask, my eyes already searching for Serena's office.

Maya waves her hand directly in front of my face. "She's on a tight deadline for some sketches. Probably doesn't have time for you."

"Sketches? She shouldn't be overworking herself," I say, my frown deepening as I try to step around Maya.

"Hey!" she calls after me. "I don't mind you visiting, but I'm worried you two will just end up fighting again. Have you dealt with that 'first love' situation yet?"

I stop in my tracks. "Is that why Serena's still upset?"

Maya looks at me like I'm an idiot, barely restraining an eye roll. "Of course she is! This isn't just any woman—this is the person you've apparently been pining for all these years. She suddenly returns, and you expect Serena not to care?"

Looking at my complicated expression, Maya continues, "Serena might not say it out loud, but don't you think you should take a stand? If you're just going to let things slide, then maybe you don't deserve a place in her heart."

"After all," she adds softly, "people only get jealous when they care."

I consider her words carefully, then nod. "I'll explain everything to Serena clearly. Thank you for the advice."

Maya finally relaxes, stepping aside. "Go on then. Talk to her properly."

I nod gratefully and enter Serena's office. She doesn't look up, assuming it's Maya.

"Stop rushing me, it's almost done," she mutters, focused on her work.

Only when I place the roses on her desk does she realize who's there. She glances up briefly, then immediately looks back down at her work.

"What are you doing here?" she asks coldly.

"I came to see you," I say gently. "Keep working. I'll just sit here and wait."

I retreat to the sofa across from her desk, unable to take my eyes off her. Watching Serena work—so focused and professional—I'm struck again by how captivating she is.

Chapter 75: Chapter 75 Jealous and concerned

Serena's POV

I ignore Ryan completely as I finish the final touches on my sketches. With a satisfied exhale, I hit send and dispatch them to Maya. My phone instantly pings with her reply:

"How's the conversation going? Candlelight dinner tonight?"

I roll my eyes at her persistent matchmaking and type back a curt "Going home to rest" before closing the chat window.

Stretching my arms overhead, I finally allow myself to glance at Ryan, who's been sitting patiently on my office sofa for nearly forty minutes.

"Finished comforting Sophie? Finally found time for me?" The questions leave my lips dripping with sarcasm. I don't even try to hide the edge in my voice.

Ryan stands and approaches my desk, his expression painfully earnest. "Serena, what I have with Sophie isn't what you think. That's all in the past. You're the only one in my heart."

He pauses, then adds with what I assume is meant to be reassurance, "I told her the same thing."

For a brief moment, I almost soften.

Something in his desperate tone nearly draws a smile from me—until my eyes catch a suspicious red smudge on his pristine white shirt collar. My body tenses instantly.

Standing up, I lean closer to examine the mark, running my finger across it. The pad of my finger comes away stained with red. Lipstick. Of course.

Ryan follows my gaze, his brow furrowing in confusion. Then I see the realization dawn in his eyes.

"It must be Sophie's lipstick," I say flatly, holding up my stained finger like evidence in a crime scene.

"Serena, this was an accident—" he begins, but I cut him off with a dismissive wave.

"Ryan, I honestly don't mind if you help her settle in. After all, she's clearly the most important person in your heart." The words burn my throat. "But please don't come to me with explanations after you've finished fawning over her. Don't you find that ridiculous?"

Ryan looks genuinely dismayed. "Why won't you believe what I'm telling you?"

"How can I?" I snap, feeling the anger I'd been suppressing bubble up again. "Lipstick doesn't magically transfer to someone's shirt without close contact, does it?"

"Then tell me what to do," he says, his chest rising and falling with barely controlled frustration. "How can I make you believe me?"

I shake my head, suddenly feeling exhausted by this entire situation. Why does he think I need to instruct him?

If he truly no longer cared about Sophie, he'd have cut all contact with her. Instead, his actions only bring me more frustration.

"If you're done, Mr. Blackwood, I need to leave. I have a client meeting tonight." The lie slips easily from my lips—I just need him gone.

Ryan remains rooted in place, staring at me with those intense eyes that once made my knees weak. Now they just make me weary.

We're locked in this silent standoff when a knock at my office door breaks the tension.

"Come in," I call out, relieved for the interruption.

Julian pushes the door open, and I could kiss him for his perfect timing. His eyes flick between Ryan and me, showing no surprise at finding my Ex-Man here.

"I see the Ex-Man is here too," Julian says casually, then looks at me. "Serena, we need to get going or we'll be late."

Ryan's expression darkens instantly. His jaw tightens visibly.

Julian adds pointedly, "We're already running behind schedule."

He gives me a meaningful look, and I immediately catch on to his rescue attempt. God bless this man.

"You're right, let's go." I stand up, moving a bit slower than usual. My ever-expanding belly has changed my center of gravity, making even simple movements more deliberate.

Ryan's hand shoots out to grasp my arm. "You shouldn't overexert yourself. Let me take you home to rest instead."

"Tonight's client is important," Julian interjects smoothly, "and Serena won't be drinking. We're just having dinner. I'll make sure she gets home safely—no need for the Ex-Man to worry."

The subtle challenge in Julian's tone isn't lost on me, nor on Ryan, whose grip on my arm tightens slightly.

I pull away from him, my voice turning colder. "Mr. Blackwood, please attend to your own affairs. I'm perfectly capable of managing my work schedule."

I turn to Julian. "Let's go."

As we leave the office together, I feel a pang of something—not regret exactly, but discomfort at leaving Ryan standing there like an outsider. Once we're safely in Julian's car, I let out a heavy sigh.

"Julian, would you mind taking me home instead? I need to rest."

He nods without hesitation and starts the engine. "Of course."

After driving in silence for a minute, he speaks again. "Maya told me what's been happening. If you don't want to see your Ex-Man again, I can tell security not to let him into the building."

"Don't bother," I murmur, staring out the window at the passing city lights. "I won't be coming to the studio much longer anyway."

Julian glances at my belly, a flicker of something like disappointment crossing his face. "You really should take better care of yourself. Don't let these small annoyances upset you."

I close my eyes, signaling that I don't want to discuss Ryan anymore. Julian takes the hint and falls silent, giving me the space I need.

When we reach my building, I thank him. "I appreciate the ride, Julian."

"Let me walk you up," he offers.

"No need. I can manage." My refusal is gentle but firm. I get out of the car and head inside without looking back.

Little do I know that barely minutes after Julian's car disappears around the corner, Ryan's sleek black sedan pulls up to the curb.

The doorbell rings just as I'm stepping out of a quick shower.

Wrapping myself in a robe, I approach the door cautiously and peer through the peephole. It's just Milton, the chef from next door.

"What is it?" I call through the door, not bothering to open it.

"Mrs. Blackwood, I've brought you some chicken soup! It's still hot—if you don't open the door soon, I might not be able to hold it steady much longer!"

I hesitate. Milton and I have developed a friendly relationship—he often brings me food, claiming a pregnant woman needs proper nutrition. With a resigned sigh, I open the door.

"Come in then," I say, stepping aside.

Milton enters, but as I move to close the door behind him, a hand shoots out to stop it. My heart jumps.

"Serena, it's me." Ryan's voice is soft, clearly trying not to startle me.

"What are you doing here?" I frown, still trying to push the door closed.

Ryan's eyes meet mine. "Since you're not meeting any clients tonight, why don't we have dinner together?"

He exchanges a look with Milton, who immediately catches on.

"Mrs. Blackwood, just wait here! I'll have a delicious meal ready for you in no time!" Milton says with enthusiastic cheer. "Better keep the door open so I can bring everything in when it's ready, okay?"

Faced with Milton's eager smile, I find it hard to refuse. Besides, it's just dinner. What's the worst that could happen?

"Fine, go ahead," I mutter.

"Excellent!" Milton practically skips out.

Ryan's expression brightens instantly as he steps inside. "Have you been feeling tired lately?" he asks, his hand coming to rest supportively at the small of my back. There's nothing sensual in his touch—just concern and protection.

I don't pull away, too exhausted to fight. My body has been feeling increasingly heavy and fatigued lately.

"Mr. Blackwood, is my well-being really any of your concern?" I ask, though the bite in my words is less sharp than before.

"Serena, I swear it was a misunderstanding," he says earnestly. "If you don't believe me, I'll take an oath. If anything I'm saying is a lie, when I walk out that door I'll be—"

I slam my hand over his mouth before he can finish. "Who curses themselves like that?!" I glare at him, genuinely annoyed. "Don't be ridiculous!"

When I remove my hand, Ryan's lips curve into a hopeful smile. He takes my hand in his.

"I knew you'd believe me. Serena, we've been through so much together. Can you promise me something? Try not to get upset so easily from now on?"

Something stirs in my heart at his words, but before I can respond, Milton returns carrying several dishes.

"Let's eat first," I say, pointing at him. "I'll deal with you later!"

By the time we finish the meal—which I have to admit is delicious—I feel my anger gradually dissipating. Food has always been my weakness, and tonight is no exception.

Wiping my hands, I look up at him, determination in my eyes. "Now," I say, "you can explain yourself."

Chapter 76: Chapter 76 I'd like to see what game she's playing

Serena's POV

Ryan's face lights up instantly when I tell him to explain. There's a boyish eagerness in his expression as he leans forward, ready to clear the air between us.

"That lipstick mark happened when Sophie stumbled into me. She was crying, and I reached out to steady her. That's when she fell against my shoulder," Ryan explains, his eyes locked on mine, watching for my reaction. "Nothing more happened between us, I swear."

I study his face carefully. The tightness around his eyes, the way his brow furrows slightly—these are Ryan's tells when he's being honest. After years of marriage, I know his expressions well enough to read the truth in them.

"Fine," I sigh, deciding to let it go. "I believe you."

Relief washes over his face, and his shoulders visibly relax. "Thank you," he says softly, reaching for my hand across the table.

"Don't push it," I warn, but I don't pull away. His thumb traces small circles on my palm, a gesture so familiar it sends a wave of nostalgia through me.

"How's your pregnancy going?" Ryan asks, changing the subject. "Don't you have another checkup soon?"

I'm surprised he remembers. "Yes, next week actually."

Ryan nods firmly. "I'll go with you."

"We'll see on the day," I shrug, not wanting to commit. "If you're too busy, don't worry about it."

I know exactly how packed Ryan's schedule usually is—board meetings, investor calls, endless business dinners. I've spent enough lonely evenings to have realistic expectations.

"A prenatal checkup is important," Ryan insists, his voice softening as he moves to sit beside me, his arm sliding around my shoulders. "I won't be busy. Trust me."

I don't resist his embrace. It feels... nice. Comforting.

Milton finishes tidying the kitchen and slips out quietly, throwing me a knowing smile before closing the door behind him.

When the day of my appointment arrives, Ryan shows up at my building early, waiting for me downstairs. I'm surprised to see his schedule completely cleared—no urgent phone calls, no Simon hovering nearby with documents requiring immediate attention.

At the hospital, Ryan stays by my side through every examination, watching with genuine interest as the technician explains each test. When the ultrasound reveals our baby's tiny form on the screen, his hand finds mine and squeezes gently.

"Look at that," he whispers, voice filled with awe.

The technician smiles at us. "Would you like to know the gender?"

Ryan looks at me questioningly, and I nod.

"It's a boy," the technician announces.

Ryan's face breaks into the widest smile I've seen in years. His joy is so unrestrained, so genuine, that for a moment I forget all our problems.

"A son," he murmurs, his eyes suspiciously bright. "Our son."

During the blood draw, he sits beside me, distracting me with stories from work. When my legs cramp up during the long wait between tests, he massages my calves without being asked, ignoring the curious glances from other patients.

"Are you comfortable?" he keeps asking. "Do you need water? Are you hungry?"

By our final test, I'm actually enjoying his attentiveness. It's been so long since anyone treated me with such care.

That's when his phone rings.

I glance at the screen and recognize the name immediately. "Sophie's calling," I say, nodding toward his phone. "Go ahead and answer it."

Ryan studies my face carefully before accepting the call. "What is it?" His tone is clipped, professional.

I can't hear Sophie's side of the conversation, but Ryan's face gradually darkens.

"Why would you go to the construction site?" he asks, frowning deeply.

I try not to eavesdrop, focusing instead on the final test results the nurse hands me. Everything looks normal—thank goodness.

"I should head home," I tell Ryan once he ends the call. "You clearly have something urgent to handle."

Ryan reaches for my hand, gripping it tightly. "I'll take you home first."

In the car, curiosity gets the better of me. "Was that Sophie calling?"

Ryan nods, keeping his eyes on the road. "Yes. There was an accident at one of our project sites. She got hurt."

"Oh," I say, processing this information. "Are you going to visit her at the hospital?"

Ryan doesn't answer immediately.

"Why don't I come with you?" I suggest suddenly, surprising even myself. "I'd like to see what game she's playing."

"You won't be upset?" Ryan asks cautiously.

"Do I seem that petty to you?" I shoot back, signaling the driver to change direction.

At the hospital, Ryan stays close, one hand always at my back, warning me about steps and uneven flooring as we walk. His protectiveness is almost comical—I'm pregnant, not made of glass.

When we enter Sophie's room, her eyes light up at the sight of Ryan before quickly noticing me beside him. The sparkle dims slightly, but her polite smile remains fixed in place.

"Ryan, you came," she says, voice breathy with relief.

Then, with a performance worthy of an Oscar: "Serena, you're here too? I'm so sorry to trouble you both."

I survey Sophie critically. Her leg is in a cast, but everything else about her seems perfectly composed—hair styled, makeup flawless, hospital gown somehow looking designer on her slender frame. Not exactly the disheveled appearance of someone who's just survived a construction accident.

"Ryan, the project manager is waiting in the hallway," Sophie says softly. "He can explain what happened."

Ryan nods and turns to me. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

He helps me into a nearby chair before stepping out.

The moment the door closes, the atmosphere in the room changes instantly.

Sophie's eyes lock with mine, all traces of vulnerability vanishing. We stare at each other, two women who understand exactly what the other wants.

"You're getting quite big, aren't you?" Sophie remarks suddenly, her smile turning cold. "Must be far along now."

I raise an eyebrow, surprised by how quickly Little Miss Perfect has dropped her act. "Yes, just had my checkup today actually."

Sophie laughs, a sharp, unpleasant sound. "Prenatal screenings only tell you so much. You never know if there might be defects or... other problems. Such unpredictable things, babies."

My body tenses, blood running cold at her implied threat. "What exactly are you saying?"

"Exactly what you think I'm saying," she responds, dropping all pretense. "If I were you, carrying Ryan's child, I'd stay quietly at home instead of parading around. Your relationship with Ryan was never strong to begin with—if something happened to that baby, he'd have no reason to keep you around." *freewebnovel.com*

Her face is triumphant, smug. I stand up so quickly my chair scrapes against the floor.

"Are you threatening my child?" My voice shakes with rage.

"Do you really think Ryan cares about you as a person?" Sophie taunts. "You're deluding yourself, Serena. You're nothing but an incubator for his heir."

Something snaps inside me. Before I can think, I step forward and slap her hard across the face.

Sophie doesn't even try to dodge. Instead, her eyes flash with excitement as she wails dramatically, transforming back into the fragile victim in an instant.

"Serena! What did I ever do to deserve this?" she cries, tears appearing on command.

"You manipulative bitch! I'll show you exactly what you deserve!" I raise my hand again, wanting nothing more than to wipe that fake innocence off her face.

I was too soft-hearted before. This viper should never have been allowed back into our lives!

The door opens, and Ryan rushes in, catching my wrist mid-air. His expression darkens as he takes in the scene.

"Serena, let's talk this through calmly," he says, his grip firm on my arm.

Chapter 77: Chapter 77 I don't want Serena upset

Serena's POV

I'm trembling with fury as Ryan grabs my wrist. The nerve of him, defending that woman after what she just said!

"Let go of me, Ryan!" I snap, yanking my arm free. "You and her are two sides of the same coin! I was a fool to believe anything you said!"

I clutch my purse tightly, desperate to get away from both of them. My chest feels tight with anger and betrayal.

"Serena, what's wrong? You said you wouldn't get upset," Ryan calls after me, confusion clear in his voice.

I let out a derisive snort. Why bother explaining? He'd never believe Sophie threatened our baby. He's always seen what he wants to see when it comes to her.

Storming out of the hospital, I flag down a taxi, my hands still shaking as I give the driver my address. I need to get home, away from Sophie's venom and Ryan's blindness.

We're about halfway there when I feel the sudden jolt—metal crunching, tires screeching. My body lurches forward, and I instinctively wrap my arms around my belly, heart racing.

"Damn it!" the driver curses, turning around with an apologetic expression. "I'm so sorry, miss. We got rear-ended. You should probably take another cab. This one's on me."

Before I can even respond, he's unbuckling his seatbelt and jumping out to deal with the other driver.

I sit there for a moment, trying to calm my racing heart. My baby. My baby has to be okay. Taking deep breaths, I finally manage to collect myself enough to exit the taxi.

The midday sun beats down mercilessly as I stand on the sidewalk, one hand shielding my eyes, the other supporting my pregnant belly. Car after car passes by, none willing to stop near an accident scene. I can't blame them—nobody wants to get stuck in traffic.

After what feels like an eternity, my legs starting to wobble beneath me, a familiar black sedan pulls up to the curb.

Julian steps out, his concerned eyes quickly taking in the accident scene before landing on me. "Were you in that taxi? Are you alright?" he asks, immediately moving to support me with an arm around my waist.

I feel slightly uncomfortable with the contact, but after standing so long under the blazing sun, my legs have turned to jelly. I don't push him away.

"You've been standing here long, haven't you? Come on, let me drive you home," he says gently.

I manage a weak "Thanks," relief washing over me. Thank goodness for familiar faces when you need them most.

"What are you doing in this area?" I ask as he helps me into the passenger seat.

"Oh," Julian responds casually, "I was meeting a client nearby. Spotted the accident from a distance. If I hadn't noticed you standing there, I would've taken a detour around this mess."

He carefully helps me into the car before walking around to the driver's side. As we pull away from the curb, the silence feels heavy. I'm still seething about what happened at the hospital, my mind replaying Sophie's threats over and over.

Julian glances at me occasionally, reading my mood. "Rough day?" he asks, but doesn't push when I only respond with a noncommittal hum.

When we arrive at my building, Julian insists on escorting me upstairs. "Let me make sure you get in safely," he says, his voice gentle but firm.

I'm too exhausted to argue. We step into the elevator together, and just as the doors begin to close, a hand shoots out between them.

The doors slide back open, and I find myself staring directly into Ryan's thunderous face.

Ryan's POV

I stare at Serena's retreating figure with a mix of confusion and frustration. What the hell just happened? One minute we're having a civil conversation in the hospital, and the next she's storming out like I've betrayed her somehow.

"Serena!" I call after her, but she's already disappeared through the hospital doors.

Behind me, Sophie continues her theatrical sobbing. Something doesn't add up here.

"Sophie, what exactly did you say to her?" I demand, turning back to face her.

She blinks those familiar doe eyes at me, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Nothing, Ryan! I just expressed concern for her and the baby. She must really hate me... she just attacked me out of nowhere."

I narrow my eyes, studying her carefully. The Sophie I thought I knew years ago would never lie to me, but this woman before me... something feels off.

I'm not an idiot. Serena wouldn't fly into a rage without good reason.

Whatever happened, Sophie must have said something to upset her.

I'm walking out of the hospital room.

"Doctor," I catch the attending physician in the hallway, "how serious are Sophie's injuries?"

The doctor doesn't answer immediately, looking me up and down instead.

"Are you a family member?"

"No, I'm her employer. Her injury happened accidentally, and I need to assess the severity to determine appropriate compensation." I narrow my eyes, my voice carrying unmistakable authority. "So your assessment is critical and legally binding."

The doctor's gaze flickers nervously. After a long hesitation, he finally speaks.

"Miss Hart's injury... doesn't actually require a cast. She insisted on it because she kept complaining about the pain."

My expression darkens immediately. "So you're saying Sophie deliberately exaggerated her injury?"

The doctor remains silent, which is answer enough.

I turn on my heel and march straight back to the hospital room. Sophie is lying in bed, and when she sees me enter, she instantly switches to damsel-in-distress mode.

"Ryan, my leg hurts so much. This cast makes everything difficult. Looks like I'll be staying in the hospital for a while. Will you come visit me often?"

Her eyes shine with hope—the kind of look most men would find impossible to resist.

But I just stare at her coldly, anger evident in my voice. "What did you say to Serena earlier?"

Sophie freezes momentarily before falling back on her script. "I didn't say anything... I was just concerned about her, that's all."

I frown deeply, glancing coldly at her casted leg. "Is your injury really that serious?"

"Ryan, how can you say that? I didn't want to get hurt either."

"I spoke with the doctor. Your injury doesn't require a cast. You insisted on it." My voice comes out cold, controlled, but inside I'm seething.

The flash of panic in her eyes confirms everything. "Ryan, how could you say that? I'm in so much pain..."

"Cut the act, Sophie. You deliberately called me here, didn't you?"

Her facade cracks for just a moment before she launches into full dramatic mode, tears streaming down her face. "Yes! I wanted you to see me! To care about me! Is that so terrible?"

"Remember when I had that accident years ago? You know why it happened! I lost my memory, struggled so hard, and when I finally made it back to you, you already had another woman!"

She's trembling now, her voice breaking. "Have you ever considered how I feel? My heart is shattered, Ryan!"

The guilt hits me like a physical blow. Our past is complicated, painful—an accident I've carried the weight of for years. I lower my eyes, anger dissipating.

"I'm sorry about what happened back then. It was an accident."

"I searched for you for so long..." freewebnovel.com

"I know, I understand," she interrupts between sobs. "People can't stay frozen in time. You have a new love and a baby on the way. I'm happy for you, Ryan. I just wanted a little bit of your concern, that's all."

"Is that really so awful of me?"

Her wide, tear-filled eyes lock onto mine, projecting pure vulnerability. If Serena were here, she'd probably applaud Sophie's performance. The thought of Serena snaps me back to reality—my pregnant wife who just stormed out of here upset.

"We need to stop seeing each other, Sophie. I don't want Serena upset, and these games need to end."

Her tears don't sway me this time. I leave without looking back.

In the car, my thoughts race to Serena. Something doesn't feel right. I try calling her, but the call doesn't go through—she's blocked me again. Dammit!

The radio crackles with news of a car accident nearby. A cold knot forms in my stomach as the reporter describes the location—right along Serena's likely route home. My hands tighten on the steering wheel as I accelerate, praying I'm just being paranoid.

I rush home, hoping she's there, safe. As I pull into the parking garage, relief floods through me when I spot her getting out of a car. She's alive. She's okay.

But my relief evaporates instantly when I realize whose car she's exiting. Julian Clarke.

They're walking toward the elevator together, his hand hovering near the small of her back in a protective gesture that makes my jaw clench.

I sprint across the garage, sliding my hand between the closing elevator doors just in time.

The doors slide back open, and I'm staring directly at my wife—her face pale, exhausted, angry—standing next to the man who's been waiting for any opportunity to take her from me.

The look on Julian's face—a mixture of surprise and something close to triumph—makes me want to slam my fist through the elevator wall.

"Serena," I say, my voice tight with barely contained emotion. "I've been trying to reach you. Are you alright?"

Chapter 78: Chapter 78 You've only seen half my talents, Serena.

Serena's POV

Hearing him ask about me, a sharp wave of anger flared in my chest. My lips parted, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of a reply.

"Ex-Man, are you coming up or what? The elevator's going to alarm if you keep holding the door," Julian called out mockingly.

"Serena, did you ask him to pick you up?" Ryan's voice was ice cold, and I immediately knew he was angry.

But seriously? I should be the angry one here!

"How is that any of your business? If you're not coming up, then move aside." I pushed him away without hesitation and closed the elevator doors.

Just before they shut completely, I caught a glimpse of disappointment in Ryan's eyes. Whatever. He didn't get to play the wounded party here.

"You two fighting again?" Julian asked beside me, his voice carefully neutral.

I didn't bother responding, just let my chest rise and fall with heavy breaths. Fighting? We were way beyond that. My blood was practically boiling.

"I've said it before, but he's not good enough for you," Julian muttered, shaking his head slightly.

I could tell he wanted to say more—probably offer himself up as the better alternative—but thankfully he read the room. I wasn't in any state for that kind of conversation right now.

The elevator finally dinged, announcing our arrival. Freedom, at last.

I dug through my purse for my keys, fingers fumbling with frustration when another elevator chimed. You've got to be kidding me.

Ryan stepped out, his face a storm of emotions. Julian immediately tensed beside me.

"Why are you following us like some kind of clingy bandage?" Julian asked, voice dripping with contempt.

"Just ignore him," I muttered, finally locating my keys and jamming them into the lock. "Let's go inside."

I didn't spare Ryan a single glance as we walked in. Not one. The satisfaction of slamming the door in his face—again—was almost therapeutic.

"There are drinks in the fridge if you want one," I said to Julian, collapsing onto my recliner. My mind was still racing, replaying our argument over and over.

This was Julian's first time in my apartment. Usually, he'd just drop me off downstairs and leave.

"Not bad at all," he said approvingly, though I barely registered his words.

After a quick tour around my apartment, Julian finally grabbed a drink from the fridge. "You must be hungry. I noticed you've got ingredients in there—how about I cook something?"

I snapped out of my daze. "You don't have to go through the trouble."

"Don't be so formal with me," he insisted, already finding an apron and tying it around his waist with practiced ease.

I couldn't help but drift over, curiosity piqued. "You cook?"

Julian flashed me a smile, eyebrow raised teasingly. "Is that so surprising? You've only seen half my talents, Serena."

It was surprising, actually. In my mind, Julian had always been the pampered heir who probably had a personal chef his entire life.

While I was still processing this revelation, Julian had already started chopping vegetables with remarkable skill. A potato was transformed into perfectly uniform slices, then julienned into thin strips with lightning speed. *freewebnovel.com*

My eyes widened. "Your knife skills are impressive."

"Of course they are. I've practiced for years," he replied with playful confidence.

I couldn't help but laugh at his serious expression. "Why would you bother learning that?"

Julian placed the potato strips in cold water, then moved on to mincing garlic and herbs before heating oil in a pan. Just when I thought he wouldn't answer my teasing question, he spoke.

In the warmth of my kitchen, surrounded by the sounds and smells of cooking, Julian's gaze was intense as it met mine.

"Because I always hoped that someday, I'd have the chance to cook for the woman I care about."

The oil started sizzling loudly, breaking the moment. Julian turned away, focusing on the stove as he added herbs to the hot pan.

"Serena, you should step out—don't let the smoke bother you."

I stood frozen for a moment before hurriedly retreating from the kitchen, our exchange hanging in the air between us as if it had never happened.

By the time Julian called me over, he had prepared a full meal—four dishes and a soup—all arranged beautifully on my dining table.

"Well? Looks good, doesn't it?" Julian asked, removing the apron with evident pride.

"It really does. Let me try." I took a bite of the herb-seasoned fries with a garlic aioli dipping sauce. The flavor was perfect—crispy on the outside, tender inside, with the herbs adding just the right touch of brightness.

I gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up. "Seriously impressive."

Julian served me a bowl of pasta with a light cream sauce before sitting down himself.

"I kept everything fairly light. Next time, I'll make you some proper bone broth—something nutritious. The most important thing right now is for you to recover and not stress yourself out."

I nodded and continued enjoying the unexpected feast.

Sophie's POV

I was feeling smug. Absolutely smug.

The moment Ryan left, I bit down hard on my lip and demanded the doctor remove my cast immediately. I wasn't going to spend another minute in this wretched hospital bed. Not when I had plans to execute.

While the doctor worked, my phone buzzed. Well, well, what perfect timing! Photos of Serena and Julian looking cozy together—him helping her into a car after that little

"accident," but the angle made it look deliciously intimate. The sender even included bank details, expecting payment for their services. Worth every penny, I'd say.

"You really shouldn't rush your recovery," the doctor droned on as he finished removing my cast. "The injury needs proper—"

"Next time, keep unnecessary comments to yourself," I snapped, cutting him off mid-sentence. "Say only what's needed or nothing at all!"

The doctor's mouth tightened, clearly offended. Fine by me. He turned and walked out without bothering to give me recovery instructions. Not that I needed them anyway. This was just a surface wound—looked dramatic but hadn't even touched the bone. All that fuss for nothing.

I tossed the prescribed ointment into my purse and finally checked my phone properly. Looking at these photos again, I couldn't help the smile spreading across my face. My mood instantly transformed from stormy to radiant.

A plan formed in my mind. I dug out my second phone—the untraceable one—and selected the most suggestive photos. Without hesitation, I forwarded them straight to Ryan.

Ryan and I had just parted on terrible terms. If I sent these from my regular number, he'd delete them without looking. But an anonymous tip? Oh, he wouldn't be able to resist.

I slipped the phone back into my purse, not even anxious about his response. Photos like these would drive him absolutely mad. The thought of his face turning dark with jealousy and anger... I couldn't help but smile.

As I walked out of the hospital, victory practically radiated from me. Sometimes revenge is sweeter when you don't witness the explosion, but just know it's coming.

Chapter 79: Chapter 79 Sophia's ex-husband

Ryan's POV

I stared at the photo on my phone, my blood boiling with rage. I had no idea who had sent it or why, but the image alone was enough to twist something sharp in my chest.

I couldn't confront Serena about it—what right did I even have?

But that didn't stop me from monitoring every sound from next door, my ears practically pressed against the wall. The only small comfort was that they'd kept the door open the entire time.

When I finally heard Julian preparing to leave, I set aside my laptop and moved to my door.

The timing had to look casual, but I wasn't about to let him strut away without acknowledging the territory he was treading on.

Our eyes locked in the hallway. The tension was immediate, thick enough to choke on.

Julian didn't hurry off. Instead, he gave me this smug little smile that made my fingers itch to rearrange his face.

"So you've moved in right next door," he observed with mock surprise. "Being closer to the water doesn't guarantee you'll drink first, you know."

"Still better odds than being rejected outright," I shot back.

His expression flickered. Good. Hit a nerve there.

"Since you're already an ex-husband, maybe keep some appropriate distance?" he suggested, eyes hardening. "Serena was absolutely livid after seeing you. If I hadn't been with her, she might have collapsed on the sidewalk with no one to help."

My jaw clenched. "You're crossing lines, Julian."

"Serena's single," he said with infuriating confidence. "I have every right to pursue her. Don't think that just because she's carrying your child you can do whatever you want."

He stepped closer, his voice dropping. "And I won't back off. Not for you. Not for anyone."

We stood there, locked in silent combat, neither willing to break first. Finally, Julian turned and stepped into the elevator, leaving me staring daggers at the closing doors.

I glanced at Serena's firmly shut door, then slammed my own with enough force to rattle the hinges.

The cold war between us stretched into days. We didn't cross paths once, though not for lack of trying on my part.

I found myself listening for her movements, sometimes standing by my door when I heard her in the hallway, but never quite finding the right moment to "accidentally" run into her.

Meanwhile, Sophie was becoming a constant presence at headquarters, showing up with homemade meals almost daily. I refused to see her, but she wasn't easily deterred.

She'd leave the food and disappear without complaint, a patient predator biding her time.

After nearly a week of this, she changed tactics. My phone rang just past midnight as I was finishing some work at the office.

"Ryan?" Sophie's voice came through small and frightened. "I'm scared. Someone's following me... they keep knocking on my door."

I rubbed my temples, exhaustion washing over me. "Have you called the police?"

She let out a choked sob. "No, I—I'm afraid they'll break in before the police arrive. Please, Ryan, I'm terrified. Could you come check? Please?"

I hesitated, and in that moment, a scream pierced through the phone, followed by Sophie's panicked voice:

"Who are you? Get out!"

Then the line went dead.

Damn it. I grabbed my coat and rushed out, speeding all the way to her apartment. Whatever our past, I couldn't ignore someone potentially in danger.

When I arrived, her door stood ajar. Inside, Sophie sat amidst upturned furniture and scattered possessions, her face tear-stained and eyes red-rimmed.

"What happened here?" I demanded from the doorway.

She launched herself at me, burying her face against my chest before I could step back.

"Ryan!" she sobbed. "I was so scared! I thought he was going to kill me!"

I didn't push her away immediately, letting her calm down first. Once her breathing steadied, I tried again.

"Sophie, what happened exactly?"

She looked up at me, her whole body trembling. "It's—it's my ex-husband. He's not dead. He found me!"

"Ex-husband?" This was news to me. "He's alive? Why is he causing trouble for you?"

Her eyes filled with fresh tears, desperation written across her face. "Ryan, please take me away from here. He knows where I live now. He'll come back tomorrow!"

I surveyed the wrecked living room with its overturned tables and broken glass. With a sigh, I led her to my car. She grabbed only her purse, clinging to my arm as if afraid I'd vanish.

The car's heater gradually thawed her panic, and she began explaining in fragmented sentences.

"I never told you everything about my past," she said, voice quavering. "Yes, my ex-husband did save me, but I never wanted to be with him. He pursued me relentlessly."

She gripped my arm tighter. "At first, he seemed caring, but he turned out to be a monster! He had these... perversions. He monitored me constantly, isolated me from everyone. I was practically his prisoner until I finally escaped."

Tears streamed down her face again. "I thought returning to the country would keep me safe from him. But now..."

"I'm so scared, Ryan..."

As her story unfolded, I pieced together the narrative she was spinning.

"I understand," I said finally, gently extracting my arm from her grip. "You can't stay at your place now. I'll arrange new accommodations for you tomorrow."

She nodded frantically, still looking thoroughly rattled.

"You can stay at a hotel tonight," I suggested.

"No!" Her eyes widened in fresh panic. "He'll find me! He could be watching right now from somewhere, tracking my movements."

She shuddered visibly, and I sighed.

"What do you suggest then?"

"Take me to your family home," she pleaded. "I promise I won't be any trouble. If he finds me again, I'll never see you again—he'll drag me away forever!"

I hesitated for a long time while Sophie continued her soft weeping, looking utterly helpless and broken.

Against my better judgment, I finally relented. "Let's go."

And so Sophie got her wish, moving into the Blackwood mansion that same night.

Though I placed her in a guest room on the first floor, far from my quarters, she seemed perfectly satisfied.

Exhaustion hit me like a wave as I gave the staff brief instructions before heading upstairs.

Chapter 80: Chapter 80 Living in the Blackwood mansion

Sophie's POV

As soon as I closed the door behind me, I dropped the terrified act. No need for that performance anymore. I couldn't help the smug smile spreading across my face. Everything was going according to plan.

I glanced at my phone, seeing a message from an unknown number.

"You need to pay extra for this job."

I typed back immediately, "No problem. Just don't screw up the performance!"

The whole "abusive ex-husband" story? Completely fabricated, of course. I'd carefully crafted that little tale and hired an actor to play the part.

While I did marry a wealthy older man abroad who genuinely died, that pathetic backstory was pure fiction.

But how else could I make Ryan feel sorry for me? Men like him are so predictably heroic when faced with a damsel in distress.

After deleting all traces of our conversation, I tossed my phone aside and treated myself to a luxurious hot bath.

I'd already decided to take a few days off from the subsidiary company. Might as well enjoy myself while Ryan was feeling too guilty to kick me out of his mansion.

"Not bad, Sophie," I whispered to myself as I slipped into the brand new silk nightgown the housekeeper had brought me. "Not bad at all."

The nightgown must have been intended for Serena—the former lady of this house. Too bad for her, I'd be the one wearing these clothes now.

I slept until late morning, stretching luxuriously when I finally decided to grace the world with my presence.

The Blackwood estate's head chef wasn't in today, but that hardly mattered. As Ryan's "former flame," I still commanded respect. The staff treated me with kid gloves, afraid of displeasing me.

After breakfast, I carried my coffee upstairs, smiling at how quickly I'd made myself at home.

"Miss Hart," a nervous maid called out, "Mr. Blackwood doesn't allow anyone into his private rooms."

I turned to her with my sweetest smile. "I just need some clothes to wear. I came here in such a hurry yesterday and brought nothing with me. Surely I can't spend all day wandering around in nightwear?"

The nightgown wasn't revealing, but it wasn't appropriate for daytime either. The maid wisely shut her mouth and backed down.

I pushed open the door to the master bedroom, taking in the familiar sight. Still the same austere gray color scheme, just as minimalist and uptight as Ryan himself.

When I walked into the walk-in closet, however, my smile vanished. I'd expected to find a few of Serena's things, but instead, the entire closet was packed with women's clothing. Designer shoes and limited-edition handbags lined the shelves—some I'd never been able to afford myself.

I clenched my fists, examining each item carefully until I noticed something odd. All these clothes appeared brand new, unworn. The tags were still attached to most pieces.

My mood darkened. Ryan had obviously bought all this for Serena. The collection represented everything he wanted to give her, everything he never gave me.

"Well," I muttered, pulling out a striking red dress, "finders keepers."

I slipped it on, admiring how the color made my skin glow and my red lips pop. Ryan always loved me in red—said it matched my fiery personality. I spent some time in front of the mirror, adding golden stilettos and a limited-edition handbag to complete the look. Perfect.

I shoved the nightgown into the back of a drawer and strutted out of the closet feeling like the queen I was born to be.

Bored with having no one to admire my new outfit, I video called my sister.

I arranged myself artfully on the balcony chaise lounge, letting the sunlight catch in my hair as she answered.

"Sis? Where are you?" Ivy asked, probably thinking I was abroad again.

I laughed. "Can't you tell?" *freewebnovel.com*

I flipped the camera, deliberately capturing the luxurious room behind me. Her gasp was exactly what I'd hoped for.

"Oh my god! You're at the Blackwood mansion!"

"Is that so surprising?" I asked, not bothering to hide my smugness.

"Are you and Ryan back together? When can I come visit?" Ivy had been desperate to get into the Blackwood estate for ages, but Serena had always blocked her attempts.

"Patience, little sister. You're my flesh and blood—I'll buy you a mansion just like this one someday."

I couldn't help the flash of contempt in my eyes. My sister was so transparent, so pathetically obvious with her ambitions. She'd had years while I was abroad to sink her claws into Ryan and had accomplished nothing. Now that I was back, I wouldn't let anyone stand in my way—not even my own sister.

"You're amazing, sis!"

The way Ivy eagerly swallowed my empty promises sometimes made me wonder if we were truly related. How could someone be so gullible?

"Enough chitchat," I said. "I need you to do something for me."

Her excitement instantly faded into a pout. "You only remember I exist when you need something."

"Don't be ridiculous. Everything I do is for our future," I said firmly.

She gave in immediately. "Fine, but I'm nearly broke. The hotel I'm staying in is awful—people make noise all night. It's miserable."

"I'll transfer you some money right away. Find yourself a decent place. Hotels aren't safe anyway." I waved dismissively.

Her face lit up again. "You're the best sister ever! I knew you'd take care of me."

Now that she was happy, I explained her task: "It's simple. Find Serena and tell her I'm living at the Blackwood estate now. Tell her Ryan and I have reconciled. Make her as angry as possible."

What better way to drive these two further apart? And if things went wrong, I could always blame my impulsive little sister.

Ivy, predictably, was thrilled at the chance to torment Serena. "Leave it to me! I'll handle it right away."

"Do it today. Don't wait," I insisted. "I'll text you Serena's address."

"On my way!"

After ending the call, I closed my eyes, imagining all the possible outcomes. If we were really lucky, maybe the pregnant princess would get so upset she'd lose that baby.

Two birds, one stone.

Poor Serena wouldn't know what hit her. And Ryan? He'd be mine again before he even realized what game we were playing.