

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

- Chapter 81 Candlelight Dinner

Chapter 81: Chapter 81 Candlelight Dinner

Serena's POV

I woke up to three missed calls from Maya, each one following a string of increasingly frantic text messages:

"I swear I had NOTHING to do with this dinner thing!"

"Ryan practically begged me to convince you!"

"DON'T KILL ME but I might have told him you're free tonight..."

"SERENA ANSWER YOUR PHONE"

I groaned, dropping my phone onto the pillow. Maya had clearly sold me out.

"Traitor," I muttered, though I couldn't summon any real anger. She'd been pushing for me to give Ryan a second chance for weeks now. "He's different," she kept insisting. "The way he looks at you when you're not watching... it's like you're his entire universe."

I stared at the ceiling, trying to ignore the nervous flutter in my stomach. After everything that had happened between us—the coldness, the misunderstandings, the heartbreak—did I really want to risk opening those wounds again?

My phone buzzed with another message. This time from Ryan:

"Dinner tonight? I promise just conversation. No pressure."

Such simple words, yet they sent my pulse racing. The old Ryan wouldn't have asked. He would have stated a time and place, expecting me to arrange my schedule around his. This new approach—this consideration for my feelings—was throwing me off balance.

I typed and deleted three different responses before settling on:

"Fine. Just dinner. 7pm."

His reply came instantly: "Thank you for giving me this chance."

I tossed my phone aside and buried my face in my hands. What was I doing?

The truth was, Ryan had been relentless these past few days. Flowers arriving at the office each morning, each bouquet more extravagant than the last.

New resources flowed into the studio more frequently than before, and he seemed determined to win over everyone on my team—especially Maya.

It was infuriating how easily he slipped into everyone's good graces, as if rewriting history with gestures and goodwill could erase the damage he'd done.

"It's just dinner," I reminded my reflection as I applied a touch of lipstick. "Not a reconciliation."

The doorbell rang at exactly 7:00. Ryan had always been punctual—one of his few qualities I'd never had reason to complain about.

When I opened the door, the sight of him standing there—tall and commanding in his perfectly tailored suit—made my heart skip in that infuriating way I'd never been able to control around him. He held violets, my favorite flowers—something I didn't remember ever telling him.

"You remembered," I said, nodding at the bouquet.

"I remember everything about you, Serena." His voice was low, sincere in a way I'd rarely heard before. "I just didn't show it when it mattered."

I accepted the flowers, our fingers brushing briefly.

"I've reserved a table at La Mer," he said. "Unless you'd prefer somewhere else?"

La Mer—the most exclusive restaurant in the city, impossible to book without weeks of notice unless you were Ryan Blackwood. The place where we'd had our first official date, though I doubted he remembered that detail.

"La Mer is fine," I agreed, grabbing my coat. The sooner we got this over with, the sooner I could figure out why my heart wouldn't stop pounding.

The drive to the restaurant was filled with a silence I didn't try to break. Ryan made a few attempts at conversation—asking about my designs, mentioning a charity event.

But I didn't respond.

La Mer was exactly as I remembered—elegant, intimate, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the harbor. The maître d' greeted Ryan by name and led us to a secluded corner table.

"I requested this specific table," Ryan said once we were seated. "It's where we sat on our first date."

I blinked in surprise. "You remember that?"

A smile touched his lips—not his usual controlled business smile, but something gentler. "I remember more than you think, Serena."

The candlelight softened his features, highlighting cheekbones that had grown sharper since our separation. Had he lost weight? The thought made me unexpectedly concerned.

"Why did you really ask me here tonight, Ryan?" I finally asked as the waiter poured wine I hadn't remembered ordering.

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Because I miss you. "

"Let's see how you handle this," I said quietly, my tone carrying both warning and challenge.

Our dinner arrived—seafood for me, steak for him, exactly as we'd always ordered—and the conversation shifted to safer topics. With each passing moment, the tension between us eased slightly, replaced by something almost comfortable.

By dessert, I found myself laughing at his dry observations about his board members, surprising myself with how natural it felt. When had I last genuinely enjoyed Ryan's company?

As the waiter cleared our plates, Ryan reached across the table, his fingers lightly brushing mine. "There's something I've been wanting to give you for a long time."

He pulled a flat box from his jacket pocket—not a ring box, I noted with both relief and an unexpected pang of disappointment.

"What is it?" I asked, not reaching for it.

"Something I should have given you during our island vacation," he said quietly. "Please, open it."

With slightly trembling fingers, I opened the box to reveal a delicate platinum necklace. A crescent moon cradled a small, brilliant star—simple yet breathtaking in its elegance.

"It's beautiful," I whispered, genuinely stunned by the piece.

"It was designed specifically for you," Ryan explained, his voice unusually gentle. "The moon representing you, and the star..." He hesitated. "I'd intended it to represent our future child."

My breath caught. "Why didn't you give it to me then?"

Pain shadowed his expression. "Because at that time, you were upset with me about Sophia—I didn't handle things properly." His voice dropped, raw and earnest. "I let her interfere... but I promise, I'll make it right. I'll make sure she leaves. If you give me another chance, I won't let anything come between us again."

I stared at the necklace, imagining how differently things might have been if he'd given it to me then, if he'd truly let me into his heart.

"May I?" he asked, reaching for the necklace.

I hesitated, then turned so he could place it around my neck. His fingers were warm against my skin as he fastened the clasp, lingering a moment longer than necessary.

"Perfect," he murmured as I faced him again, his eyes darkening with an emotion I wasn't ready to name. freewebmovel.com

The pendant rested just below my collarbone, cool against my skin but somehow warming me from within.

"Thank you," I said softly, touching it with my fingertips. "Not just for the necklace, but for tonight. For being honest."

Something shifted in the air between us—a tentative bridge across the chasm that had separated us for so long.

I took a deep breath, deciding to lay my own cards on the table. "There's something I've wanted to ask you for a long time."

Ryan nodded, his full attention on me. "Anything."

Chapter 82: Chapter 82 Sophie and Ryan have reconciled

Serena's POV

I took a deep, shaky breath, my fingers tightening around the necklace Ryan had given me. I needed to know.

I had to hear it from him, to finally understand why that night had gone so wrong.

The memory of being trapped, helpless, the cold fear creeping into every part of me... it still made my chest ache. Every time I thought about it, my pulse spiked, my hands trembled.

"That night I was kidnapped," I began, watching his face darken at the memory. "I called you for help, but Ivy answered your phone. She told me..." My voice faltered. "She told me you were busy—with her—and couldn't be disturbed."

Ryan's expression changed from confusion to shock to cold fury in rapid succession. "What? I was at the office all night. Ivy was nowhere near me or my phone."

"Then how did she answer when I called?" My fingers tightened around my glass.

"I'd left my personal phone at home that day," he said slowly, realization dawning in his eyes. "I was using my backup phone for urgent calls. Ivy must have..." He closed his eyes briefly, fury evident in the rigid set of his jaw. "She deliberately kept your call from me."

"Why would you even have let her into your home?" I couldn't keep the hurt from my voice.

"I didn't," Ryan said grimly. "My housekeeper let her in when she claimed she had documents I needed. I never saw her that night—I was working until dawn trying to close the Henderson deal." His eyes met mine, intense with regret. "If I'd known you were in danger, nothing would have kept me from you. Nothing. And now... I'll make sure Sophia stays away. I just need one more chance with you."

The conviction in his voice made my throat tight. All this time, I'd thought he'd chosen Ivy over me in my moment of need.

"I believed her," I whispered. "That's why I told you I wanted a divorce after that night. I thought you'd gone back to her."

Ryan reached across the table, taking my hand in his. This time, I didn't pull away.

"Serena, there has never been anything between Ivy and me—not before you, not during our marriage, not after. She's been trying to manipulate her way into my life for years."

"But Sophie—"

"Was my past," he said firmly. His thumb brushed across my knuckles. "I'd rather risk everything than lose you again."

When Ryan drove me home later, the silence between us was charged but not uncomfortable. He walked me to my door, maintaining that same respectful distance that now felt more like consideration than coldness.

"Would you have dinner with me again?" he asked as I unlocked my door. "Perhaps next week?"

I turned to look at him, my hand unconsciously rising to touch the necklace at my throat. "I'd like that," I found myself saying, surprising us both.

The smile that crossed his face then was genuine, warming his eyes in a way I'd rarely seen. "Goodnight, Serena," he said, then leaned in slowly, giving me plenty of time to pull away.

I didn't. His lips brushed my cheek, light as a whisper, before he stepped back.

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"Goodnight, Ryan," I replied, slipping inside and closing the door before I could change my mind and invite him in.

I leaned against the door, my fingers still touching the necklace, wondering if I was making a terrible mistake or finally giving us both a chance to heal.

That night, I slept better than I had in months, waking to bright sunshine streaming through my curtains. For once, I felt hopeful, almost lighthearted as I stretched and got out of bed. Maybe, just maybe, things could be different this time.

I made coffee and wandered to the window, planning my day. Maybe I'd call Maya, tell her about dinner. Maybe I'd even go to the studio and work on those sketches that had been giving me trouble—inspiration suddenly seemed abundant this morning.

The doorbell rang, interrupting my thoughts. Too early for deliveries, and Maya never showed up before noon on weekends. Maybe Ryan had sent flowers?

I opened the door, coffee mug still in hand, only to freeze in shock.

Ivy Hart stood on my doorstep, her perfect face curved in a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"Serena, darling!" she exclaimed, as if we were old friends. "Hope I'm not interrupting your morning. May I come in? We have so much to catch up on."

The coffee mug nearly slipped from my fingers as my perfect morning shattered around me.

"What do you want?" I managed to keep my voice steady despite the shock of seeing her here—at my home, my sanctuary.

"Aren't you going to invite me in? Where are your manners, Serena?" She tilted her head, golden waves cascading perfectly over one shoulder.

I looked her up and down, anger replacing my initial shock. "You're hardly a guest. We're enemies, aren't we? Or have you conveniently forgotten everything you've done?"

Ivy let out a cold snort, her sweet facade cracking momentarily. "Fine, stay out here then. I'm just being kind enough to warn you—Sophie and Ryan have reconciled. You should stop embarrassing yourself by chasing after him."

My heart clenched painfully. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not making this up! See for yourself." She pulled out her phone with manicured fingers, tapping the screen with dramatic flair before turning it toward me.

My eyes locked onto Sophie's social media post. The background was unmistakably the master bedroom at Ryan's house. My stomach dropped. The caption read: "Perfect sunshine, endless love."

Just as sickeningly sweet as Sophie herself.

The lounge chair on the balcony—I'd bought that myself before our divorce, a place where I could soak up sunshine and forget my troubles. Now this woman was using it, contaminating it with her presence. I suddenly felt the chair was tainted.

"See it clearly now?" Ivy's voice dripped with satisfaction. "If they weren't back together, why would my sister be living at the Blackwood estate? Serena, you're really just fooling yourself!"

She slipped her phone back into her purse with deliberate slowness, clearly enjoying how my expression was changing. Her pleasure at my pain was palpable.

I gripped the doorknob tightly, feeling the blood drain from my face. I didn't want to believe Ivy's words, but that photo couldn't be faked. I'd personally chosen that lounge chair, remembered every detail of it.

"If you don't believe me, go see for yourself," Ivy continued, crossing her arms. "My sister is being waited on hand and foot, surrounded by admirers."

Her eyes flicked briefly to my midsection, her smile turning cruel. "If you're smart, you'll stop clinging to Ryan. Or better yet... get rid of that baby. Imagine how sad—a child born without a father."

Seeing the identical ugliness between the two sisters' expressions, I raised my hand and slapped her hard across the face before I even realized what I was doing.

"Shut your mouth!" I snapped.

Ivy hadn't expected me to react physically. She couldn't dodge in time. The slap connected solidly, leaving an instant red mark blooming across her cheek.

Chapter 83: Chapter 83 Who's upset you this time?

Serena's POV

My palm still stung from the force of the slap I'd given her. Ivy stood there, mouth agape, hand rising to her reddened face.

"You! You dare to slap me!" she shrieked, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Damn right I did! You heartless sisters think you can curse my baby?" I stepped closer, feeling a surge of protective rage. "I'm warning you now—show up at my door again, and I'm calling the police!"

"This is harassment! I'll hire the best lawyers and have you thrown in jail!" Ivy's voice cracked slightly.

She took a step back, visibly shaken by my outburst. I could see she hadn't expected this reaction from me—the woman who had once tolerated everything thrown her way now standing firm and fighting back.

"Go ahead, try it," I growled. "See who the courts believe—a pregnant woman defending her home or a stalker showing up uninvited."

Ivy swallowed hard, but couldn't resist getting in a few more poisonous words before fleeing.

"Serena, stop deluding yourself! If you don't believe me, go see for yourself—go to the Blackwood estate right now!"

"I don't waste my time with crazy women like you. You'll regret this day!"

I raised my hand again, and that was all it took. Ivy practically tripped over herself running away from my door.

After she left, I stood there breathing heavily, her venom still circulating through my system. The image of Sophie's social media post burned in my brain. I slammed the door shut and paced my apartment, my mind racing chaotically.

The longer I thought about it, the more restless I became. Finally, I changed clothes and called a taxi to the Blackwood estate.

Since the divorce, I hadn't been back once. When I first moved into that mansion, my heart was so full of hope—I genuinely believed it was the beginning of my happy ever after. Instead, each day had grown more suffocating until I couldn't breathe anymore.

I stood at the entrance for several minutes before finally pressing the doorbell. The familiar butler greeted me with a respectful smile, his manner unchanged.

"Madam, you've finally returned."

I glanced past him into the house, my expression darkening instantly.

"Don't call me that. Your future 'madam' remains to be seen."

I stepped inside, and there she was—that flash of red I'd glimpsed earlier solidified into Sophie's form. She turned toward me, raising her wine glass in mocking salute.

"Serena, what a rare visitor you are."

She was playing the perfect lady of the house.

I examined her dress—this season's latest design.

"I'm so sorry, Serena," Sophie said with a poisonous smile. "I came over in such a hurry last night, I didn't bring any clothes to change into. I just grabbed something from the closet. You're generous enough not to mind, aren't you?"

My heart lurched painfully. Last night? While I was sulking alone at home, Ryan had brought this snake back to our house?

"Serena, are you feeling alright? You look rather pale," Sophie asked with fake concern, her eyes dancing with challenge.

The butler rushed to steady me. "Madam, are you unwell?"

I snorted, refusing to let Sophie see me falter.

"It's just a dress. Ryan himself is something I've used and discarded," I shot back. "If you're so desperate to climb into his bed, why put on this innocent act?"

Sophie's smile froze on her face. Being exposed in front of the staff clearly made her uncomfortable.

"Sophie, your little white lotus routine makes me sick every time I see it."

With that, I turned and walked away. The butler called after me, but I ignored him. From the corner of my eye, I saw the other servants lowering their heads, pretending they hadn't witnessed the confrontation.

"Madam, there's been a misunderstanding," the butler hurried to explain. "The master did bring her back last night, but she slept in the guest room."

I waved dismissively. "I don't want to hear it. Whatever the misunderstanding, I don't care anymore. Don't tell Ryan I was here."

I climbed into a taxi and left, ignoring the butler's attempts to stop me.

I headed straight to my studio, deciding to stay with Maya for a while. The moment I walked into her office, she took one look at me and exclaimed.

"What happened? Who's upset you this time?"

My emotions had settled somewhat, but Maya could still read me like an open book.

Seeing my silence, she immediately put her hands on her hips.

"It's Ryan, isn't it? You're too good to him, and he's still making you upset! You're pregnant, for God's sake!"

I made a shushing gesture, feeling exasperated.

"Keep it down. This is the studio—do you want all the employees knowing about my personal life?"

Maya muttered an "oh" but remained agitated.

"What are you two fighting about this time?"

I didn't want to discuss it. I could already predict her reaction if Sophie's name came up—she'd probably blow the roof off the building in anger.

"Are you done with work? I want to stay at your place for a few days. Don't tell anyone."

Maya frowned, suddenly looking concerned.

"Seems like this is a serious fight."

"I suppose it is. Either way, I don't want to see him for a while, and I don't want him finding me."

Maya gasped dramatically. "Then staying at my place isn't safe at all! What if I'm here at work and he breaks in looking for you?"

I paused, realizing she had a point.

"What should I do then?"

Maya smiled mysteriously.

"Well, you need somewhere he'd never think to look."

I stared at her blankly. Was there anywhere in this city Ryan couldn't track me down if he really wanted to? I just needed a few days of peace.

"Julian, you live in SoHo, right?" Maya called out.

Julian nodded as he entered. "Yes. Why?"

"Serena could stay at your place! It's farther out, and Ryan would never think to look there," Maya suggested with a mischievous grin.

I caught my friend's not-so-subtle matchmaking attempt and shook my head.

"That's really not convenient. I'll just stay at your place for a couple days."

Julian was single and available—how would it look if I stayed with him? The last thing I needed was more complications in my already messy life.

Julian seemed to understand immediately and gave a light chuckle.

"I actually have two places in the SoHo. You're welcome to use one if you'd like."

"Two places? Julian, are you some secret trust fund baby we don't know about?" Maya asked excitedly.

Julian's smile widened as he casually explained.

"You're giving me too much credit, Maya. I just made some decent money a few years back. They're rentals actually. I guess it's habit from avoiding paparazzi—never put all your eggs in one basket."

"Oh wow, being a star sounds tough," Maya remarked.

"It has its challenges," Julian turned to me with earnest eyes. "Serena, would you like to stay at my place for a few days? Linwood is a bit farther out, but it's peaceful—perfect for your pregnancy."

Under Julian's attentive gaze, refusing felt almost unkind.

"Julian, I appreciate it, but it wouldn't look right for either of us. Better not."

He looked disappointed but managed a smile.

"If you change your mind, just call me. I'm happy to help anytime."

I thanked him, and after he left, my friend leaned in with an exasperated sigh.

"Some people just don't recognize a blessing when they see one. If I had someone that devoted waiting in the wings, I definitely wouldn't be chasing after my ex."

I'd heard comments like this countless times before. Usually, I'd laugh them off, but this time, a complex ache rose in my chest.

"Alright, let's head home. Do you need to grab anything from your place?" Maya asked, seeing my lack of response.

"No need."

"Fine, you can use my stuff then."

On the way back, Maya updated me on the studio's recent business. Without my public presence, there had been a slight dip in profits and plenty of speculation.

"People are saying you've jumped ship to another design house, or that you've left the country."

"It's all ridiculous. Don't they understand what Dreamland Studio stands for?"

I touched my stomach gently. My absence from the public eye was deliberate—to avoid unnecessary complications. If someone decided to dig into my past maliciously, the fallout wouldn't be worth it.

"Can you handle things?" I asked.

"Serena, I'm not that weak! I'm just telling you to be careful when you go out. Wear a hat and mask."

"What if some nosy people actually cornered you?" she added with concern.

"I'll be careful," I promised.

"After these busy days pass, I'll take you somewhere to clear your head. Men, ex-men, whoever—they can all go to hell!" Maya declared loudly.

I couldn't help laughing at her outburst. Despite her rising success, Maya remained the same straightforward, loyal friend she'd always been.

As I smiled, a melancholic thought crossed my mind. Perhaps she was the only person in this world who truly cared about me for who I was.

Chapter 84: Chapter 84 Pretend to be ill

Ryan's POV

"Mr. Blackwood, they're waiting for you inside," Simon whispered, gesturing toward the boardroom.

I nodded, straightening my tie. "Let's get this over with."

Two hours later, I finally escaped the boardroom, immediately checking my phone. Six missed calls from the butler. My stomach dropped.

"Simon, reschedule everything. Something's happened."

I called the butler back immediately, my fingers tightening around the phone as he explained the situation.

"Sir, Mrs. Blackwood—I mean, Ms. Quinn came to the estate today. There was... an unfortunate encounter with Ms. Hart."

"What happened?" My voice came out sharper than intended.

"Ms. Hart was wearing some of the clothes Ms. Quinn left behind. There were... words exchanged."

I closed my eyes briefly. Of course Sophie would do something like that. "I'm on my way."

Twenty minutes later, I stormed through the front door of the estate. The butler approached immediately, looking distressed.

"Where is Sophie?" I demanded.

"In the guest bedroom, sir. She's been... upset since Ms. Quinn left."

I headed straight upstairs, not bothering to knock before entering. Sophie sat on the edge of the bed, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. The moment she saw me, her expression crumpled.

"Ryan, I'm so sorry," she whimpered. "This is all my fault. I shouldn't have let Serena misunderstand."

I narrowed my eyes, "why didn't you explain the situation clearly?"

Sophie shook her head pitifully. "I tried, but she turned and left before I could say anything. She wouldn't give me a chance to explain."

She looked up at me with those wide, tearful eyes—the same eyes that had once held me captive for years.

"It's because I'm staying here, isn't it? She misunderstood. But Ryan, I have nowhere safe to go. If my ex-husband finds me, he'll lock me away again. You know what he's capable of."

Her hand reached out, clutching my sleeve desperately. The contrast between this fragile creature and the smug woman the butler described from earlier was striking.

I sighed heavily. "I'll arrange another safe place for you to stay. I'll have someone escort you to and from work. You won't be in any danger, but you can't stay at the Blackwood estate anymore. It's not appropriate."

Her hand trembled against my sleeve, eyes filling with fresh tears.

"You're sending me away? After everything?"

I had no patience for her emotional manipulation. All I could think about was Serena—pregnant with my child, seeing Sophie in our home, wearing her clothes. My chest tightened painfully.

"Pack your things. I'll have someone take you to the new place tonight."

I left without another word, heading straight for Dreamland Studio. I needed to see Serena, to explain. The possibility that stress might harm her or our baby made my heart race with fear.

When I arrived, security blocked my entrance.

"Ms. Quinn and Ms. Carter gave specific instructions. You're not allowed inside, sir."

My jaw clenched. "Where is Serena?"

"Ms. Quinn isn't here."

I tried to push past them, but more security personnel appeared, physically blocking my path.

"Sir, please don't make this difficult," one pleaded. "We're just following orders."

"Do you want us to lose our jobs? Please understand."

"Everyone's working inside. This kind of disturbance isn't good for anyone."

Their words barely registered as I continued pushing forward. Then a familiar voice cut through the chaos.

"Well, if it isn't the ex-husband! What's this—made her angry again and now you're here for damage control?"

Julian Clarke walked toward us, coffee in hand, observing the scene with barely concealed amusement.

"Where is Serena?" I demanded.

Julian glanced at the security team. "You can go. I'll handle this."

The guards retreated gratefully while Julian took a leisurely sip of his coffee, clearly enjoying my impatience.

"She's not here. Don't you find this pattern exhausting? You hurt her, then you rush to make amends. Don't you see how ridiculous that is?"

"You're the one hurting her, yet you're always the one chasing after her. It's pathetic, really."

His condescension grated on my already frayed nerves.

"This is between Serena and me. It doesn't concern you."

I brushed past him and headed straight to Serena's office, only to find it empty.

"Believe me now?" Julian leaned against the doorframe. "She doesn't want to see you. Not just today—ever. Do you understand?"

I ignored his taunting and walked out. The situation was worse than I'd thought. Serena was clearly jealous of Sophie—which meant she still cared. But she was also angry enough to avoid me completely.

I needed to fix this, fast.

That evening, I returned to the old Blackwood mansion. Since the incident with Kane, my relationship with Grandmother had cooled considerably. When she saw me enter, she merely glanced up.

"You're here."

"Grandmother," I greeted her respectfully, sitting down to keep her company.

She immediately rubbed her forehead, letting out a pained sound. "Oh my... I've been feeling so unwell lately. This house is too empty—no one to talk to. I suppose I'm just getting old and useless."

Concern crossed my face. "Have you seen a doctor? What's wrong?"

She waved dismissively. "Of course I have. They're no help—just prescribe pills that make me feel worse."

"If you truly cared about your grandmother's happiness, you wouldn't let me suffer like this."

I tensed, already guessing where this conversation was heading.

Kane remained abroad with an arrest warrant hanging over his head. As long as I pursued the case, he couldn't return to the country, forced to hide in some obscure location.

He might be comfortable financially, but having to conceal his identity was surely torturous for my crippled uncle.

"Ryan, you both carry the Blackwood name. You're family. Why can't you let this go?" Grandmother pressed.

I remained silent. Telling her the truth about how Kane had orchestrated my parents' deaths would destroy her. With one son dead and the other a murderer—she couldn't bear it.

"Ryan, I know you're meticulous—that's why Blackwood Group thrives under your management. But I promise, I won't let your uncle touch any part of the business again."

"The company will remain solely yours. I'm old, Ryan. I just want my son by my side."

Her eyes reddened with emotion.

"How many years do I have left? Why can't you grant me this one wish?"

Her words made me falter. Was I being too harsh?

"Just let Kane come home. All you need to do is drop the charges. He's crippled now—what threat could he possibly pose to you?"

"This feud between uncle and nephew only gives people something to gossip about."

Her arguments were straightforward, laying out the benefits and consequences for my consideration.

Seeing my hesitation, she changed tactics.

"Are you and Serena fighting again? I haven't seen her around lately. Tell me what's happening. Let your grandmother help."

This was exactly why I'd come—hoping Grandmother could intervene where I couldn't.

"We had a misunderstanding. I can't find her now."

"Ah, I see," Grandmother nodded. "I'll invite her over. Why don't you stay here at the mansion?"

"I'll stay, but I doubt she'll come."

Grandmother smiled knowingly. "That's simple enough. I'll pretend to be ill."

Would that actually work? I wasn't convinced, but I was desperate enough to try anything. Sometimes desperate times call for desperate measures.

Chapter 85: Chapter 85 Grandmother was ill

Serena's POV

When I got the call from Mrs. Blackwood, I hesitated to answer. I still remembered those outrageous things she said when Ivy announced her pregnancy.

Now that my belly was visibly growing day by day, suddenly she was being extraordinarily nice to me.

At the end of the day, it wasn't me she cared about—it was the Blackwood bloodline growing inside me.

"Why aren't you answering? Is it Ryan?" Maya asked.

I shook my head. "It's his grandmother."

"That old witch? Don't even bother with her. None of those Blackwood people have good intentions," Maya said, snatching my phone and placing it on the far end of the sofa where the vibration was barely audible.

"There, problem solved. Now go take a shower," she said, handing me a brand new set of pajamas. "They're clean. I haven't even worn them yet—lucky you."

I nodded and took them, heading to the bathroom.

The warm water felt good against my skin, easing some of the tension in my lower back that had been plaguing me since the pregnancy started showing.

I closed my eyes, trying not to think about the Blackwoods or Sophie or any of the drama that seemed to follow me no matter how far I ran.

I didn't stay long though—standing too long made my legs wobbly these days.

When I emerged, toweling my hair dry, I spotted Maya coming in from the balcony, quickly shutting the door behind her.

"That was quick," she said.

"My legs get weak if I stand too long," I replied, immediately noticing my phone in her hand. "Did you answer my call?"

"Why are you getting worked up? Have you forgotten how that old hag treated you?" Maya gave me a disapproving look, putting the phone back on the sofa.

"I'm not upset," I clarified, "I just wanted to know what she wanted."

Maya rolled her eyes. "What do you think? She wants you to come see her, of course. Don't tell me you actually want to go?"

"Did you say anything that might upset her?" I asked carefully. "She's old, you know. She might not handle stress well."

"Don't worry, I didn't say much—just told her she had the wrong number. She's getting old, with failing eyesight. Misdialing happens."

I sighed. "My number is saved in her contacts. How could she misdial?"

Maya scoffed, "I just can't stand how the Blackwoods treat you. That Sophie woman openly provokes you, and you're still willing to just take it? Serena, is there water in your brain or something?"

I was used to my best friend's scolding by now. And honestly, I did think there was something wrong with me for even considering going to the Blackwood mansion to check things out.

"Whatever, let's just go to sleep," I said, drying my hair and slipping under the covers. My body was exhausted, and I didn't have the energy to deal with drama.

I hadn't slept long when Maya's phone started ringing. The sound woke both of us up. Maya, who has terrible morning temper, cursed loudly before grabbing her phone.

It was an unknown number.

She rolled up her sleeve, prepared to unleash hell if it was a spam call.

"Who the hell is this? Are you sick in the head?" she barked into the phone.

The voice on the other end went silent for a moment before replying in an ice-cold tone: "Grandmother is seriously ill."

Maya froze, recognizing Ryan's voice immediately. I was still groggy, but the words "seriously ill" jolted me awake.

"Put Serena on the phone. I need to talk to her," Ryan demanded.

Maya reluctantly handed me the phone.

"What happened?" I asked, my face growing colder with each word Ryan spoke. After a few short responses, I hung up.

Maya was still fuming, she couldn't help asking, "Did he ask you to go back?"

I nodded. "Grandmother has fallen suddenly ill, and it has nothing to do with what you did. The doctor says her condition is serious."

"She's old. If she doesn't make it through this time, I should go there at least once, to pay my respects," I said quietly.

Maya frowned but couldn't argue with that. An elderly person's grave illness was indeed solemn news.

"Serena, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have answered your phone without permission."

I sighed. "Maya, I know you were looking out for me. I don't blame you. And don't worry—Grandmother's condition isn't something a few angry words could cause. This must be the result of years of accumulated issues."

Maya felt relieved hearing my words.

When I arrived at the Blackwood mansion, the place was eerily quiet. The butler sighed heavily as he explained what had happened the previous night.

"Madam hasn't been well for some time now. She's been taking medicine and getting injections, but nothing seems to work. Last night, something happened—she suddenly collapsed. Acute distress, they said."

I had been skeptical before coming, wondering if this was some kind of trap. But hearing this, I started to believe it was genuine.

Then I saw the doctor descending the grand staircase, his expression grim as he addressed Ryan.

"Mr. Blackwood, your grandmother's condition stems from a chronic ailment exacerbated by her age and weakened immunity. She's been harboring emotional stress for quite some time, which likely contributed to this episode. There were probably warning signs you missed."

The doctor sighed heavily. "The fever has subsided temporarily, but she's delirious, talking nonsense. I'm afraid... the situation looks quite serious."

"If we could alleviate the source of her distress, her recovery chances would improve significantly," the doctor added meaningfully.

"Are you certain you're not exaggerating?" Ryan questioned sharply.

The doctor looked offended. "Mr. Blackwood, I wouldn't dare lie about something this serious. If you doubt my assessment, please consult other physicians. If their conclusions differ, I'll never set foot in this house again."

Ryan remained silent, but after escorting the doctor out, he immediately arranged for two additional trusted physicians to examine his grandmother.

As I watched him make these arrangements, I began to understand.

Evelyn Blackwood's illness was rooted in her concern for her son—this sudden collapse was likely a calculated move to pressure Ryan into bringing his uncle back.

The old lady was playing a ruthless game. Now the question was: would Ryan be ruthless enough to resist?

Chapter 86: Chapter 86 His apology

Ryan's POV

I heard the doctor's diagnosis and my mind went blank.

I couldn't believe Grandmother was actually sick, and seriously ill at that.

Just yesterday we'd been plotting to use the "sick grandmother" trick to lure Serena back to the mansion, and now Grandmother had actually collapsed. Talk about coincidences.

Especially when the doctor mentioned her emotional distress, it made me suspicious that Grandmother might be faking it. She'd been constantly worrying about her youngest son—my uncle.

I questioned the doctor sharply, "Are you certain you're not exaggerating?"

The doctor looked taken aback. "Mr. Blackwood, what are you suggesting? Would I dare lie about something this serious?"

"If you don't believe me, feel free to consult other physicians. If their conclusions differ, I'll never set foot in your home again."

To confirm Grandmother wasn't putting on an act, I called two doctors I completely trusted to examine her. The results were the same—Grandmother was genuinely ill.

While I was considering what to do next, Serena suddenly spoke up: "I want to see Grandmother."

"Of course, I'll take you." I reached out to support her, considering her pregnancy.

But she coldly avoided my hand. "I can walk by myself," she said, striding forward without even glancing my way.

The faint scent of her perfume drifted toward me as she moved, making me momentarily dizzy. Even pregnant, she walked with such grace and poise.

Entering Grandmother's bedroom, the subtle smell of medicine greeted us. The elderly woman lay in bed with half-closed eyes, her breathing labored.

Grandmother had always been meticulous about her appearance, but now her face looked haggard, her hair noticeably grayer.

I frowned almost imperceptibly. For the elderly, illness could be devastating.

"Grandmother, it's Serena. I'm here," Serena said, sitting beside the bed and leaning close to Grandmother's ear, hoping she could hear better.

As she bent forward, the perfect curve of her neck came into view, causing me to swallow hard. freewebmovel.com

Grandmother turned her cloudy eyes and shakily extended her hand. Serena immediately understood, offering her own hand and holding Grandmother's tightly.

"I'm here, Grandmother. If you have anything to tell me, I'm listening."

Grandmother took a labored breath and began speaking haltingly. I expected her to mention my uncle, but instead, she started talking about the argument between Serena and me.

"Serena, Ryan isn't... good with words... whatever misunderstanding... you have... talk it through... don't let it... slip away."

"It's not easy... to find each other. You two... don't give up so easily."

Grandmother spoke with such sincerity that I could see Serena's expression soften.

I sighed deeply. Grandmother looked as if she was giving her final wishes.

The scene was difficult to bear—I had so few family members left, and Grandmother was one of the most important people in my life. I couldn't lose her.

"Grandmother, focus on getting better. Serena and I will work things out, don't worry," I quickly reassured her, inadvertently meeting Serena's gaze. The concern in her eyes struck me deeply.

"Good... good..." Grandmother repeated the word several times before her hand slowly released its grip. She looked as if she had used up all her energy, falling back into a deep sleep.

Serena stood up, and we left the room together. I noticed she had become more emotional during her pregnancy, and this scene had clearly affected her.

My eyes couldn't help but linger on her—pregnancy gave her a special kind of allure, making her seem softer and more captivating than before.

I had to take advantage of this rare opportunity to explain things clearly.

"Serena, about Sophie—I need to explain. She claimed her ex-husband was harassing her and she was almost in trouble. That's why I brought her to the mansion, but I've sent her away now."

I moved a step closer, catching the fragrance of her hair, which reminded me of those nights we slept in each other's arms.

Serena didn't react much, just snorted dismissively, clearly not believing me.

"You don't need to explain anything to me. She was the love of your life, I understand," she waved her hand. "I came today just to see Grandmother. Now that I have, I should go."

She quickly headed downstairs, and I hurried after her. Watching her walk away, I suddenly remembered those lonely, endless nights without her. I couldn't let her leave again.

"Serena, I'm trying to honestly explain. Why won't you believe me?" In my desperation, I grabbed her hand and placed it over my heart. Her warm palm seared through my shirt directly to my chest, making my entire body tense.

"Can you feel it? This heart only beats for you now." My voice deepened with tension as my eyes locked onto hers.

God, I can't believe I actually said that. Serena blinked rapidly, clearly finding it too sappy.

We were standing so close that I could see the fine hairs on her face and her slightly parted lips when surprised, making me want to kiss her.

She quickly pulled her hand away. "Ryan, are you feeling alright?"

I felt people staring and my ears burned with embarrassment. I realized this wasn't the place for this conversation.

But this was my best chance to explain—if I let her walk away now, things would only get worse. I unconsciously licked my lips, suppressing the urge to pull her back into my arms.

"Serena, can we talk? Even if you don't want to deal with me, please listen for the sake of our baby." I lowered my voice, adopting a pleading tone, forcing myself not to touch her again.

Serena raised an eyebrow, seemingly unable to believe what she was hearing.

"Follow me," I said, this time not reaching for her as I headed straight to the backyard.

After hesitating briefly, she followed. We stopped in a secluded corner of the backyard.

I turned to face her, controlling myself not to stand too close, yet desperately wanting to close the distance between us.

"Serena, I did have feelings for Sophie before, but that's all in the past. It's true that after marrying you, I thought about her for a few years, but since I started pursuing you again, I haven't thought about anyone else."

My gaze unconsciously fell on her lips, remembering their feel, almost losing my self-control.

I paused, worried she wouldn't believe me, and added something incredibly sappy: "You and our baby are everything in my life now."

As soon as I said it, my ears burned with embarrassment and I couldn't help coughing awkwardly. If outsiders saw me like this, they'd be shocked.

But at that moment, I only wanted her to understand my feelings, even if it meant setting aside all my pride.

Serena stared at me for two seconds before suddenly laughing. Seeing her laugh lightened the atmosphere considerably, and I felt relieved. When she smiled, it was like magic—I almost forgot to breathe.

Looks like the advice Eliza gave me actually worked, though I'd never had the courage to try it before. Sometimes you really have to push yourself.

"Serena, do you believe me now?" I asked, anxiously waiting for her answer, my heart in my throat.

Chapter 87: Chapter 87 Winning back the truly mattered

Serena's POV

I bit my lip as Ryan's gaze held mine, his eyes filled with an honesty I hadn't seen in years.

He stood there like a man awaiting judgment, his usual confidence replaced with vulnerability that made him look almost boyish. Damn it. Why was he making this so hard?

Maybe I could try trusting him one more time, but I needed him to understand where I stood. So I wiped the smile from my face, instantly serious.

"Sophie works at your company, and you're constantly protecting her. It's hard not to think something's going on."

Ryan caught my meaning immediately. "I'll have someone clarify our relationship to everyone at the company. No more rumors." His voice was firm, determined. "If you don't believe me, just wait. I'll prove it to you. How's that?"

I couldn't help but snort, though I felt my expression softening. "You'd better." Then, shifting topics to avoid the flutter in my chest, I asked, "What are you planning to do about Grandmother?"

Our eyes met, and an unspoken understanding passed between us.

"If Grandmother wants to see that cripple, I'll arrange it," he said, referring to his uncle. "Kane has no power in this city anymore. He can't cause any trouble."

I stayed quiet. This was Blackwood family business, and technically, I had no right to voice an opinion anymore. Strange how that thought stung.

"Serena, aren't you coming back to the apartment?" Ryan's question hung in the air between us.

"I'm comfortable at Maya's place," I answered, eyeing him suspiciously. "What are you getting at?"

"Staying at someone else's home can't be convenient for long."

I waved my hand dismissively. "That's my choice to make. Until you resolve this Sophie situation, don't come looking for me."

I turned to leave but remembered Grandmother's condition. "If anything happens to Grandmother, call me. We were family once, after all." I paused, considering. "Though since you're letting Kane return, I suspect her health won't deteriorate that far."

With nothing more to say, I walked away, feeling his eyes boring into my back. Part of me wanted him to stop me, to grab my hand again. The other part was relieved when he didn't.

When I got back to Maya's apartment, I flopped onto her couch with a dramatic sigh. My back was killing me - pregnancy wasn't exactly the glowing experience everyone made it out to be.

"So?" Maya appeared from the kitchen, two mugs of herbal tea in hand. "What happened with Mr. Ice King? You were gone longer than I expected."

I recounted the whole encounter - Grandmother's condition, Ryan's unexpected sincerity, and his promise to deal with Sophie.

Maya rolled her eyes so hard I thought they might get stuck. "God, Serena, you're hopeless. Absolutely hopeless." She handed me the tea and plopped down beside me. "Why are you so determined to hang yourself on this crooked tree? The man had years to treat you right and chose not to."

"It's complicated," I muttered, cradling the warm mug against my chest.

"No, it's really not. You're just—" Maya stopped mid-sentence as I gasped. "What? What's wrong?"

I grabbed her hand and placed it on my belly where a distinct little kick had just landed. "Feel that?"

Maya's eyes widened as another kick pressed against her palm. "Oh my god!" She squealed, dropping to her knees to get closer to my bump. "Hello in there, little one! It's your Auntie Maya!"

I couldn't help laughing at her enthusiasm as she kept her hands glued to my stomach, waiting for more movement.

"This is incredible," she whispered, looking up at me with wonder. "You've got a whole person in there."

"Half Ryan's DNA," I reminded her, and she made a face.

"Well, hopefully just the good parts," she quipped, then her expression softened. "You know I'll support whatever you decide, right? Even if it means watching you give that man another chance."

I smiled gratefully, placing my hand over hers where it still rested on my belly. "I know."

We sat talking until late, Maya peppering me with questions about baby names and nursery colors until we were both yawning and headed off to our respective beds.

As I lay in the darkness, I felt another gentle kick. "What do you think, little one?" I whispered, running my hand over my bump. "Should we give your daddy another chance?"

The only answer was another soft kick, which I decided to take as a maybe.

Ryan's POV

I could tell Serena's mood had improved by the end of our conversation. The ice in her eyes had thawed slightly, and that was enough to give me hope. One thing was crystal clear: I needed to end things with Sophie once and for all.

I stayed at the family mansion for several days, keeping Grandmother company. During that time, Sophie showed up uninvited, claiming she wanted to check on Grandmother's condition.

I didn't let her in. Instead, I went to the entrance myself, determined to make things clear between us.

"Ryan, I heard Grandmother was sick, so I came to see her," Sophie said, pouting slightly. "But they won't let me in."

I held up my hand as she started forward, her momentary look of triumph fading when I physically blocked her path.

"Ryan, what are you...?"

"Grandmother's resting. You wouldn't be able to see her anyway," I said firmly. "I need to talk to you."

I walked outside the gate, stopping by the wall. Sophie followed, her smile still fixed in place though I could see anxiety flickering in her eyes.

God, how had I never noticed how calculated her expressions were? Standing here now, I could practically see the wheels turning in her head, strategizing her next move. Had she always been this transparent?

"Sophie, I have Serena now," I stated plainly, feeling lighter with each word. "It's better if we minimize our contact."

After all these years of carrying Sophie as a ghost in my heart, the freedom of finally letting go was exhilarating.

"Whatever our past was, I don't want to revisit it anymore."

"Ryan... you..." Sophie's voice trembled, her perfectly manicured hand reaching toward me.

"That's all I wanted to say. You can leave now." I took a deep breath, turned around, and walked back into the mansion without looking back.

For the first time in years, my shoulders felt unburdened. The weight I'd carried since Sophie's "death" was finally gone.

Now I could focus entirely on winning back the woman who truly mattered – the mother of my child, who against all odds, might be starting to believe in me again.

Chapter 88: Chapter 88 An Offer from Kane

Sophie's POV

I stood there, dumbstruck, as Ryan walked away. My carefully practiced smile crumbled, twisting into something ugly and desperate. My fingers clenched around the gift bag I'd brought—now just a pathetic joke.

That bitch Serena. Somehow she'd managed to make Ryan cut ties with me completely.

I glared up at the Blackwood mansion with pure hatred before spinning on my heel. As I stormed away, a black car brushed past me.

The nightmare continued when I got back to the office next day.

Colleagues who used to kiss my ass now wouldn't even look at me—or worse, they'd stare with obvious contempt.

I've always been sensitive to other people's moods, and something was definitely wrong.

After sitting at my desk for maybe ten minutes, I grabbed my mug and headed to the break room. I hadn't even reached the doorway when I heard them talking about me.

"Did you hear? Sophie and Ryan were never actually together. She was just clinging to him this whole time."

"Ryan has a girlfriend, but it's not her. And she's pregnant! They've been happy together for ages."

"I always thought Sophie was such a fake. Acting all sweet but really just a scheming bitch."

"Right? If she really had connections to Ryan, why would she be working here? It was all so obviously fake!"

I gripped my mug tighter, my face burning. These same people had been practically bowing to me days ago. Now that my connection to Ryan had been publicly severed, I was suddenly everyone's favorite target.

I wasn't surprised. These were games I'd played myself countless times.

I pushed the door open and swept in, giving everyone my coldest stare. Instead of cowering, they glared right back.

"What are you looking at?" one of them sneered. "Sophie, do you ever say anything true? I can't believe I was stupid enough to trust you."

"Remember when you promised to help me transfer to headquarters?" another jumped in. "What a joke. You're still stuck here yourself! I don't see Ryan rushing to give you a promotion!"

A third one laughed dramatically. "Be nice, guys. After all, Ryan sent people specifically to clarify they have NO relationship! Sophie's little rumor made it all the way to headquarters!"

My face grew colder by the second. I wanted to fight back, but what could I say? Ryan had publicly distanced himself from me. I had no cards left to play.

If I caused trouble here, I might lose any chance of getting close to Ryan again. Swallowing my pride, I turned and walked out, leaving their mockery behind.
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For days, the gossip followed me everywhere. Everyone in the office, even my manager, seemed determined to make my life hell.

"Translate this document by this afternoon," May said, throwing a file onto my desk with a smirk. "You're such a brilliant graduate, this should be easy, right?"

"Do it yourself. That's not my job." I glared at her and threw the document on the floor. If she thought she could bully me that easily, she was mistaken.

"You'll regret this, Sophie," she hissed before storming off.

I didn't even bother looking at her, just took out my lipstick and reapplied it calmly.

Just before leaving work, I went to the bathroom. As I was pulling up my pants, someone dumped a bucket of cold water over the stall door. I heard multiple giggles before the sound of hurried footsteps faded away.

My clothes and shoes were soaked. Worse, my hair was dripping wet.

When I opened the stall door, the bathroom was empty. From the sounds I'd heard, there must have been at least three of them. I never thought I'd be humiliated like this—truly a fallen tiger at the mercy of dogs!

I fixed myself up as best I could, but still looked like a mess. Thank god I had a jacket at my desk that could hide some of the damage.

After leaving the building, I sneezed hard, my nose already turning red. I'd only walked a few steps when I spotted a familiar car. My eyes lit up immediately. I put on my most pitiful expression and hurried over.

When the door opened, my face fell. It wasn't Ryan inside.

One look at Kane Blackwood in his wheelchair made my blood run cold. This man was definitely not someone I could afford to mess with.

"Miss Sophie, it's been so long," he said smoothly. "After all these years, even after being married, you still look so young and beautiful."

My heart skipped a beat. How did he know about my marriage? I'd hidden that part of my past perfectly. I'd never officially registered the marriage to that old man, which meant I couldn't claim any of his fortune when he died.

That had worked in my favor until now—there was no paper trail of my past, which is why I'd dared to return and pursue Ryan again. But somehow, this wasn't a secret anymore.

If Kane revealed this, I'd have no future in this city.

"What do you want, Kane?" I asked coldly.

"You're a smart woman, Sophie. You know your value. If you're willing to work with me, I can help you get what you want."

I stared at him, not trusting a single word. In my mind, Kane was like a venomous snake, always ready to strike.

"You don't seem convinced," Kane smiled. "But you'll come looking for me soon enough. A poisonous beauty like you—we're actually perfect for each other."

Before I could respond, he closed the car door. I could only watch as the car sped away.

A chill ran through my body, giving me goosebumps all over. Kane's appearance made me certain that something bigger was happening—something I wasn't going to like.

Chapter 89: Chapter 89 The way she tests him

Serena's POV

I'd packed most of my things into two suitcases. No sense staying at Maya's anymore—I no longer needed to hide from Ryan.

"You sure you're ready to move back?" Maya asked, helping me with one of my bags. "My door's always open."

"I'm good," I assured her as we headed downstairs. "Hiding from Ryan was getting exhausting anyway. Besides, I miss my own space."

Maya laughed. "Your 'space' that you've barely lived in for weeks?"

"It's still mine."

We pushed through the building's front doors, and I froze. Ryan was standing there, looking unfairly handsome in dark jeans and a navy button-up, holding a bouquet of violets—my favorites.

"What's he doing here?" Maya whispered.

"No idea," I muttered, my heart doing an annoying little flip.

Ryan approached us with that confident stride that always made heads turn. "Serena," he said, his voice deep and rich. "I thought you might need a ride home."

I raised an eyebrow. "And you just happened to bring flowers?"

"These?" He glanced at the bouquet like he'd forgotten it was there. "Just something I picked up on the way."

Maya snorted beside me. "Right, because everyone casually picks up custom arrangements."

I bit back a smile. "I already have a ride, Ryan."

"Of course," he nodded, then looked at Maya. "Mind if I steal her? I'd like to talk about some... parenting arrangements."

The "parenting" card. Clever. Maya looked at me questioningly, and I shrugged.

"Fine," I sighed dramatically. "I guess you can drive me. He is the babies' daddy after all," I added to Maya with an exaggerated eye roll.

Maya looked suspicious but helped transfer my bags to Ryan's car. "Call me later," she ordered, giving Ryan a warning glare that clearly said "hurt her and die."

"You didn't have to come," I said once we were alone in the car.

"I wanted to." Ryan took both my suitcases like they weighed nothing. "You shouldn't be lifting heavy things anyway."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm pregnant, not made of glass."

"Humor me."

The drive to my apartment was quiet but not totally uncomfortable. I caught him glancing at my belly several times.

"They're not going to start kicking while you're driving," I said dryly.

His lips twitched. "Have you felt them move yet?"

"Little flutters. Nothing dramatic."

"Are you hungry?" he asked .

I was about to say no when my stomach growled loudly. Traitor.

Ryan laughed. "I'll take that as a yes."

Then Ryan drove us to this little Italian place I'd mentioned loving once.

The fact that he remembered made something warm bloom in my chest, which I promptly squashed down. I wasn't going to get all gooey just because he had good recall.

The food was amazing—all carbs and cheese, exactly what my pregnant body craved. I moaned slightly around a forkful of lasagna, then caught Ryan staring.

"What?" I asked, mouth half full.

"Nothing," he said, clearing his throat. "Just... glad you're enjoying it."

After dinner, we headed to my apartment. I hadn't been there in weeks, and when I opened the door, I grimaced at the thin layer of dust covering everything.

"Well, this is depressing," I muttered, dropping my purse on the counter.

I pulled out my phone, ready to call a cleaning service, when I glanced at Ryan standing awkwardly in my living room. A delicious idea formed in my mind.

"You know," I said slowly, "if you really want to prove how serious you are about making amends..."

Ryan's eyes narrowed slightly. "What did you have in mind?"

I smiled sweetly and handed him a duster from my hall closet. "My apartment needs cleaning."

His eyebrows shot up. "You want me to clean your apartment?"

"Is that a problem? I mean, I am carrying your children. The least you could do is make sure we have a dust-free environment."

I expected resistance, maybe even that famous Blackwood coldness. Instead, Ryan rolled up his expensive shirt sleeves and took the duster.

"Where do I start?"

For the next two hours, I watched in amazement as Ryan Blackwood—billionaire CEO who probably had never held a mop in his life—cleaned my entire apartment.

He dusted, vacuumed, mopped, and even scrubbed the bathroom tiles. When he asked for specific instructions, I kept adding new tasks, testing his limits.

"The top of the fridge needs wiping too."

"Don't forget under the couch."

"The windows are looking streaky." freewebnovel.com

Not once did he complain. In fact, he seemed determined to do everything perfectly, his jaw set in that stubborn way I used to find infuriating but now found oddly endearing.

When he finally finished, his hair was damp with sweat and his expensive shirt had water stains. He looked thoroughly un-CEO-like, and I couldn't stop staring.

"Here," I handed him a glass of ice water. "You earned it."

He drank it in one long gulp, his throat working in a way that made my mouth go dry.

"Thank you," I said, meaning it. "I didn't actually expect you to do all that."

"I'd do anything for you, Serena. I think I've made that clear." he replied, setting the empty glass down and moving closer to me.

My back hit the wall before I realized I'd been retreating. Ryan placed one hand on the wall beside my head, effectively caging me in.

"Now that I've proven my domestic skills," he murmured, his face inches from mine, "what else can I do to impress you?"

His cologne mixed with the scent of cleaning supplies should not have been sexy, but somehow it was. My heart raced as his free hand gently tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

"Ryan," I breathed, hating how breathless I sounded.

"Yes?" His lips were so close now I could feel his breath on mine.

I should have said stop. Instead, I leaned forward slightly, and that was all the invitation he needed.

His lips touched mine, gentle at first, then hungrier when I didn't pull away. My hands found their way to his chest, feeling his heartbeat racing beneath my palm. God, I'd missed this—missed him—more than I wanted to admit.

When his hands slid down to my waist, pulling me closer, heat flooded through me. My pregnancy hormones were going wild, and for a moment I seriously considered dragging him to my bedroom.

But then I remembered my promise to myself. No more giving in too easily.

I ducked under his arm and danced away, grabbing his expensive jacket from the chair.

"Thanks for your help," I said brightly, holding the door open. "Really appreciated it. Bye now!"

The confusion on his face was priceless. "Serena, what—"

"It's getting late," I interrupted, shoving his jacket into his chest. "And pregnant ladies need their rest."

Before he could protest, I practically pushed him through the doorway. As he turned to say something, I smiled sweetly.

"Next time, bring gloves. My oven needs cleaning too."

And with that, I shut the door in his handsome face, leaning against it with a breathless laugh. Through the door, I heard a low chuckle that sent shivers down my spine.

"Sweet dreams, Serena," he called out, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

Damn him. This was supposed to be me getting revenge, not him enjoying it. But as I touched my fingers to my lips, remembering how close he'd been, I couldn't help but smile too.

Game on, Ryan Blackwood.

Chapter 90: Chapter 90 It was just the beginning of my revenge

Ryan's POV

I woke up in a stellar mood despite the late night. Cleaning Serena's apartment wasn't exactly how I'd planned to spend my evening, but seeing her smile—even if it was at my expense—made it worth every damn second.

"Good morning, Mr. Blackwood," Simon greeted me as I walked into my office, looking slightly surprised at my early arrival.

"Morning," I replied, settling behind my desk. "I need you to handle something immediately."

Simon straightened, his expression shifting to professional mode. "Of course, sir."

"Ms. Sophie Hart," I said, my tone hardening at just saying her name. "Have her employment terminated by noon today."

Simon's eyebrows raised just slightly—the most reaction he'd allow himself. "On what grounds, sir?"

"I don't care what reason you give. Just make sure she's gone from this company today," I replied, pulling up the quarterly reports on my screen.

"Consider it done," Simon nodded, making a quick note. "Anything else?"

I leaned back in my chair, thoughts of Serena momentarily distracting me. The way she'd shut the door in my face last night... damn, she was getting under my skin again.

"Sir?" Simon prompted.

"The Henderson merger needs finalizing," I said, snapping back to business. "And the Tokyo branch is reporting issues with their supply chain. Have Legal prepare contingencies." freewebnovel.com

Simon nodded and left me to my work. I buried myself in spreadsheets and projections, occasionally touching my lips when no one was watching. She'd been so close last night. Next time, I wouldn't let her slip away so easily.

Sophie's POV

I arrived at the office an hour early, my blood still boiling from yesterday's humiliation.

Though I hadn't seen who pushed me into that toilet stall, I had my suspicions. May was definitely one of them.

"Time for a little payback," I murmured.

The moment I walked into the department, May scurried over with a mocking smile.

"How did toilet water smell yesterday? Did it wash away all that rich heiress attitude of yours?" she sneered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

I had always carefully cultivated my image—"wealthy heiress" being one of my key labels. Now that Ryan had publicly clarified our relationship status, my carefully constructed persona was crumbling, becoming ammunition for their mockery.

"I wouldn't know," I grabbed May's wrist firmly. "Why don't you try it yourself?"

I started dragging her toward the bathroom, my grip tight enough to make her whimper.

"Sophie, are you crazy? I was just joking! What are you doing?" May cried out.

"I'm just letting you experience what you did to me. What's wrong? You think that's unfair?" I smiled coldly, making her shrink back in fear.

Just then, a voice cut through our confrontation.

"Ms. Hart," Simon said flatly. "A moment of your time?"

I followed him to a small conference room, my hopes rising. Was this about a promotion?

"Ms. Hart, effective immediately, your employment with Blackwood Enterprises is terminated."

I blinked, certain I'd misheard. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Your position has been terminated," he repeated, sliding a folder across the table. "Your final paycheck, minus company property costs, and exit instructions."

"This is ridiculous!" I snapped, my voice rising. "There must be some mistake. Ryan would never—"

"Mr. Blackwood personally authorized your termination," Simon cut in. "Security will escort you to collect your belongings."

I sat there, stunned. "Is this because of that pregnant bitch?"

"Ms. Hart," Simon's voice was ice. "I'd advise against making any statements about Ms. Quinn. It would reflect poorly in your file."

My hands trembled with rage. "You can't do this to me. Ryan and I have history."

"That 'history' ended years ago, Ms. Hart. Please don't make this more difficult than necessary."

When I stepped out of the conference room, I realized everyone knew. They were all watching, some hiding smiles behind their computer screens.

As I packed my desk, whispers floated around me.

"I've been wanting to say this for ages - Sophie always had that fake, innocent act. So annoying to watch."

"I know, right! Thank god the CEO fired her. It's so satisfying!"

May sauntered over, not even trying to hide her glee. "Tough break, Sophie. But honestly, what did you expect? You're not exactly Blackwood material."

Something in me snapped. I lunged toward her desk, grabbed her stupid designer mug, and hurled it against the wall. "You think you're better than me? You're nothing! Just a pathetic little nobody!"

That's when everything spiraled. May shoved me, and suddenly other women from the department were there too, pushing me backward. I stumbled, falling hard onto the floor as my box of belongings scattered everywhere.

"Enough!" The department manager's voice cut through the chaos. Everyone froze.

I looked up, makeup streaked down my face, waiting for him to defend me. Instead, he looked disgusted.

"Ms. Hart, this behavior is exactly why you're being terminated. Security will escort you out now."

May and the others backed away, but not before May whispered, "Guess you won't be Mrs. Blackwood after all. How does it feel?"

I straightened my skirt with as much dignity as I could muster. "You think this is over? You have no idea what I'm capable of. All of you—especially that bitch you—May, will regret this day."

As security guided me to the elevator, I caught my reflection in the mirrored walls. Mascara streaked, hair disheveled—but my eyes burned with determination.

This wasn't the end. It was just the beginning of my revenge.