

## CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 256

Serena's POV

As the late afternoon sunlight filtered through the curtains, I watched my daughter sleep in her hospital-grade crib beside my bed.

The bedroom door opened quietly, and Ryan stepped in, his eyes immediately softening when they landed on our daughter.

"Maya's been discharged and she's doing well," he said, settling into the chair beside my bed. "She wanted me to tell you not to worry about her. Once she gets caught up at the studio, she'll be by to see you."

The memory of Maya shielding me during our fall made my chest tight with emotion. Knowing she was safe lifted a weight I hadn't realized I'd been carrying. But there was still one shadow hanging over us—the man who'd orchestrated it all.

"What about Kane Blackwood?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "Where is he now?"

"Kane's been dealt with," he said, his voice low as he took the chair beside my bed. "Permanently."

I felt a cold satisfaction wash over me. "Good. Did he suffer?" The venom in my voice surprised even me, but I couldn't help it. That man had tried to kill not just me, but my innocent child.

"People don't try to harm what's mine without consequences," Ryan replied, his eyes turning glacial for a moment before warming again as he looked at me. "You don't need to know the details. Just know he won't ever be a threat again."

"People shouldn't mess with me and live to tell about it," I said fiercely, unable to keep the emotion from my voice. "After everything he did—he deserved whatever he got!"

Ryan reached for my hand, his thumb brushing over my knuckles in a soothing gesture. "Hey, it's over now. Let's not waste another breath on him." He nodded toward our sleeping daughter. "We have more important things to focus on."

I felt myself calm under his touch, my attention drawn back to Vivian's peaceful face.

"Have you decided on a name yet?" Ryan asked, his gaze still on our daughter.

I smiled, the first genuine smile in what felt like forever. "Vivian," I said softly. "Vivian Blackwood."

“Vivian,” Ryan repeated, testing the name. His lips curved into a rare smile that transformed his entire face. “It’s perfect.”

He surprised me then, reaching out to stroke a gentle finger down our daughter’s cheek. “She’ll grow up happy and loved, just like you wanted. She’ll never know fear or pain if I have anything to say about it.”

My family stayed in New York much longer than planned, unwilling to leave until they were certain I was recovering well. Two weeks after giving birth, I was finally cleared to go home—not that the hospital room hadn’t been luxurious, but I longed for some semblance of normalcy.

Ryan had been meticulous about security arrangements. Every staff member at the Blackwood estate had been thoroughly vetted, background checks run multiple times, references contacted. The incident with Kane had made him paranoid—though perhaps justifiably so.

“I’ve personally interviewed every person who will have access to you or Vivian,” he told me as we settled into our wing of the mansion. “No one gets near either of you without my approval.”

My first day home was peaceful until the doorbell rang in the afternoon.

“Mrs. Blackwood, there’s a visitor for you. She says she’s an old friend from university,” the housekeeper announced.

When the woman walked in, I had to blink twice. The years had changed her—gone was the studious girl with glasses and ponytail, replaced by a polished, sophisticated woman with designer clothes and perfect makeup.

“Serena!” she exclaimed, arms outstretched. “It’s me, Olivia! Olivia Wilson!”

I nodded, forcing a smile. “Olivia, of course. It’s just been so long...”

“Too long,” she gushed, setting an elegantly wrapped package on the coffee table before taking my hands in hers. Her grip was just a touch too tight, her smile just a degree too bright. “I came as soon as I heard you’d had your baby! I would have been here sooner, but work has been absolute madness.”

She settled herself on the sofa beside me, still clutching my hand. “You look tired, darling. Was the birth difficult? I hear the first one always is.”

There was something performative about her concern that set my nerves on edge, though I couldn’t quite place why. Before I could respond, Ryan entered from the terrace, his expression instantly becoming guarded when he noticed our visitor.

“Ryan, this is Olivia Wilson, my old university friend,” I explained quickly.

He gave a curt nod. “Ms. Wilson.”

Olivia's attention shifted to Ryan. "I've heard so much about you, Mr. Blackwood," she said, her voice dropping half an octave. "It's truly an honor to meet the man who captured Serena's heart."

Ryan's expression remained impassive as he excused himself to take a call, but I noticed the slight tension in his shoulders. He didn't trust her either.

"Oh, Serena," Olivia continued once he'd stepped away, "childbirth is practically walking through death's door, isn't it? You poor thing. You must tell me everything!"

Her questions became increasingly personal, her presence increasingly suffocating until my sister Eleanor mercifully intervened.

"Serena needs to rest," Eleanor stated flatly, not bothering with pleasantries. "She just came home from the hospital today, Ms. Wilson. Perhaps you could visit another time?"

"Of course! How thoughtless of me," she backpedaled smoothly, getting to her feet. "It's just been so long since I've seen my dear friend. I got carried away."

She squeezed my hand one last time. "I'll be in New York for quite a while, so we'll have plenty of time to catch up. I'll call you tomorrow."

As soon as Olivia was escorted out, Eleanor rolled her eyes dramatically. "Wasn't she at that celebration party years ago? The one right before you..." She trailed off, unwilling to mention my disappearance.

"Yes, she was," I confirmed, suddenly feeling exhausted.

"Funny how she never helped look for you when you went missing, but now she can't wait to be your bestie again," Eleanor remarked acidly.

I frowned at my sister's unusually hostile tone. "El, she probably had her own life going on. It's been years."

Eleanor pursed her lips but dropped the subject as Ryan returned to help me upstairs for my afternoon rest.

After Zoe and Ethan returned to London—both reluctantly, citing urgent business matters—Eleanor stayed behind.

Over the next few days, Olivia became a constant presence in my life, if not physically then through endless phone calls. Each conversation inevitably steered toward nostalgic reminiscences of university days—oddly specific memories that sometimes felt just slightly off, though I couldn't pinpoint exactly why.

"Serena, would it be alright if I came by this evening?" Olivia asked during our third call that week.

“Of course,” I replied, too polite to refuse. “Stay for dinner. I’ll have the staff prepare something special.”

After hanging up, I instructed the housekeeper to set an extra place for dinner. Eleanor, who’d been working on her laptop nearby, closed it with a decisive snap.

“Are you and this Olivia really that close?” she asked bluntly. “You’ve been on the phone with her constantly.”

I shrugged, adjusting Vivian in my arms. “We were friends in college. I guess time apart hasn’t changed that.”

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### Author’s POV

According to Serena, Olivia currently worked as a department manager at an international design company, had spent several years abroad, and had only recently relocated to New York.

While everything sounded normal enough, Eleanor couldn’t forget Zoe’s warning. She made a mental note to observe Olivia carefully that evening. If this woman had any ulterior motives toward her sister, Eleanor intended to nip it in the bud.

Keeping these thoughts to herself, Eleanor returned to her work without further comment.

As dinner time approached, Olivia’s sleek car appeared near the Blackwood estate. Instead of driving directly to the entrance, she parked around the corner and began meticulously touching up her makeup. She spritzed herself with expensive new perfume, all while keeping a watchful eye on the surrounding area as though waiting for something—or someone.

After fifteen minutes, her eyes lit up. She quickly started her engine and drove to the Blackwood’s front entrance just as Ryan was stepping out of his car.

Hearing movement beside him, Ryan glanced briefly in her direction before continuing toward the house without acknowledgment.

Unwilling to miss this “chance” encounter, Olivia hastily grabbed her purse and exited her vehicle. “Mr. Blackwood! Just getting off work too?” she called out, her voice deliberately light and friendly.

Ryan’s nose wrinkled slightly at the overpowering cloud of perfume that surrounded her, but he didn’t respond.

Undeterred by his silence, Olivia persisted. “Your home is absolutely magnificent, Mr. Blackwood. Serena must be so happy living here with you.” She quickened her pace to keep up with his longer strides. “I hope my joining you for dinner tonight won’t be an imposition? Serena invited me, of course.”

Ryan gave a curt nod but said nothing. After a long day, his only desire was to see his wife and daughter. If Serena had invited a friend over while she was recovering, he wouldn’t object.

“Mr. Blackwood,” Olivia continued breathlessly as she struggled to match his pace, “how did you and Serena meet? I heard she was missing for three years before returning to the Quinn family. I can’t imagine what happened during that time.”

Her tone was deliberately casual, but beneath the friendly inquiry lay something more calculated—as if reminding Ryan that Serena’s past contained mysterious gaps that even he might not fully understand.

Not that it mattered. Ryan had been by Serena’s side during those three years, and he had no interest in explaining their history to a stranger.

They finally reached the front hall where Serena sat with Vivian in her arms, the evening sunlight casting a golden glow on her casually styled hair. The sight instantly brought a smile to Ryan’s usually stern face.

“Serena, I’m home,” he said, his voice softening in a way that made Olivia’s practiced smile freeze on her face.

She had spent the entire walk trying to engage him in conversation, yet the mere sight of Serena and their child had accomplished what she couldn’t—drawing actual words from him.

Why her? The question burned in Olivia’s mind as she watched the tender exchange. Since college, Serena had always been the center of attention—naturally gifted in design, winning awards at a young age, pursued by the most eligible men on campus.

And what had Olivia been? Nothing but background noise. Invisible. The professors and male students had only ever had eyes for Serena.

When Serena disappeared, Olivia had thought perhaps her shadow would finally lift. Instead, three years later, Serena had not only returned but had married into one of New York’s most powerful families.

Despite all Olivia’s years of hard work, she still couldn’t match even a fraction of what Serena had. In career and in life, she had lost spectacularly.

“Ryan, you’re back,” Serena looked up with a gentle smile that transformed her entire face. Then she noticed her visitor. “Olivia, come sit with us!”

Serena gestured with her free hand, and Olivia’s expression immediately reverted to its pleasant mask.

“Serena, Mr. Blackwood and I just happened to meet at the entrance,” she explained with perfect innocence.

Ryan moved to take Vivian from Serena’s arms, his face softening further as he gazed at his daughter.

Olivia’s eyes kept darting to Ryan, looking for another opportunity to engage him. “What a beautiful baby,” she cooed. “Mr. Blackwood, may I hold her for a moment?”

Ryan’s brows drew together in immediate disapproval. “Your perfume is too strong,” he stated flatly.

Olivia’s smile faltered as she discreetly sniffed herself. The perfume smelled wonderful to her—why would he find it objectionable?

“Olivia,” Serena intervened diplomatically, “Vivian’s actually quite heavy, and babies are so delicate. You might find yourself afraid to move once you’re holding her.”

Olivia forced a laugh. “You’re right, I didn’t think of that.”

She pivoted smoothly. “Vivian is such a beautiful name. Serena, I haven’t met the right person in all these years. I truly envy you—married to someone like Mr. Blackwood and mother to such an adorable child.”

The envy in her voice was genuine, even if it masked deeper jealousy.

“You’ll meet someone perfect for you too,” Serena responded kindly, clearly pleased by the compliment. “There’s nothing to envy.”

When dinner was ready, Eleanor finally emerged from her study. Her sharp eyes immediately assessed Olivia, noting the careful styling and expensive accessories.

Being something of a fashion connoisseur herself, Eleanor immediately recognized the scent hanging in the air. “Serena mentioned you have a good job now,” she remarked casually. “Must pay well. That perfume is a limited edition, quite expensive.”

Olivia’s expression momentarily tightened. “Limited edition? I wouldn’t know. A friend gave it to me as a gift. I’m not particularly choosy about perfumes—they all smell similar to me.”

Eleanor made a soft, skeptical sound but didn’t press further.

After a nanny took Vivian away to be fed, they all sat down for dinner. Throughout the meal, Olivia maintained a steady stream of conversation, skillfully shifting topics and even trying to win over Eleanor by complimenting her skin and asking for beauty tips.

Ryan remained focused on his food, contributing nothing to the conversation. Even Eleanor seemed disinterested, offering only brief responses before declaring herself finished.

Seeing her attempts at charm falling flat, Olivia gradually fell silent.

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### Author's POV

After dinner, Eleanor chose to remain in the living room rather than returning to work, positioning herself protectively near Serena. Olivia joined them with a cup of tea, adopting a gossipy demeanor.

"Serena, when did you two meet? Tell me all about your love story," she urged.

Serena, seeing her interest, provided a simplified version. "Three years ago, Ryan rescued me after I fell into the water. I lost my memory after that."

Olivia froze, clearly not expecting this revelation. "I had no idea... you two really were destined to meet."

"We certainly were," Serena agreed with a soft smile, offering no further details about the three years that followed. That Chapter was closed as far as she was concerned.

"I remember the day you fell in," Olivia said, leaning forward. "I was frantic, searching everywhere for you. I never imagined you'd lost your memory—that explains why there was no word from you."

Serena smiled faintly, fragments of memory from before her fall suddenly flickering through her mind.

"Olivia," she asked carefully, "can you help me remember something? Was anyone else around when I fell into the water?"

Olivia visibly tensed. "Serena, what are you suggesting? Do you think it wasn't an accident?"

Serena sighed, her expression troubled. "Sometimes I feel like it wasn't. I have this sensation... like someone pushed me."

Eleanor's expression darkened at Serena's suspicion. If someone had deliberately pushed her sister into the water, the Quinn family would stop at nothing to make them pay.

"Unfortunately there were no security cameras on that section of the deck," Olivia remarked, her tone oddly regretful.

After a moment's hesitation, Serena nodded. "Eleanor, do you still have the guest list from the celebration that night?"

"Of course I do," Eleanor confirmed with a curt nod. "We keep backups of everything."

Olivia swallowed visibly, her eyes darting nervously around the room. “Serena, it’s been so long... Even if someone did try to harm you, wouldn’t it be nearly impossible to find proof now?”

Eleanor shot her a withering look. “Difficult doesn’t mean impossible. And make no mistake—we will investigate thoroughly. Anyone who dared to harm Serena made an enemy of the entire Quinn family.”

“I’m just being practical,” Olivia protested, her face flushing. “Dredging up the past might only cause more pain. What good would it do now?”

“What good?” Eleanor’s voice dropped dangerously low. “My sister nearly died. She lost three years of her life because of what happened that night. And you’re suggesting we just let it go?” She leaned forward, eyes narrowing. “That’s a curious position to take, Olivia. Almost as if you’d prefer we didn’t look too closely at what happened.”

“That’s not what I—”

“Tell me,” Eleanor interrupted, “why are you so concerned about Serena investigating her own accident?”

Olivia’s hands trembled slightly as she set down her teacup. “I’m just worried about her wellbeing. She’s just had a baby. This kind of stress isn’t good for her recovery.”

“How thoughtful,” Eleanor replied, her tone ice-cold. “And how convenient.”

Without another word, Eleanor rose from her seat and headed upstairs to retrieve the guest list, leaving Olivia visibly shaken.

As soon as Eleanor was out of earshot, Olivia turned to Serena with glistening eyes. “Serena, does your sister hate me? Everything I say seems to offend her.”

“I’m only trying to help. You’ve just had a baby—you should be focused on your recovery and your beautiful daughter, not dwelling on painful memories from the past.” Her voice quavered. “What’s the point of all this now?”

Serena studied her former friend carefully, her gaze lingering just long enough to make Olivia shift uncomfortably.

“My sister is protective of me, Olivia. Try to understand.” Serena’s voice softened, but her eyes remained watchful. “She’s my family. What kind of sister would she be if she didn’t care when I was hurt?”

A hint of pride crept into Serena’s smile.

Olivia’s expression flickered briefly before settling into something resembling envy. “You’re so lucky, Serena. A perfect husband, a protective sister... you have everything.”



She reached across to touch Serena's hand. "I've thought about you constantly all these years. Seeing you living such a wonderful life now... I'm relieved. Truly."

"Thank you," Serena replied simply, neither confirming nor rejecting Olivia's assessment of her supposedly perfect life.

During their conversation, Ryan had gone upstairs to handle some business matters. He didn't reappear before Olivia finally left.

Ever since Serena had mentioned her suspicions about the fall, Eleanor had thrown herself into investigating the incident. At the time, the Quinn family had believed it was simply an unfortunate accident—that Serena had been drinking and lost her balance.

For three years, they'd focused solely on finding Serena, not questioning how she'd disappeared in the first place.

After retrieving the guest list, Eleanor began analyzing it meticulously. LUXE Jewelry wielded significant influence in London, and they'd invited very few business rivals to the celebration. The remainder of the guests were either families with good relationships to the Quinns or business associates with London connections.

Eleanor reviewed the list several times but couldn't identify anything suspicious. Frowning, she decided to call Zoe for help. Zoe hadn't attended the celebration that night.

"What is it?" came Zoe's clipped greeting.

Accustomed to her sister's abrupt manner, Eleanor got straight to the point, explaining Serena's suspicions about being pushed.

After a thoughtful pause, Zoe responded, "If Serena feels she was pushed, then that's almost certainly what happened."

"You were at the celebration. Think carefully—was there anything unusual that night?"

Zoe's reasoning was clear and direct. She didn't doubt Serena's instincts for a second. She'd harbored similar suspicions herself but had prioritized finding Serena over investigating the fall.

"Anything unusual..." Eleanor repeated, sighing.

"Consider this," Zoe suggested. "Who was close enough to Serena that night that she wouldn't have been on guard around them?"

"Someone she trusted who could get close without raising suspicion," Eleanor mused, following this line of thought.

After considering for a moment, she shook her head. “Serena was always quite selective about who she associated with. Men found it nearly impossible to get close to her.”

“However...” Eleanor paused, a realization dawning. “Serena did bring a friend that night—Olivia.”

As soon as she said it aloud, Eleanor drew a sharp breath.

“We shouldn’t make accusations without evidence,” Zoe cautioned. “For now, reach out to anyone who spoke with them that night. There might be something we’ve overlooked.”

Eleanor agreed, and Zoe added a final warning: “Remember, be discreet. We can’t risk alerting whoever is responsible.”

“I understand.”

After ending the call, Eleanor began contacting the younger guests who had attended that night. It was the younger crowd who might have noticed something important or overheard a telling conversation.

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Ryan’s POV

I didn’t exactly plan on working late that day. The evening was calling, and all I could think about was getting home to Serena and our little Vivian. My daughter was barely a month old, but already she’d become the center of my universe—something I never would have anticipated before she arrived.

Simon knocked on my door just as I was shutting down my laptop.

“Mr. Blackwood, there’s a Miss Wilson in the meeting room. Says she’s a friend of Mrs. Blackwood’s. Something about a project she insists needs your personal attention.”

I frowned immediately. “Which company?”

“SW Design.”

The name meant nothing significant—certainly not a company that warranted my direct involvement. But the moment Simon mentioned the surname, I knew exactly who our visitor was. Olivia Wilson. Serena’s so-called friend who’d been hovering around our home lately.

I hesitated. My schedule was clear for the rest of the evening, and something about this woman didn’t sit right with me. Perhaps it was worth finding out what she was really after.

"I'll see her," I decided, rising from my chair.

Walking into the meeting room, I noticed how Olivia's eyes lit up at my entrance. She practically bounced in her seat.

"Mr. Blackwood! Thank you for making time to see me."

I sat down without ceremony, giving her a curt nod. "What's this project you mentioned?"

Her smile faltered slightly at my directness. She'd clearly been hoping for small talk, but I had no interest in playing whatever game she was setting up.

"Of course, straight to business," she recovered, passing a folder across the table. "Our company is very committed to this opportunity. I've been given full authority to negotiate, and if you could personally oversee this partnership, I'm certain the results would be... extremely favorable."

The suggestive tone in her voice wasn't subtle. I barely registered her words as I flipped through the proposal, mentally calculating how quickly I could end this meeting.

After scanning the documents, I placed them back on the table. "The project looks viable. We can proceed with it."

Olivia's face brightened immediately. "Wonderful! Perhaps we could discuss the details over—"

"Miss Wilson," I cut her off, giving her a cold look. "While you may be acquainted with my wife, that doesn't grant you special treatment in business matters."

I stand up, already done with this charade. "If SW Design wishes to move forward, continue discussions with the appropriate department manager. I have other commitments."

Her smile falters but she recovers quickly. "Mr. Blackwood, please don't go yet! I have something else to ask you."

Christ, this woman doesn't take a hint. I stop at the door, not bothering to hide my irritation. "What is it?"

"Vivian's one-month celebration is coming up, and Serena invited me." She twirls a strand of hair, attempting to look innocent. "I'm stuck on what gift to bring. Since you know Serena so well, perhaps you could offer some suggestions?"

Is she fucking serious? Using my daughter to try to forge a connection with me?

"You claim to be Serena's friend," I say coldly. "Shouldn't you know what she likes?"

I turn to leave again but she steps forward, blocking my path.

"Mr. Blackwood, I was hoping we could discuss the project over coffee sometime. Just to ensure everything aligns with your vision."

That's it. I've had enough.

"Miss Wilson," I say, my voice dropping dangerously low. "Let me make something perfectly clear. My patience is extremely limited, and you're rapidly exhausting what little I have."

Her eyes widen as I continue.

"The only reason I agreed to meet you today is out of respect for my wife. But that courtesy has limits." I step closer, towering over her. "I suggest you return to discussing business matters with the appropriate personnel, or SW Design might find itself removed from consideration altogether."

I press the intercom button on the conference phone. "Simon, please escort Miss Wilson out. And reassign the SW Design project to Johnson's team."

"Right away, Mr. Blackwood," Simon's voice responds immediately.

Olivia's face flushes red. "This is completely unprofessional! I came here in good faith to—"

"What's unprofessional," I interrupt, "is using a personal connection to my wife to secure a business meeting, then trying to manipulate that into something more. Don't insult my intelligence."

Simon appears at the door, his expression professionally neutral.

"This way, Miss Wilson," he says, gesturing toward the exit.

"Serena will hear about this," she hisses, clutching her purse against her chest.

I actually laugh at that. "By all means, tell my wife. I'm sure she'll be fascinated to learn how you tried to use her and our daughter to get close to me."

As Simon leads her away, I hear her protesting loudly in the hallway. I shake my head, already reaching for my phone to call Serena. This Olivia situation is getting out of hand, and it's time Serena knew exactly what kind of "friend" she's dealing with.

All I want now is to get home to my family. The paperwork can wait until tomorrow.

The nerve of these guards! I stared at the Blackwood mansion's imposing gates, my blood boiling as two security men blocked my path. After Ryan so rudely dismissed me at his office, I came straight here instead of reporting back to SW. No way I was giving up that easily.

"I've been here multiple times before! Don't you recognize me?" I flashed my most charming smile while gripping my designer purse tighter. "I'm Serena's close friend. Let me in right now!"

God, these people were insufferable. The Blackwood estate never used to be this difficult to access. I smoothed down my business suit, regretting not changing into something more casual that would've made my "friendly visit" story more believable.

"Ma'am, we have strict instructions about visitors today. Mrs. Blackwood is resting with the baby."

"Then I'll wait! Just call someone to verify who I am!"

The head security guard exchanged glances with another staff member who disappeared inside. Perfect. They were getting someone. All I needed was to get past this front gate, then I could implement the next phase of my plan.

While I waited, sweating under the brutal afternoon sun, I rehearsed my story again. The project with Blackwood Enterprises was supposed to be my golden ticket. If Serena had seen Ryan personally approving my proposal, she would've mentioned it to him at home. One word from her, and I'd have legitimate reasons to schedule meetings with Ryan regularly.

But that arrogant bastard had completely shut me down! Called me manipulative right to my face!

My thoughts were interrupted when a slim, elegant woman appeared at the gate. Eleanor. Shit. Anyone but her.

"You won't need to call Serena," she announced coldly. "She's sleeping and won't be disturbed."

I immediately switched tactics, softening my expression. "Eleanor! So good to see you! I completely understand about Serena resting. I just wanted to ask about baby gift ideas for the one-month celebration."

Eleanor's eyes narrowed, scanning my outfit. "You're dressed rather professionally for a casual visit."

Damn it. I should've known she'd notice.

"I came straight from work," I laughed lightly. "Didn't have time to change."

"Yet you said you were 'in the neighborhood,'" Eleanor challenged, her voice like ice. "What exactly are you after, showing up at this house every other day? If you were truly Serena's friend, you'd respect her need for rest."

My heart raced. She was onto me. "That's completely unfair! Serena and I go back to university days. She needs friends around her right now, not just family controlling who she sees!"

"Friends don't force themselves where they're not wanted," Eleanor snapped. "Especially when a new mother is recovering."

"I'm not forcing anything! I—"

“Enough.” Eleanor cut me off with a dismissive wave. “Security will show you out. Call next time before coming.”

Before I could protest further, the guards stepped forward, making it clear I had no choice but to leave.

As I was escorted down the long driveway, humiliation burned through me. First Ryan, now this. The Blackwoods thought they could just dismiss me? I wasn’t some nobody to be tossed aside.

They had no idea what I was capable of. This rejection only strengthened my resolve. There were other ways to get close to Ryan Blackwood. And if Serena stood in my path... well, women who’ve just had babies can be so emotionally fragile, can’t they?

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Serena’s POV

I was halfway down the stairs when I heard Eleanor speaking with the security guards. From the terse tone alone, I knew something was off.

“What happened?” I asked as Eleanor returned to the foyer, noticing my presence immediately.

“You’re awake?” she asked, looking surprised.

I shook my head, feeling the exhaustion behind my eyes. They were probably bloodshot from lack of sleep. “Got woken up by the commotion. What’s going on?”

“Your so-called ‘good friend’ was here again,” Eleanor rolled her eyes dramatically. “Obviously came with some agenda but made up other excuses instead.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, fixing me with that look she’s had since we were kids – the “I-know-better-than-you” stare that always made me feel like I was missing something obvious.

“Serena, don’t you think there’s something seriously off about this Olivia person?” she pressed.

I rubbed my temples, feeling a headache coming on. “She has changed since three years ago, I’ll give you that.”

“Changed? You’re too damn trusting! Haven’t you noticed how her eyes are constantly following Ryan around whenever she visits?” Eleanor’s voice rose slightly. “All these eager visits to see you... you honestly don’t think she has ulterior motives?”

My sister sighed heavily, clearly frustrated with my obliviousness.

I frowned, genuinely uncertain. Had I missed something? Between the baby and recovery, I hadn't been paying attention to these dynamics.

"If you don't believe me," Eleanor continued, "call her right now and see if she doesn't have some favor to ask. I guarantee it."

"If it's something small, I could help her—"

"Oh my God!" Eleanor threw her hands up, rolling her eyes so hard I thought they might get stuck. "I swear, pregnancy really did make you lose all your sense. They say 'pregnancy brain' lasts nine months, but you're going on three years of cluelessness!"

Curiosity got the better of me. I hesitated briefly before grabbing my phone and dialing Olivia's number.

She picked up after a few rings, her voice immediately shifting into complaint mode.

"Serena! I just came by your place but they wouldn't let me in because you were resting."

"I just woke up," I replied neutrally. "Did you need something?"

"Nothing major," she said casually. "Just wanted some advice on gifts for the baby's one-month celebration. What would be appropriate?"

"Really, the thought counts more than anything," I answered. "No need to spend much."

"Well, I also wanted to share some good news! I just came from Blackwood Enterprises where I closed a new project deal!"

"Congratulations," I replied flatly.

"It's all thanks to our friendship, Serena! This is my first major project since returning to New York, and I was wondering..." her voice dropped to a honeyed plea, "could you maybe ask Mr. Blackwood to give me some special consideration? You know, put in a good word?"

And there it was – the fox finally showed its tail. I glanced at Eleanor, who was watching me with raised eyebrows, clearly having predicted this exact scenario.

"Ryan's work matters aren't something I meddle with," I said carefully. "Just focus on doing the project well, and I'm sure everything will be fine."

My polite rejection wasn't well-received. I heard Olivia inhale sharply.

"Serena, aren't we best friends? It's just a small favor, just mentioning me casually," she pressed, switching tactics. "I just transferred back to New York, and if this project fails, they might push me out. Please? Just this once?"

The pathetic act combined with the manipulative tone made my stomach turn. Every word confirmed what Eleanor had warned me about.

"I'll... see what I can do," I finally said, unable to outright refuse her but having zero intention of bothering Ryan with this.

"I knew you'd help!" Her voice instantly brightened. "Thank you so much, Serena!"

I made up an excuse about Vivian crying and quickly ended the call.

Eleanor's triumphant "I told you so" expression made me want to throw my phone at her.

"See?" she smirked. "Exactly as I predicted. Since when do genuine friends show up this often with hidden agendas?"

"You know what they say – 'Excessive enthusiasm hides selfish intentions.' Either she's after something shady or she's up to no good."

I set my phone down with a sigh. "She wasn't like this three years ago. Back then, she always had my back, followed me around everywhere. She even seemed insecure because of her modest background." I couldn't keep the disappointment from my voice. "It's sad how much she's changed."

"Don't waste your energy feeling sad about it," Eleanor shrugged. "Just keep your distance from now on."

"Yeah," I agreed reluctantly. "I will."

Eleanor then mentioned she needed to investigate something in the coming days, promising to share the results later. Despite my curiosity, she remained tight-lipped about what exactly she was looking into.

I was about to press her further when I heard the front door open. Ryan walked in, looking exhausted but immediately brightening when he saw me. He crossed the room in a few long strides.

"How's my favorite girl?" he asked, dropping his briefcase and wrapping an arm around my waist. The familiar scent of his cologne made my heart skip.

"Better now," I admitted, leaning into his touch. "Though we had an interesting visitor try to get in earlier."

Eleanor snorted. "That Olivia woman again. She's getting quite persistent."

Ryan's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "Simon mentioned she came by the office today too. Trying to leverage her connection to you."



"And?" I asked, suddenly curious about how he'd handled it.

"I made it very clear that personal connections don't influence business decisions at Blackwood," he said firmly. His hand traced small circles on my lower back as he spoke. "And that no woman, business partner or otherwise, could ever compare to my wife."

I felt my cheeks warm at his unexpected declaration.

"On that note," Eleanor announced loudly, "I'll leave you two alone. Some of us don't need to witness this disgusting display of affection."

But I caught her small smile as she walked away.

When we were alone, Ryan pulled me closer, his forehead resting against mine. "I meant what I said. No one compares to you, Serena."

Something about the intensity in his eyes made my breath catch. After weeks of sleep deprivation and baby chaos, this moment of connection felt precious.

"Even when I look like a zombie and can barely string together coherent sentences?" I joked.

"Especially then," he murmured, his lips finding mine in a gentle kiss that quickly deepened.

I pulled back slightly, my hands resting on his chest. "I've been thinking about planning Vivian's one-month celebration. I want it to be perfect."

Ryan smiled, brushing a strand of hair from my face. "Whatever you want, it's yours. Our daughter deserves the best first celebration."

As he held me in the quiet of our home, I tried to push thoughts of Olivia and her schemes out of my mind. Some friendships weren't worth saving, especially when I had everything that mattered right here.