

CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 301

Ryan's hands gripped my thighs firmly as he carried me across the living room, my back hitting the wall with a gentle thud. His mouth never left mine, hungry and demanding, stealing my breath with each passionate kiss.

"I've thought about this every night," he whispered against my lips, his voice husky with desire. "Touching you, tasting you..."

I tugged impatiently at his shirt buttons, desperate to feel his skin against mine. "Show me," I challenged, eyes locked with his.

In one swift movement, Ryan set me down and stripped off his shirt, revealing the sculpted planes of his chest and abdomen. My fingers traced the contours of his muscles, savoring the way they tensed beneath my touch.

"Your turn," he commanded softly, reaching for the zipper of my dress.

The expensive fabric pooled at my feet, leaving me in nothing but lace underwear. Ryan's eyes darkened as they traveled over my body, appreciation and hunger evident in his gaze.

"God, you're beautiful," he breathed, pulling me against him. "Every inch of you."

The feel of his warm skin against mine sent electricity coursing through my veins. I arched into him as his hands roamed my body, expertly finding every sensitive spot he'd memorized over our time together.

"I need you," I gasped as his fingers slipped beneath the lace of my underwear. "Now."

Ryan didn't need further encouragement. He lifted me again, carrying me to the nearest flat surface – the dining table. With one sweep of his arm, he cleared the decorative centerpiece, laying me down on the cool wooden surface.

"Here?" I asked, a mixture of surprise and excitement in my voice.

His smile was predatory as he leaned over me, caging me with his arms. "I told you the bedroom was too far."

I wrapped my legs around his waist, drawing him closer. "I'm not complaining."

His lips traveled down my neck to my collarbone, then lower still, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. My back arched off the table as his mouth closed over my breast, teasing through the delicate lace until I was squirming beneath him.

"Ryan," I moaned, threading my fingers through his hair. "Please..."

He looked up, his eyes meeting mine with such intensity it made my breath catch. “Tell me what you want, Serena.”

“You,” I answered without hesitation. “All of you.”

The remaining barriers between us disappeared in a frantic flurry of movement. When he finally pushed into me, we both gasped at the exquisite sensation of being joined again after weeks apart.

“I’ve missed this,” he groaned, starting to move with deep, deliberate strokes. “Missed you.”

I clung to his shoulders, nails digging into his skin as pleasure built within me. “Show me how much.”

Ryan’s pace increased, his control slipping as passion took over. The table rocked beneath us, our bodies moving in perfect synchronization. Every thrust drove me higher, closer to that glorious edge.

“Look at me,” he commanded softly as he felt me nearing my peak. “I want to see your face.”

I forced my eyes open, meeting his intense gaze as waves of pleasure crashed over me.

We remained tangled together, breathing heavily, neither willing to break the connection just yet. Ryan’s forehead rested against mine, his thumb gently tracing my cheekbone.

“Was this why you flew all the way to London?” I teased, once I could speak again. “For a quickie on my dining table?”

He chuckled, the sound reverberating through his chest against mine. “This was just the appetizer,” he promised, pressing a tender kiss to my lips. “I have plans for every surface in this apartment.”

“Ambitious,” I commented, raising an eyebrow.

“I have three days to make up for three weeks apart,” he explained, finally withdrawing and helping me sit up. “That requires ambition.”

The shower was spacious, steam quickly filling the glass enclosure as hot water cascaded over us. Ryan’s hands glided over my soap-slicked skin, ostensibly to help me wash but clearly with other intentions.

“Tell me about today,” he murmured, pressing kisses along my shoulder. “You mentioned it was eventful.”

Between gasps as his fingers worked their magic between my thighs, I recounted Ethan's proposal to Maya and the celebration that followed. Ryan listened attentively, even as his hands and lips continued their delicious assault on my senses.

"They're good together," he commented, turning me to face him under the spray. "Like us."

"Are we good together?" I asked, suddenly serious despite our intimate position.

Ryan's eyes softened as he cupped my face. "The best, Serena. Everything I never knew I needed."

He lifted me effortlessly, my back against the cool tile wall as he entered me again, this time with agonizing slowness. "Feel that?" he whispered against my ear. "That's what you do to me. Every time. Without fail."

I wrapped myself around him completely, surrendering to the passion building between us once more. "I love you," I breathed, the words torn from me as pleasure mounted.

"And I love you," he responded, his movements gaining urgency. "More than I ever thought possible."

We lost ourselves in each other again, the steam and water creating a world that existed only for us. When we finally emerged, wrapped in plush towels, Ryan pulled me close for a tender kiss unlike the desperate ones we'd shared before.

"Bed now?" he suggested with a smile that promised we wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon.

I took his hand, leading him toward the bedroom. "I believe you mentioned something about every surface?"

His laugh followed me down the hallway, deep and genuine. "I did, didn't I? Better get started then."

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Serena's POV

I woke up with a delicious ache spreading through every muscle in my body. Sunlight streamed through the half-drawn curtains as I stretched carefully, wincing at the pleasant soreness.

"Morning, beautiful," Ryan murmured, his voice still rough with sleep. He propped himself up on one elbow, looking unfairly gorgeous with his tousled hair and sleepy eyes.

"Morning," I replied, unable to suppress my smile. "I think you broke me."

His lips curved into that smug smile I both loved and hated. “Complaints?”

“Not a single one.” I leaned over to kiss him, but before things could escalate again, my phone started buzzing frantically on the nightstand.

Maya’s name flashed across the screen. I groaned but reached for it anyway.

“Your timing is terrible,” I answered without preamble.

“SERENA!” Maya’s voice practically exploded through the speaker, so loud that Ryan raised an eyebrow beside me. “I need you NOW. Wedding dress shopping. This is NOT a drill!”

I sat up, clutching the sheet to my chest. “Today? But I thought—”

“I found this AMAZING boutique that specializes in custom bridal wear, but they had a cancellation so they can fit us in TODAY. Like, in two hours! You HAVE to come with me. I can’t make these decisions alone!”

Ryan was now trailing kisses along my shoulder, making it difficult to concentrate. I swatted at him half-heartedly.

“Of course I’ll come,” I said, trying to sound normal while Ryan’s hand slid beneath the sheets. “Text me the address.”

“And bring Ryan!” Maya added excitedly. “Ethan will be there too. I’ve been thinking… what if we had the wedding here in London? It would be so romantic, and since you guys are already here…”

I felt a sudden rush of emotion. “You want to have your wedding here? Because of us?”

“You’re my best friend, Serena. I want you there, fully present, not distracted by work or travel. Plus, London is gorgeous! So, what do you say? Will you help me find the perfect dress AND be my maid of honor for a London wedding?”

My eyes welled up unexpectedly. “Yes to everything. I’ll be there in two hours.”

After hanging up, I turned to Ryan, who was watching me with curious eyes. “Maya wants to have her wedding in London. She wants me to be her maid of honor.”

Ryan smiled, wiping away a tear I hadn’t realized had fallen. “That’s wonderful. She’s important to you.”

“She’s the only real friend I had when everything fell apart,” I admitted quietly. “When I left you, started over… she was there through all of it.”

He pulled me close, kissing the top of my head. “Then I owe her a debt I can never repay. Now, much as I’d love to keep you in bed all day, it sounds like we have a bridal appointment to get to.”

Two hours later, we walked into one of London’s most exclusive bridal boutiques, where Maya was already bouncing on her toes with excitement. The place was a vision of white and cream, with plush seating and champagne on ice.

“Finally!” Maya grabbed my hands. “They’ve pulled some dresses already, but I need your expert eye. You know I trust your design instincts more than anyone’s.”

I squeezed her hands. “Let’s find you something spectacular.”

While the men were ushered to a waiting area with drinks, Maya and I disappeared into a sea of tulle, lace, and silk. The boutique manager, a slender woman named Claudia, started bringing out options.

“This is a Vera Wang,” she said, presenting the first gown.

Maya slipped it on and stepped onto the viewing platform. I circled her slowly, my designer’s eye automatically cataloging every detail.

“The neckline is competing with the beadwork,” I said, pinching the fabric between my fingers. “And the silhouette doesn’t emphasize your waist enough.”

Claudia blinked, clearly not used to such detailed critique.

“Try the next one,” I suggested.

Four dresses later, Maya stood in an A-line gown with delicate lace sleeves. It was beautiful, but...

“The lace quality is mediocre,” I commented, examining the pattern. “And these seams will photograph poorly in certain lights.”

Claudia looked between us with a bemused expression. “Are you ladies in the industry?”

“We’re designers,” Maya explained. “Not bridal specifically, but—”

“We know quality,” I finished. “Sorry if we seem picky.”

Claudia smiled. “No need to apologize. It’s refreshing working with clients who understand craftsmanship. Let me bring out our couture collection.”

The seventh dress was the one. The moment Maya put it on, we both knew. It was a sleek, modern design with vintage-inspired details – architectural lines combined with ethereal movement.

“This is it,” Maya whispered, turning slowly before the mirror. “I feel like myself, but... elevated.”

“It’s perfect,” I agreed, my throat tight with emotion. “Ethan won’t know what hit him.”

After selecting Maya’s dress and scheduling fittings, Claudia turned to me. “And for the maid of honor?”

“Oh, I haven’t even thought about—”

“Actually,” Maya interrupted, “I took the liberty of having them pull some options for you too.”

Before I could protest, I was whisked away to another fitting room. Maya handed me a sleek, midnight blue gown that shimmered subtly in the light.

“Try this one first,” she insisted.

The dress fit like it was made for me, hugging my curves before flowing gracefully to the floor. A tasteful slit revealed just enough leg to be interesting without crossing into inappropriate territory.

“Well?” I asked, stepping out to show Maya.

“Stunning,” she breathed. “But try the emerald one too. I have a feeling...”

The emerald dress was even better – a rich, deep green that made my skin glow and my eyes pop. The neckline was daring but elegant, with delicate straps crossing over my exposed back.

“This is the one,” Maya declared. “Ryan will swallow his tongue.”

I laughed. “Is that the goal?”

“Always,” she winked. “Now, let’s show the boys.”

We changed back into the selected dresses and made our grand entrance to the waiting area where Ryan and Ethan sat nursing drinks. The moment we stepped into view, both men froze mid-conversation.

Ethan stood immediately, eyes fixed on Maya with such pure adoration it made my heart ache. “You’re breathtaking,” he said simply.

But I was watching Ryan. His eyes darkened as they traveled slowly from my face down the length of my body, his expression shifting from surprise to something heated and possessive.

“Well?” I prompted, doing a small turn that made the fabric shimmer in the light. “Will I do as maid of honor?”

Ryan finally found his voice. “You’ll outshine everyone in the room,” he said, his tone making it clear that wasn’t necessarily a compliment to the other guests.

“Except the bride,” I corrected, gesturing to Maya.

“Of course,” Ryan agreed smoothly, but his eyes never left me.

“So,” Claudia said, breaking the moment, “shall we proceed with these selections?”

“Absolutely,” Maya confirmed, still beaming. “They’re perfect.”

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Serena’s POV

I watched Maya twirl in front of the mirror one last time before we signed the final paperwork.

I adjusted her veil, fighting back tears. “You look breathtaking.”

“So,” Claudia asked as she carefully folded Maya’s wedding gown into its box, “when’s the big day?”

“Next week,” Maya said lightly, as if she hadn’t just dropped a grenade into the room.

I nearly choked on my champagne. “I’m sorry—what? Next week? As in seven days from now?”

Maya grinned, completely unapologetic. “Why wait? We found the perfect venue and they had a cancellation. The stars aligned, Serena. Besides, you and Ryan are already in London, my parents can fly in, and—”

“And you’re insane,” I finished for her, though I was smiling.

This was Maya. Impulsive. Passionate. Once she decided something, the world simply had to keep up.

The next seven days disappeared in a blur.

Maya and I flew back to New York the morning after our shopping trip, leaving the men behind to deal with business. We had exactly five days to gather everything before heading back to London for the final preparations.

“Do you think I’m crazy?” Maya asked during the flight, twisting her engagement ring around her finger, the diamond catching the light. “Planning a wedding in a week?”

I squeezed her hand. “Completely. But if anyone can pull this off, it’s you.”

“And you,” she said softly. “I’d be lost without my maid of honor.”

I meant it when I smiled.

The wedding day dawned bright and clear—a small miracle for London. I helped Maya into her dress, my hands trembling slightly as I zipped her up.

“You’re beautiful,” I whispered, adjusting her veil.

Her eyes shone. “Do you think Ethan will like it?”

“He’ll love it,” I said. “Because it’s you.”

“Don’t you dare cry,” Maya warned, her own eyes glistening. “If you start, I’ll start, and then my makeup will be ruined.”

“No crying,” I promised, dabbing carefully at my eye corners. “Just... I’m so happy for you.”

“Your parents are already seated,” I said, peeking through the doorway of our preparation room. The Carters had flown in from New York just yesterday, Mrs. Carter fussing over every detail despite the short notice. “Your dad looks like he might burst with pride.”

Maya took a deep breath. “And Ryan?”

“Front row, looking devastatingly handsome and checking his watch every thirty seconds,” I laughed. “Though whether he’s anxious for the ceremony to start or just impatient to get to the reception bar, I can’t tell.”

“Liar. That man only has eyes for you.” Maya squeezed my hand. “Thank you for being here. For everything.”

The music began, my cue to head down the aisle first. I smoothed my emerald dress, took a breath, and stepped out.

Walking slowly down the flower-strewn path, I caught Ryan's eye immediately. His gaze was intense, tracking my every movement, that now-familiar heat in his eyes making my skin tingle despite the hundred guests surrounding us. When I reached my position, I turned to watch Maya's entrance.

The collective gasp when she appeared was everything a bride could hope for. Ethan's face transformed with pure joy as she walked toward him, her father beaming beside her. I spotted Mrs. Carter already dabbing at her eyes with an embroidered handkerchief.

"Dearly beloved," the officiant began, his voice carrying clearly across the hushed garden.

The ceremony was personal and moving, with vows they'd written themselves. Maya's voice shook slightly as she promised to "always be your biggest supporter, your harshest critic when you need one, and your safe harbor in every storm." Ethan pledged to "choose you, every day, in every way, for all our days."

I wasn't the only one wiping away tears by the time they exchanged rings. Ryan caught my eye during the vows, his expression unreadable but intense. I wondered what he was thinking, if he was remembering our own wedding, so different from this joyful celebration.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the officiant declared. "You may kiss the bride!"

The guests erupted in cheers as Ethan swept Maya into a passionate kiss. Rice and rose petals showered down as they ran back down the aisle, laughing and ducking under the colorful storm.

The reception that followed was magical—tables adorned with wildflowers and candles, champagne flowing freely, and a band playing everything from classic standards to current hits. Maya's father gave a touching speech that had everyone reaching for their napkins again, and Ethan's best man had us all howling with laughter at stories from their college days.

"Dance with me?" Ryan appeared at my side, hand extended, as the band shifted to a slow, romantic melody.

I slipped my hand into his. "Always."

He pulled me close, one hand at the small of my back, our bodies moving in perfect sync.

"You're a vision in that dress," he murmured against my ear. "I've been wanting to get you alone all day."

I laughed softly. "Behave yourself. This is Maya's day."

"And yet I can't stop looking at you." His fingers traced the exposed skin of my back. "Reminds me of our wedding day."

I tensed slightly. Our wedding had been a lavish but cold affair, arranged more than chosen. “This is nothing like our wedding.”

“No,” he agreed, surprising me. “This is what ours should have been. Full of love, joy, friends. I’m sorry it wasn’t.”

The unexpected apology caught me off guard. Before I could respond, the music changed and Maya pulled me away for an impromptu dance circle with her college friends.

The celebration continued well into the evening. I was returning from helping Maya with a bustle issue on her dress when I noticed something odd—a server I didn’t recognize arguing with a security guard near a side entrance. Something about his stiff posture set off warning bells.

I scanned the room, spotting Ryan deep in conversation with some business associates. Ethan was cutting the cake with Maya, both laughing as they fed each other tiny bites.

That’s when I saw him. Edward Quinn slipping through a service door, his expression disturbingly focused. Before I could even process why he’d be here, I saw the unmistakable outline of a gun partially concealed beneath his jacket.

My blood ran cold. He was moving with purpose toward the small stage where Maya and Ethan were now preparing for their first dance as husband and wife.

“Ryan!” I tried to call out, but my voice was drowned by the music and chatter.

Edward’s face contorted with rage as he watched Maya kiss Ethan. His hand moved to his jacket, pulling out the gun.

There was no time to think. I kicked off my heels and ran, pushing through dancing guests, my emerald dress flowing behind me like a stream of water.

“Maya! Ethan!” I screamed as I reached the stage, just as Edward raised his arm.

Without hesitation, I lunged forward, shoving them both sideways. In that split second, I saw Ryan’s head whip around, his expression shifting from confusion to horror as he spotted Edward.

The gun went off with a deafening crack that seemed to freeze time itself. Screams erupted as guests scattered. I felt a strange, burning sensation, then nothing at all as the world tilted sideways.

The last thing I saw was Ryan running toward me, his mouth forming my name, his eyes wild with fear.

Then everything went black.

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Serena's POV

I couldn't tell how long I'd been out when consciousness started seeping back into my body. First came the sounds—beeping machines, hushed voices, someone crying softly. Then the sensation—a dull throbbing in my side and a sharper pain at the back of my head. The antiseptic smell hit me next, that unmistakable hospital scent.

My eyelids felt impossibly heavy as I struggled to open them. The fluorescent lights above were blinding, making me wince.

“She’s waking up!” Someone gasped—Maya’s voice, thick with tears.

I blinked several times, the room slowly coming into focus. My hospital bed was surrounded by people—Maya still in her wedding dress though it was wrinkled now, mascara streaking her cheeks; Ethan beside her looking shell-shocked; my brother Ethan Quinn hovering anxiously at the foot of the bed; and Ryan...

Ryan was right next to me, clutching my hand like it was his lifeline. His knuckles were white, face ashen, hair disheveled like he’d been running his fingers through it for hours. His normally immaculate suit was rumpled and stained with what looked horribly like blood—my blood.

“Don’t try to move,” he said, his voice raw. “You’re okay. You’re going to be okay.”

I tried to speak but my throat felt like sandpaper. Ryan immediately reached for a cup with a straw, gently holding it to my lips. The cool water was heaven.

“What happened?” I managed to croak out, though I was starting to remember fragments—Edward, the gun, pushing Maya and Ethan...

Maya’s face crumpled. “You saved us, Serena. That psychopath Edward was aiming for Ethan but you...” she broke off, unable to continue.

“The bullet hit you in the side,” Ryan explained quietly, his thumb stroking the back of my hand. “And you hit your head on the sound equipment when you fell. You’ve been unconscious for about six hours.”

“Edward?” I asked.

“In custody,” Ethan Quinn answered, stepping closer. His eyes were red-rimmed too. “Security tackled him seconds after he fired. The police have him, and with attempted murder at a public event with hundreds of witnesses plus his previous stalking charges... he’s never seeing daylight again.”

I nodded weakly, then winced as pain shot through my head.

“Don’t move your head,” Ryan said immediately, his hand tightening around mine. “The doctor said you have a mild concussion.”

“The bullet?” I whispered.

“Grazed your side,” Ryan explained. “Missed everything vital. You were incredibly lucky.”

Maya suddenly burst into fresh tears. “You could have died because of us! I’ll never forgive myself for—”

“Stop,” I interrupted, my voice stronger now. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat. Not your fault. Never your fault.”

Ethan pulled his sobbing bride gently against his chest, mouthing “thank you” to me over her head, his own eyes glistening.

The door opened and a doctor entered, clipboard in hand. “Ah, Mrs. Blackwood, you’re awake. That’s excellent. How’s the pain?”

“Manageable,” I lied. Every breath felt like fire in my side.

The doctor wasn’t fooled. “I’ll have the nurse increase your pain medication. The good news is the bullet wound was relatively clean—it grazed your abdomen but didn’t penetrate deeply. No major organs were damaged. The concussion is mild, but we’ll keep you under observation for the next 24-48 hours to be safe.”

“When can she come home?” Ryan asked, his voice tight with concern.

“Assuming no complications, probably in three days. The bullet wound will take a few weeks to heal completely, and she’ll need rest for the concussion, but there’s no reason she won’t make a full recovery.”

The relief in the room was palpable. Ryan’s shoulders sagged as he brought my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss against my knuckles.

“I’ll give you all a few more minutes, then Mrs. Blackwood needs to rest,” the doctor said before leaving.

As soon as the door closed, my brother moved to the other side of my bed, gently taking my free hand. “When they called me...” his voice caught. “I thought I was going to lose you all over again, after just finding you.”

“Not getting rid of me that easily,” I managed a weak smile.

“The whole family’s in the waiting room,” Ethan Quinn continued. “Mom and Dad are beside themselves. They’re only letting immediate family in right now.”

“Tell them I’m okay,” I said. “Really.”

Maya had composed herself somewhat, though her eyes were still red and swollen. “Your wedding gift to us was supposed to be that gorgeous set of crystal champagne flutes, not taking a bullet.”

I tried to laugh but stopped when it sent pain shooting through my side. “Consider it an upgrade.”

“Not funny,” Ryan muttered, but there was relief in his eyes now that I was awake and talking.

A nurse came in with more pain medication, adding it to my IV. “This will make you drowsy,” she warned.

As the medication began to take effect, making the room slightly fuzzy around the edges, Maya and Ethan reluctantly said they’d come back tomorrow. My brother kissed my forehead before leaving too, promising to return with our parents in the morning.

Ryan stayed, still holding my hand, his thumb making soothing circles against my skin.

“You’re not leaving?” I asked, my eyelids growing heavy.

“Try and make me,” he said, his voice low and fierce. “I’m not leaving your side again.”

“Mmm, stubborn,” I murmured, feeling sleep pulling me under.

Just before I drifted off, I heard Ryan whisper, “When I saw you fall... I’ve never been so terrified in my life. Don’t ever scare me like that again, Serena. I can’t lose you.”

I wanted to respond, but the medication was too strong, carrying me into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Over the next two days, my hospital room became a revolving door of Quinn family members. My parents barely left, my mother fussing over everything from my pillows to my hospital food, while my father stood guard like a sentinel. Eleanor and Zoe came with flowers and gossip magazines “to keep you from dying of boredom instead.” Maya and Ethan visited daily, still apologizing profusely despite my insistence that they stop.

And Ryan... Ryan was my constant shadow. He worked remotely from a chair beside my bed, only leaving when forced out by nurses or when my family insisted he get some rest. Each time he returned looking more disheveled than when he’d left, like being away from me physically pained him.

On the third day, the doctor declared I was ready for discharge. “Remember, plenty of rest, no strenuous activity, and keep the wound clean. The stitches will dissolve on their own.”

“I’ll make sure she follows every instruction to the letter,” Ryan promised, his hand warm on my lower back as he helped me into the wheelchair hospital policy required for discharge.

As we waited for the discharge papers, I couldn’t help but notice how the Quinn family had formed a protective circle around me—my parents discussing my aftercare with the doctor, Ethan Quinn arranging for a private nurse to visit daily, Eliza already texting the house staff to prepare my favorite foods.

“They love you,” Ryan murmured, noticing my gaze. “We all do.”

“Ready to go home?” Ryan asked as the nurse arrived with my discharge papers.

I nodded, realizing I truly was ready—not just to leave the hospital, but to embrace this next Chapter. We had survived. We were together. The worst was behind us.

Ryan wheeled me out into the sunshine, my family flanking us like an honor guard.

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Serena’s POV

I was officially back on my feet after two grueling weeks of recovery. The bullet wound still twinged occasionally when I moved too quickly, but the constant pain had subsided to a manageable ache. I could finally breathe without feeling like someone was stabbing my side.

“Are you absolutely certain you’re ready to travel?” Mom fussed over me in my childhood bedroom at the Quinn estate, watching me pack with worried eyes. “The doctor said—”

“The doctor cleared me three days ago,” I reminded her gently, folding another silk blouse into my suitcase. “I’m healing perfectly. No complications.”

She sighed, smoothing down the bedspread for the fifth time. “New York is so far away.”

I paused my packing and took her hands in mine. “I know. I’ll miss you too. But I have responsibilities there, and Ryan...”

“Ryan hasn’t left your side for more than an hour since the shooting,” Mom said, a reluctant smile touching her lips. “That man loves you fiercely.”

I couldn’t help the warmth spreading through my chest at her words. “He does. And I love him.”

“I just found you again,” she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. “It feels too soon to let you go.”

“You’re not letting me go,” I promised, hugging her carefully. “I’m just going home. We’ll visit often, and you and Dad have an open invitation to stay with us anytime.”

A knock at the door interrupted us. Ryan stood there, looking unfairly handsome in dark jeans and a charcoal cashmere sweater.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said, his eyes softening when they landed on me. “Ethan sent me to tell you the caterers have arrived for the farewell party.”

Mom wiped her eyes quickly and patted my cheek. “I’ll go make sure they’re setting up correctly. Your father will undoubtedly be interrogating the poor bartender about the quality of the scotch.”

After she left, Ryan crossed to me, wrapping his arms around my waist with careful gentleness. “How’s the packing going?”

“Almost done,” I said, leaning back against his chest. “Though my mother seems convinced I’m one wrong move away from falling apart.”

“Can you blame her?” Ryan pressed a kiss to the side of my neck. “You terrified all of us.”

I turned in his arms, looking up at him. Those dark, sleepless shadows that had lingered under his eyes for days after the shooting had finally faded. “I’m okay now. Really.”

“I know.” He touched his forehead to mine. “But I reserve the right to be overprotective for at least another month.”

“Only a month?” I teased, smoothing my hands up his chest.

“Two, then.” His lips quirked. “Final offer.”

I laughed, rising on tiptoes to kiss him. What started as gentle quickly deepened, his hands sliding into my hair as he backed me carefully against the dresser.

“Ryan,” I breathed against his mouth. “We have guests arriving.”

“Mmm,” he hummed, trailing kisses down my throat. “They can wait.”

A pointed cough from the doorway made us spring apart like guilty teenagers. Ethan stood there, eyebrows raised.

“If you two could postpone the honeymoon activities until after the party,” he said dryly, “Grandmother is asking for Serena.”

Ryan sighed, stepping back but keeping his hand at my waist. “We’ll be right down.”

The Quinn estate’s expansive gardens had been transformed for our farewell gathering. Fairy lights twinkled in the trees as twilight descended, and tables laden with exquisite food and drink dotted the manicured lawn. Family members and close friends mingled, champagne glasses in hand.

“There’s our warrior princess!” Uncle James boomed, pulling me into a gentle hug. “How’s the battle wound?”

“Healing nicely,” I assured him, accepting the glass of sparkling water Ryan handed me. I was still on medication that didn’t mix well with alcohol.

For the next two hours, we made our rounds, accepting well-wishes and goodbyes. Maya and Ethan, who would be traveling back to New York with us tomorrow, were surrounded by Maya’s tearful family.

“They’re acting like New York is on another planet, not just a eight-hour flight away,” Maya said when she joined us, rolling her eyes fondly.

“Mothers,” I said sympathetically, glancing at my own mom who was still watching me like I might collapse at any second.

Grandmother Quinn eventually cornered me by the rose garden, her sharp eyes missing nothing. “You look well, Serena. Much better than when you were in that dreadful hospital bed.”

“Thank you, Grandmother.” I smiled at the formidable matriarch of the Quinn family. Despite her stern exterior, she’d visited me daily in the hospital, reading aloud from classic novels while I drifted in and out of sleep.

“That husband of yours,” she said, nodding toward Ryan who was deep in conversation with my father across the lawn, “he’s proven himself worthy of you.”

Coming from Grandmother Quinn, this was the highest possible praise.

“I think so too,” I said softly.

“He was a man possessed when you were injured. Wouldn’t leave your side, threatened to buy the entire hospital when a nurse suggested he step out during your examination.” Her eyes twinkled. “Reminds me of your grandfather when I had pneumonia in ’78.”

My heart warmed at the comparison. Grandfather Quinn had adored his wife with legendary devotion until his dying day.

“I’m glad you found each other again,” she continued, patting my hand. “Don’t waste a moment of it, dear girl. Life is too short and too precious.”

The party began winding down as the evening grew later. I found myself growing tired, the day's activities taking their toll on my still-healing body.

Ryan noticed immediately, materializing at my side during a conversation with Eliza. "You need to rest," he murmured in my ear, his arm sliding supportively around my waist.

I started to protest but couldn't stifle a yawn. "Maybe you're right."

We made our goodbyes, promising to see everyone for breakfast before our flight tomorrow. My parents hugged me extra tight, and Dad whispered, "We're so proud of you, sweetheart," in my ear.

Instead of heading up to my bedroom at the estate, Ryan surprised me by leading me to his waiting car.

"Where are we going?" I asked as he helped me into the passenger seat.

"I thought we might spend our last night here somewhere private," he said with a mysterious smile, sliding behind the wheel.

Twenty minutes later, we pulled up to The Windsor, the most luxurious hotel in the area. As we stepped into the elegant lobby, I raised an eyebrow at Ryan. "When did you arrange this?"

"I have my ways," he said, guiding me toward the elevator.

The Presidential Suite took my breath away—a sprawling space with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city lights. But what truly stunned me was the trail of rose petals leading from the entrance to the bedroom, where dozens of candles cast a warm, golden glow.

"Ryan," I breathed, taking in the champagne on ice (and sparkling cider for me), the platter of chocolate-dipped strawberries, the turned-down bed scattered with more rose petals.

"Too much?" he asked, suddenly looking uncertain.

I turned to him, emotion swelling in my chest. "It's perfect."

Relief softened his features as he stepped closer, his hands coming to rest lightly on my hips. "The doctor said you were cleared for... all activities," he murmured, his eyes darkening. "But if you're not ready—"

I silenced him with a kiss, pressing my body against his. "I'm ready," I whispered against his lips.

His control snapped. In seconds, I was in his arms as he carried me to the bed, laying me down with exquisite care among the rose petals. His eyes never left mine as he slowly unbuttoned my blouse, pushing the fabric aside to reveal the healing scar on my side.

Ryan's expression turned solemn as he traced the mark with gentle fingers. "I almost lost you," he said hoarsely.

"But you didn't," I reminded him, pulling him down for another kiss. "I'm right here."

He kissed me deeply, his hands moving reverently over my body like he was memorizing every inch. I tugged at his sweater, needing to feel his skin against mine, and he quickly stripped it off, followed by the rest of our clothes.

"Beautiful," he whispered, hovering above me, his eyes drinking me in. "So beautiful."

When he finally joined our bodies, the pleasure was almost overwhelming after weeks apart. I gasped his name, clinging to his shoulders as he moved with careful restraint, mindful of my healing wound.

"I'm not made of glass," I breathed in his ear, urging him closer. "I won't break."

Something fierce and possessive flashed in his eyes. "Mine," he growled, deepening his movements but still maintaining that edge of control that drove me wild.

Afterward, he held me against his chest, his heartbeat strong beneath my ear. His fingers traced lazy patterns on my bare shoulder as we lay in comfortable silence.

"I love you," he murmured into my hair. "God, Serena, I love you so much it terrifies me sometimes."

I lifted my head to meet his gaze, seeing the raw vulnerability there. "I love you too. Always."

Tomorrow we would return to New York, to our life together and whatever challenges awaited us there. But tonight was just for us.