

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

- Chapter 111 Fighting for My Life

Chapter 111: Chapter 111 Fighting for My Life

Serena's POV

I handed Derek's phone back to him with trembling fingers, trying desperately to mask the panic coursing through my veins. Every move I made was under his watchful eye, that knife still glinting in the dim light. After weighing my options, I decided Maya was my best chance.

"I'm putting it on speaker," I explained calmly, dialing Maya's number. "This is my business partner. She can transfer the money faster than anyone else."

Derek's mouth twisted into an ugly smile as he inched the blade closer to my stomach. The message was clear - one wrong word and both my baby and I would pay the price.

Maya answered after two rings. "Serena? Everything okay?"

I kept my voice steady, choosing my words with extreme care. "Maya, I need to invest in a project right away. Can you transfer some money to an account I'm about to send you?"

The line went quiet for a moment. I could almost see her furrowed brow.

"This late at night? What kind of project is this? You never mentioned anything about a new investment."

"Just a small opportunity that came up," I replied smoothly, feeling Derek's eyes boring into me. "I'll explain all the details tomorrow. For now, I just need to send the initial payment."

Maya seemed to accept this, her voice relaxing. "Sure, how much do you need?"

I hesitated, calculating. "Five million."

"What?" Maya gasped. "That much for just an initial payment?"

Derek tensed beside me, his eyes narrowing dangerously. He jabbed the knife forward slightly, silently ordering me to fix this quickly.

"It's actually not that much considering what's at stake," I said, forcing a light laugh. "Trust me, what I'm getting in return is worth far more. Please, just transfer it now. I'll send you the details."

"Okay," Maya finally agreed, her suspicion fading. "Send me the account info."

"Maya," I added, my mind racing ahead.

"Yes?"

"Don't forget about the important client meeting tomorrow. I'm... I'm not feeling well, so I'll be resting at home for a couple days. Don't worry about me, just handle things at the studio."

I glanced at Derek, noting how his grip on the knife loosened slightly. The coded message was subtle, but I prayed Maya would catch that something was seriously wrong.

"Sure, take care of yourself," she replied, her tone unchanged.

"Get some rest yourself. I've got to go." I hung up quickly before she could ask any more questions that might trigger Derek's suspicions.

I forwarded the account information Derek had shown me to Maya, then turned the phone screen toward him. "Satisfied? I'll make sure this money is clean so you won't have trouble using it. Once you let me go, I'll send another payment as promised."

Derek's lips curled into a satisfied smile. "Smart girl. But this isn't enough."

My stomach dropped. "You're going back on your word?"

"You've given me an opportunity I'd be stupid to waste," he said, sliding the knife back into his pocket. "Don't worry, once I get the money and leave the country, I'll let you go."

His eyes narrowed. "Just not right now."

The moment Derek opened the car door, I made my move. I wasn't about to sit there and wait for him to kill me after getting his money. I bolted from the car, my pregnant body protesting with every step.

The cool night air burned my lungs as I ran, hearing Derek's footsteps pounding behind me. I barely made it a few hundred feet before his hand grabbed my arm, yanking me backwards.

"You fucking bitch!" His open palm connected with my face, the sharp sting bringing tears to my eyes. "You don't cooperate, don't blame me for what happens next."

We stood on a deserted road, nothing but darkness surrounding us. No cars. No witnesses. No help.

In that moment, survival instinct took over. I lunged forward and sank my teeth into his forearm with all the strength I could muster, tasting the salt of his skin and feeling a surge of savage satisfaction when he howled in pain.

"Goddammit!" He jerked away, giving me the opening I needed.

I sprinted toward a small side road, disappearing into the darkness. My heart hammered against my ribs as I ran, one hand protectively over my belly. If I could just find somewhere to hide until morning...

But my pregnancy had slowed me down. Within moments, Derek was on me again, this time twisting my arms behind my back to prevent another attack.

"You're gonna pay for that," he snarled, dragging me back toward the taxi despite my struggles.

By the time he forced me into the backseat again, I was gasping for breath, my energy spent. My cheek throbbed where he'd struck me, and despair was starting to set in.

"Fucking hell," Derek muttered, touching the bite mark on his arm. "Almost fell for your act. Should've just knocked you out from the beginning."

He slammed the car door shut and was about to climb into the driver's seat when blinding headlights suddenly illuminated the area behind him. A car horn blared through the night.

Derek raised his arm to shield his eyes as a vehicle screeched to a halt just feet away. Before he could react, several men in black suits emerged, surrounding him instantly.

"Who the fuck are you people? Mind your own business!" Derek shouted.

His protest was cut short as the security team moved with professional efficiency. Within seconds, Derek was on the ground, restrained and groaning in pain.

I stumbled out of the taxi on shaky legs and almost collapsed before familiar arms caught me. The scent of Ryan's cologne enveloped me as I fell against his chest.

Ryan's eyes darkened dangerously as he took in my swollen cheek. Pure rage transformed his face into something almost unrecognizable.

"Take him away and get everything he knows," he ordered his men, his voice ice cold and deadly.

Ryan lifted me into his arms as if I weighed nothing, carrying me to his waiting car.

"Serena, are you okay?" he asked, his voice tight with concern as he gently placed me in the backseat. "The baby?"

"We're both fine," I whispered, tears finally breaking free now that I was safe. "Thank you for coming... how did you know?"

"I have security watching over you," Ryan explained, brushing a strand of hair from my face with unexpected tenderness. "When they reported the taxi taking an unusual route and then going off-grid completely, I knew something was wrong immediately."

His jaw clenched. "If we hadn't found you... if that bastard had taken you somewhere else..."

"But you did find me," I said weakly, reaching for his hand. My fingers trembled as they closed around his. "You came for us."

"Don't talk anymore," Ryan said, his voice gentler than I'd ever heard it. "Just rest. You're safe now."

As he placed me gently in the backseat, the adrenaline finally wore off, leaving behind nothing but exhaustion and fear.

I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness.

Then Darkness claimed me as I collapsed against Ryan's chest.

Chapter 112: Chapter 112 He was protecting Sophia

Serena's POV

I woke up to the sterile smell of hospital disinfectant and the steady beeping of monitors. My body felt heavy, like I'd been hit by a truck.

Opening my eyes fully, I found Maya sitting beside my bed, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed.

She practically lunged forward when she noticed I was awake. "Serena! Thank God! I feel like such an idiot. I should've caught on faster when you called. Something felt off, but I just didn't connect the dots until it was almost too late."

I glanced around the hospital room, searching for Ryan but finding no trace of him. The disappointment I felt surprised me.

"I'm okay," I assured her, my voice raspy. "Was it Ryan who rescued me?"

Maya nodded quickly. "He called me last night, told me to come here and stay with you. He was furious, Serena. I've never seen him like that before."

"Where is he now?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"He said he had some business to take care of," Maya replied, standing up. "Let me go get your doctor."

The doctor came in promptly, checking my vitals and examining me thoroughly.

"You're experiencing some shock, which is perfectly normal given what you've been through," he explained. "What you need most now is rest and minimal stress."

He placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "Your baby is doing remarkably well. Strong heartbeat, normal position. That little one's a fighter, just like mom."

Relief flooded through me. After everything that happened last night, knowing my baby was safe was all that mattered. *freewebnovel.com*

"What about the man who kidnapped me?" I asked after the doctor left.

Maya's expression darkened. "Ryan's men took him somewhere for questioning. I haven't heard anything else yet, but don't worry. Ryan's handling it."

I nodded, sinking back into the pillows. Part of me was grateful for the chance to rest, but my mind wouldn't stop racing with questions. Could there be others behind Sophie? Just how deep did this conspiracy go?

Ryan's POV

I stood in a dimly lit basement, staring down at Derek's battered form.

His face was a mess of bruises, his body slumped in the chair where my security team had been working on him since the previous night.

"So you're claiming Sophie Hart hired you to do this?" I asked, keeping my voice dangerously calm despite the rage burning inside me. "She promised you money to leave the country afterward?"

Derek nodded frantically, desperation clear in his bloodshot eyes. "Yes, yes! I swear it's the truth. She arranged everything!"

I circled around him slowly, like a predator stalking prey. "You're supposedly her ex-husband. Why would she trust you with something like this?"

"That's just it—I'm not her ex-husband at all," Derek gasped out. "That was all part of the act she paid me to perform. It was a setup from the beginning."

"Show me proof," I demanded coldly.

Derek's eyes widened. "Check my phone! She transferred money to me. The receipts are all there!"

I took Derek's phone from Simon, scrolling through the transaction history with narrowed eyes. The amounts were substantial—far more than Sophie could afford on her own.

"Is this all the evidence you have?" I asked, pocketing the phone.

Derek's face fell. "What more do you want? I'm telling the truth, I swear!"

I turned to my security chief. "Continue. I want to know who's really backing her."

As fresh screams echoed through the basement, I handed the phone to Simon. "Trace every transaction. I want to know exactly where this money originated."

"Right away, sir."

I left the basement, shutting the heavy door behind me. The screams instantly silenced. I stood in the hallway for a moment, straightening my jacket as my mind processed everything I'd learned.

I drove to the hospital, my thoughts in turmoil. When I arrived, I stopped outside Serena's room, watching through the doorway as she talked with Maya. She looked pale but alert, her hand resting protectively on her belly.

I hesitated. I needed more information before facing her questions. Better to wait until I had concrete answers about who was truly responsible.

After speaking briefly with her doctor and confirming she was stable, I decided to leave. I'd return once I had the full truth.

Serena's POV

"Serena, I think I just saw Ryan in the hallway," Maya said, returning to my room with medication.

I froze mid-bite of the apple I'd been eating. "Ryan was here? Why didn't he come in?"

"I don't know. I only caught a glimpse of him leaving."

My jaw clenched as realization dawned on me. Derek had been in Ryan's custody all night—more than enough time to extract the truth.

If Ryan was avoiding me now, there could only be one reason — he was protecting Sophia.

"Maya, I want to check out of the hospital. Now."

Her eyes widened in shock. "What? Are you crazy? You need to rest!"

"I can rest somewhere else," I insisted, my anger building. "I can't stay here another minute."

"Serena, please be reasonable. What if something happens? You need medical care!"

"What I need is to get out of here," I said firmly. "I'm perfectly stable, and this place is suffocating me. Please, just help me with the discharge papers."

After considerable arguing, Maya finally gave in. Instead of returning to my apartment, I went to stay at her place. I couldn't bear the thought of being alone, and I certainly didn't want to be somewhere Ryan could easily find me.

As Maya tucked a blanket around me on her couch, she continued fretting. "I still think this is a terrible idea. What if you start feeling sick or have complications? At the hospital they could immediately—"

I shot her a warning look, and she stopped mid-sentence.

"Ugh, listen to me being all doom and gloom!" she exclaimed, shaking her head. "Bad Maya!"

"Maya," I said, my voice taking on a serious tone, "I need you to do something important for me. I need detailed information on Sophie's recent activities. Everything she's been doing, everyone she's been seeing."

Maya's expression turned serious. "You think she's behind the kidnapping?"

I nodded slowly. "I'm almost certain of it. But I need solid proof."

Since Ryan was choosing to protect Sophie even now, I'd have to handle this myself. I'd been naive to think he might have changed, to let my guard down just because he'd rescued me. The moment I thought of putting Sophie in a bad light, he disappeared.

"I've had enough," I whispered, more to myself than to Maya. "Sophie has gone too far this time. She's not just coming after me anymore—she put my baby in danger."

My hand moved protectively over my stomach. No more playing nice. No more second chances. If Ryan wouldn't stand up to her, I would have to do it myself.

Chapter 113: Chapter 113 Her strategy

Ryan's POV

I stared at my phone, anger burning through me as Simon's text confirmed what I'd feared. The transaction trail from Derek's account had been professionally scrubbed—evidence that should have been there was mysteriously missing. Someone with significant resources had covered Sophie's tracks.

Placing my phone down on my desk, I rubbed my temples. The evidence against Sophie was mounting, yet somehow always falling just short of conclusive. Her timing was too perfect, her excuses too convenient.

A soft knock at my door interrupted my thoughts. Sophie stood there, trembling visibly, her eyes wide with fear.

"Ryan, Derek came to threaten me again yesterday," she whispered, her voice quavering. "He said if I don't give him a huge sum of money, he'll destroy me."

She fumbled with her phone, playing a recording of her conversation with Derek. I listened carefully to his threats, noting how explicit and detailed they were.

"When exactly did he approach you yesterday?" I asked, watching her closely.

Sophie sniffled, appearing to search her memory. "Yesterday morning. He cornered me outside the company building. He's a gambling addict, Ryan. I think he ran out of money again and came to squeeze more from me."

Her eyes welled with tears as she looked up at me. "Ryan, Derek is obsessed with money. If he wants revenge on me, I won't be able to protect myself. I'm terrified. What should I do?"

My jaw tightened as pieces clicked into place. Derek had threatened Sophie for money, then targeted Serena when that failed. It fit a pattern—except for the timing. Something wasn't adding up.

"Sophie, don't cry. Derek is already in custody," I said flatly.

Her face paled momentarily before relief washed over her features. "Really? Are you serious?"

"He kidnapped Serena last night," I continued, watching her reaction closely. "He claims you orchestrated the whole thing."

Sophie was immediately shaking her head vigorously. "That's impossible! I've been trying to avoid him completely. Why would I ask him to do anything?"

She stepped closer, tears spilling down her cheeks. "Ryan, now I understand! When he threatened to destroy me, this is what he meant—he planned to frame me! How vindictive!"

Sophie moved closer still, her familiar scent bringing unwelcome memories. "Ryan, you believe me, don't you? We've known each other for so many years. You know what kind of person I am."

I remained silent, neither confirming nor denying my trust. Something in her story felt rehearsed, too perfect. My instincts were screaming that I was missing something crucial.

"I need to verify a few things," I said finally. "In the meantime, stay available. We may have more questions."

After Sophie left, I called Simon immediately. "I want every camera feed from outside our building yesterday morning. And get me everything you can on Sophie's activities for the past month—phone records, credit card statements, everything."

"Sir, about the money transfers in Derek's account—our tech team says the trails were professionally erased. Someone with serious resources has been covering tracks."

I frowned. "Expand the search. Look for connections between Sophie and anyone with that kind of capability."

Sophie's POV

I walked out of Ryan's office, my heart pounding. He hadn't explicitly said he trusted me, but I knew him well enough—he was almost there.

Slipping into the bathroom, I took a moment to compose myself. Looking at my reflection in the mirror, I couldn't help the smug smile spreading across my face. God, I'm good at this.

Thank heaven my plan was meticulous. Even though that idiot Derek had botched the kidnapping, there was no way it could be traced back to me. And if I played this right, I could drive an even bigger wedge between Ryan and Serena.

I almost wanted to applaud myself. Ryan was undoubtedly scrambling to investigate any connection between Derek and me, but that's where Kane's usefulness would truly shine. He could erase any digital footprint without leaving a trace.

Kane would jump at any chance to make Ryan look foolish. Our arrangement was mutually beneficial that way.

I checked the message on my phone and smiled with satisfaction. Kane had moved quickly—Ryan wouldn't find any evidence. My comfortable life would continue undisturbed.

Maya had been sniffing around, but she hadn't found anything truly damaging.

Still, she'd managed to dig up one detail: that the so-called kidnapper was my ex-husband. Predictably, that little nugget ended up in Serena's ears.

I had business with Ryan anyway—just a routine check-in. But as luck would have it, she came storming in while I was there.

Couldn't have planned it better myself.

"Sophie, my kidnapper was your ex-husband," Serena accused, her eyes burning with fury. "You expect me to believe you had nothing to do with this?"

I glanced at Ryan, noticing how his face lit up at the sight of Serena despite the tension. Interesting.

"Serena, I swear I had nothing to do with him," I said, making my voice small and frightened. "He's been threatening me for ages, saying he'd destroy me. He probably kidnapped you just for money."

"Ryan can vouch for me. Serena, if you're upset, I understand. I'm truly sorry this happened."

Serena's face hardened at my show of weakness, which only made me want to laugh. She was so predictable.

"Just tell me straight. Did you do this or not?" she demanded. *freewebnovel.com*

I raised my hand solemnly. "I swear, I had absolutely nothing to do with this!"

"Serena, I honestly don't wish you any harm. What Ryan and I had is ancient history. I truly don't want to come between you two."

I could tell she wasn't buying it, so I went for the ultimate move. I bit my lip nervously, then sank to my knees in front of her.

"Serena, please believe me. This wasn't my doing. I'm begging you, don't blame me for something I didn't do."

Serena looked genuinely shocked. "What are you doing?" she snapped, her voice sharp with disbelief.

Ryan rushed forward to help me up.

Perfect.

I let my ankle give out just enough to stumble—gracefully, of course—right into his arms. My head tilted just so, my hand clutching his sleeve like I had no one else in the world to turn to.

"Ryan," I whimpered, voice trembling, "please, explain to her. Tell her I didn't do this."

Over his shoulder, I watched Serena's face twist. Her chest rose and fell with fury—yes, that's it. Be angry. Be suspicious of me and Ryan. Let it eat you alive.

The moment she saw me pressed against him, she spun on her heel and stormed out without another word.

Ryan pushed me away almost instantly, but I was ready. I gasped sharply, letting out a soft cry of pain.

"My ankle..."

The red swelling was already visible—nothing a quick twist in a stiletto couldn't achieve. Painful? Slightly. Worth it? Absolutely.

Tears shimmered in my eyes as I looked up at him, vulnerable and shaking. "Ryan... she looked so upset. I never meant to cause any trouble."

Ryan's eyes flicked toward the door, but Serena was already gone.

He sighed, his voice low. "I'll have someone take you to the hospital."

I bit back a smile.

This was going even better than I'd planned.

Chapter 114: Chapter 114 New Opportunities

Serena's POV

I haven't answered any of Ryan's calls or messages since the Sophie incident. How could I possibly face him?

The betrayal cut too deep, especially seeing how easily Sophie had manipulated him. Every time my phone lit up with his name, my stomach twisted into knots.

Thankfully, Dreamland Studio received exciting news that pushed personal drama to the back burner.

A prestigious international jewelry company, Celestial Gems, was looking for a partnership in the American market—a golden ticket to global expansion that Maya and I couldn't ignore.

"Serena, I've got confirmation! Their representative will arrive in New York tomorrow evening, and we're scheduled to meet," Maya announced, practically bouncing with excitement.

I felt a surge of excitement. Dreamland was gaining recognition domestically, but this international opportunity was exactly what we needed to take things to the next level.

"That's perfect timing! I've nearly finished our presentation materials," I replied, already mentally reviewing my notes on their company profile.

Maya nodded approvingly. "I think Celeste should join you for this one. Her international experience could be valuable."

"Good call."

Before the meeting, Celeste and I were frantically finalizing our materials while researching Celestial Gems' background.

Their CEO, Lucian West, had built an impressive empire in just a few years, dominating European and Asian markets with his forward-thinking approach to jewelry design.

"I'm so nervous," Celeste admitted as we waited in the private dining room of an upscale restaurant. "Who knows what kind of representative they're sending? These international executives can be intimidating."

I squeezed her arm reassuringly. "Don't worry. We've prepared thoroughly. If we're not ready, then Dreamland just needs to keep growing before we tackle international markets."

The door opened, and my heart skipped a beat when a striking man in an impeccably tailored suit walked in. There was something commanding about his presence that immediately told me this wasn't just any representative.

I stood up and extended my hand. "Hello, I'm Serena Quinn, founder of Dreamland Studio."

His eyes assessed both of us briefly before taking my offered hand. His grip was firm but brief.

"Lucian West."

I heard Celeste's sharp intake of breath beside me, and my own pulse quickened. The CEO himself had come? This was huge!

"Mr. West, what an honor! Please, have a seat," I said, suddenly much more hopeful about our prospects.

"Dreamland has an excellent reputation in the domestic market. I wanted to see for myself if it lives up to the buzz," he said, his accent subtle but distinctly European. "I'd hate to waste a trip to New York."

His demeanor was refined and cultured - quite different from the ruthless businessman portrayed in business magazines.

With renewed confidence, I presented our portfolio and outlined Dreamland's design philosophy. I also shared my analysis of potential new market segments we could explore together in Europe, which seemed to capture his interest completely.

The atmosphere became surprisingly comfortable as Lucian occasionally interjected with insightful questions. The conversation flowed much more naturally than I'd anticipated.

"It seems the reputation precedes the reality in this case," he remarked with the hint of a smile. "Dreamland is even more impressive in person." **freewe@bnov@l.com**

My heart leapt. This was my opening.

"What exactly are you looking for in a partnership, Mr. West?"

Lucian studied me for a moment, clearly appreciating my direct approach but not rushing his decision.

"My criteria for partners isn't one-dimensional, but I must say, Ms. Quinn, you certainly meet many of them."

I smiled but didn't push further. In business negotiations, you need to leave room for the other party to elaborate on their own terms.

After a thoughtful pause, he continued. "However, New York is such a beautiful city, and I haven't had a chance to explore it properly. Business matters can wait a little."

I jumped at the opportunity. "If you don't mind, I'd be happy to show you around. New York is my hometown - I know all its most beautiful spots."

His smile deepened, transforming his serious face. "Americans are so refreshingly direct. Is that a New York woman trait, Ms. Quinn?"

"New York women are all unique," I laughed. "I certainly can't speak for all of them."

"Well, it's been a pleasure meeting you tonight. A toast to new possibilities," I added, raising my teacup. He graciously returned the gesture.

After the meeting, Celeste was practically hyperventilating as we walked to the car.

"Oh my God, that was THE Lucian West! People rarely even get to see him at major industry events, and we just had dinner with him!"

"He was nothing like I expected," she continued. "So calm and polite - not intimidating at all."

I felt the same, though years of business meetings had trained me to maintain my composure better than Celeste.

"I have a good feeling about this partnership," I admitted. "I think we have a real shot."

"You were amazing in there," Celeste gushed. "If it had been just me, I would have frozen completely."

I laughed and playfully poked her forehead. "Come on, you're one of the top designers in the country! You need to build your confidence. Tag along with Maya to more meetings like this - you'll be seeing plenty of them in your future."

The next afternoon, I was surprised to find an unexpected visitor waiting in my office when I returned from a meeting.

Lucian West sat casually on my office sofa, legs crossed, looking completely at home. He barely glanced up when I entered.

"Meeting finished?"

His casual tone and posture made him look like he owned the place.

I approached him with a professional smile. "Mr. West, have you been waiting long? My assistant should have notified me."

He took a sip from the teacup in his hand. "The tea is excellent. Waiting wasn't a problem."

I sat on the sofa opposite him, impressed that he'd chosen to wait rather than rescheduling. Very gentlemanly.

"What brings you here today, Mr. West?"

He set down his cup and gave me an amused look. "Have you already forgotten what you said last night?"

Last night? I froze momentarily, trying to recall. Was he referring to the partnership discussion, or...

"You offered to show me the sights of New York. How quickly important people forget their promises," he teased.

I smacked my forehead playfully. "Of course! I'm so sorry. Are you sure you don't need time to recover from jet lag first?"

He shook his head. "I often work late hours. New York's time zone actually suits me quite well."

"You must be quite the workaholic."

I set aside my files, already mentally planning our tour. Someone of Lucian's caliber wasn't really here to sightsee.

This was clearly another opportunity to evaluate Dreamland as a potential partner.

It was a test, but one I was more than willing to take.

Any chance to secure this partnership was worth pursuing. Besides, showing a handsome, successful man around my city? There were certainly worse ways to spend an afternoon.

Chapter 115: Chapter 115 A pleasant experience

Serena's POV

I couldn't decide what to suggest to Lucian without knowing his preferences.

His personality was still a mystery to me, and I didn't want to risk stepping on any landmines with such an important potential partner.

"Since you're interested in exploring, should we go out for a bit? Would you prefer enjoying some food and drinks, or perhaps seeing the sights and experiencing a bit of nature?" I asked, carefully watching his reaction.

Lucian considered my question for a moment before answering, "Let's just relax a bit."

His vague response made my stomach tighten with anxiety. Dining could be relaxing, but so could sightseeing. I needed more direction than that to make sure I impressed him properly.

Perhaps sensing my unease, he clarified, "Whatever Miss Quinn wants to do for relaxation is fine with me. I'll follow your lead."

The ball was in my court now. I nodded quickly, grateful for the opening. "I'll go change clothes. Please wait just a moment."

I hurried to my office's private bathroom, swapping my professional outfit for something more casual.

I topped off the look with a cute sun hat, instantly transforming from businesswoman to someone warmer and more approachable.

Looking in the mirror, I barely recognized the difference in myself - amazing what clothes could do to one's entire presence.

When I emerged, I noticed Lucian still in his impeccable business suit and realized we had a mismatch.

"That outfit might not be ideal for what I have planned," I said, gesturing to his formal attire. "Perhaps I could accompany you to buy something more casual nearby?"

Lucian nodded. "I'll follow your lead," he repeated, seeming genuinely amenable to my suggestions.

His car was waiting outside, and I couldn't help noticing the stares we received as we left my office building together. I'm sure the rumor mill would be working overtime by tomorrow morning.

At a nearby high-end shopping center, I helped him select a comfortable but stylish casual outfit.

The transformation was remarkable - with his sharp business suit gone, the intimidating aura that surrounded Lucian West softened considerably.

"May I ask why you suggested I change into casual clothes?" he asked as we left the store. "Are we going to be exercising?"

I shook my head. "If you want to truly relax, it should be both mind and body. A suit constrains everything about you," I explained. "This way, the distance between us feels less formal, don't you think?"

Lucian considered my words thoughtfully before nodding in agreement. "You have quite the insightful mind, Miss Quinn."

"Please, there's no need to be so formal. Just call me Serena," I offered, hoping to further bridge the gap between potential business partners and something more comfortable.

"Serena," he repeated smoothly, the name sounding strangely formal yet intimate on his lips.

I blinked, my long eyelashes fluttering slightly. I hadn't expected him to be so accommodating. This would make building rapport much easier, and keeping this potential investor happy was definitely my priority right now.

"Let's go then. I want to show you my secret hideaway," I said with a smile.

My "secret hideaway" was actually a private coffee roastery located in a more remote part of the third ring of the city.

Its location made it relatively unknown to most people, which was precisely why I loved it. Despite the cheaper rent in this area, the spacious establishment still represented a significant investment.

When Lucian stepped out of the car, he looked momentarily taken aback.

"I love the coffee beans they use here," I explained, watching his face. "Do you enjoy coffee, Mr. West?"

"It's acceptable," he replied noncommittally.

I could tell he was the type who probably drank coffee regularly during his long work hours.

He seemed slightly surprised by my choice of venue - clearly not what he had expected when a business partner offered to show him around.

"I find hand-grinding coffee beans incredibly therapeutic - the sound is so soothing," I shared as we entered.

Lucian seemed intrigued by this concept, watching as I visibly relaxed upon entering the familiar space. This place had always been my sanctuary.

I led him upstairs to the rooftop terrace where the afternoon sun created the perfect ambiance. "Please, have a seat," I said, patting the comfortable sofa beside me.

The plush sofa was irresistibly cozy, the kind that makes you sink in and never want to leave. Even Lucian, who I imagined always sat with perfect posture in board meetings, eventually allowed himself to relax into a more comfortable position.

I carefully selected some specialty coffee beans and began preparing them, but made sure to include Lucian in the experience by handing him the grinder and patiently teaching him the technique.

"The process isn't complicated, but it requires patience," I explained, enjoying the peaceful atmosphere that settled between us.

Lucian seemed genuinely interested in this new experience, watching my movements carefully and following my instructions. I could tell he hadn't done anything like this before.

"You're doing great," I encouraged softly, guiding his hands. "Just like that, continue with that rhythm."

After our combined efforts, Lucian finally tasted the coffee he'd helped create. His eyes brightened noticeably at the rich, complex flavor.

"Do you come here often?" he asked, seeming genuinely curious about my habits.

I nodded. "I used to come whenever I had free time. They have an incredible variety of beans. The owner is a Brazilian businessman - a hidden millionaire who runs this place purely for the joy of it."

"It's not widely known - they hardly advertise at all," I added.

I discovered this place through sheer chance. Actually, it was because of Ryan. He was incredibly particular about his coffee, and I'd searched the entire city trying to find beans that would please him at home and at the office.

For years, I'd faithfully ground fresh coffee beans for him every morning.

After our divorce, that ritual ended abruptly, like so many other aspects of our life together. Between that and my increasingly hectic work schedule, I hadn't visited this place in ages.

My reminiscing was interrupted when Lucian looked over at me.

"This is indeed relaxing. Thank you, Serena," he said, using my first name with a naturalness that surprised me.

I smiled brightly at him. "Then I guess I'm doing a decent job as your tour guide."

Lucian nodded, visibly more at ease than when we'd first arrived.

"As a thank you, allow me to take you to dinner tonight," he suggested. "We can discuss our potential partnership further. I have a feeling this collaboration will be quite successful."

My eyes lit up with excitement. I hadn't expected things to progress so smoothly. "I'd be delighted."

"The coffee was excellent, by the way. Thank you," he said, raising his cup in a small toast.

Our eyes met over our coffee cups, and we shared a smile. The afternoon sunlight streamed around us, creating a perfect moment of connection.

Dinner was at an exclusive private restaurant Lucian had reserved.

The elegant atmosphere was perfect for conversation, and we found ourselves discussing design philosophy and industry trends with increasing enthusiasm.

The details of our partnership began taking shape naturally through our conversation, with the formal contract to be handled by Lucian's assistant later.

"Will you be staying in the city for long?" I asked, curious about his plans.

He hesitated briefly before nodding. "I have friends here as well. Now that I've made time to return home, I plan to stay for a while."

Both of us clearly valued this potential partnership, and I was thrilled at how well things were progressing.

By the time dinner ended, it was much later than I'd realized.

Lucian insisted on driving me home, and I watched his car disappear around the corner before turning toward my building entrance.

That's when I noticed Ryan standing nearby, his expression unreadable in the shadows.

Our recent argument about Sophie had left things tense between us. I was still angry and had no interest in dealing with him tonight after such a productive day.

He silently followed me into the elevator.

"Who was that dropping you off?" he asked, his voice controlled but tight.

I wasn't surprised by the question - clearly, he'd been waiting around for a while to catch me coming home.

"A business partner," I replied flatly.

The elevator dinged as we reached my floor. I stepped out first, heading straight for my apartment door without looking back.

Ryan followed, quickly stepping forward to block the door with his arm just as I'd opened it.

"What are you doing?" I frowned up at him, annoyed by his presumption.

"Serena, we need to talk," he insisted.

"There's nothing to talk about," I replied coldly. *freewebnovel.com*

My chilly demeanor was a stark contrast to how animated and warm I'd been with Lucian all day.

Hearing my words, his expression darkening with what looked suspiciously like jealousy as his tone grew sharper.

"Why not?"

I couldn't help but laugh bitterly.

Did he seriously expect me to be okay after he'd so blatantly defended his precious Sophie?

And now he had the nerve to act wounded when I refused to engage? The audacity of this man was truly something else.

Chapter 116: Chapter 116 Small gathering

Serena's POV

"Why don't you go find Sophie instead?" I snapped, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

"After all, she's so sweet and accommodating to you. She never gives you a hard time like I apparently do."

I glared at him, my patience completely spent. "Move. I need to rest."

Ryan reluctantly stepped aside, and I slammed my door shut with enough force to nearly hit his nose.

The loud bang was immensely satisfying - almost as satisfying as the shocked expression on his face before the door closed.

For the next few days, I personally handled all communications with Lucian for our partnership. Sometimes he'd come for face-to-face meetings, other times he'd be busy with other matters.

It was refreshing to work with someone who treated me with consistent respect, unlike a certain ex-husband who couldn't decide whether he wanted me in his life or not.

Once all the details of our collaboration were finalized, Lucian hosted a small gathering.

He invited not only my team from Dreamland but also several of his friends from the New York.

Despite being the host, Lucian seemed surprisingly detached from the festivities, simply sitting on the private room's sofa, casually sipping champagne.

I only brought Maya and Celeste with me. The three of us sitting together drew quite a bit of attention - I caught several men stealing glances our way throughout the evening.

A few even approached us for conversation, but I maintained my professional demeanor, keeping my responses polite but brief.

Maya and I chatted quietly in our corner, deliberately avoiding the lively crowd in the center of the room. Lucian was surrounded by people, clearly the focal point of the gathering.

I watched as he took a few sips of his champagne, his eyes scanning the room before landing on our little corner.

Then Lucian stood up and made his way toward us. I noticed several of his friends following his gaze, exchanging whispers and curious looks.

"Those ladies look familiar. Who are they?" I overheard one man ask.

"They're from Dreamland Jewelry, Lucian's new business partners," another answered.

"Just business partners?" someone else added with a suggestive tone.

A few of them followed in Lucian's wake, approaching our table with obvious interest. I straightened my posture slightly, switching into professional mode.

"I'm the founder of Dreamland Jewelry," I introduced myself smoothly. "We're currently collaborating with Mr. West. I take it you're all friends of his?"

They exchanged knowing glances before nodding in unison. The conversation that followed was polite enough, though sprinkled with subtle flirtation that I expertly deflected.

I kept things cordial but distant - the last thing I needed was to give anyone the wrong impression.

Lucian sat nearby but remained silent, his eyes roaming the room with an unreadable expression. He seemed content to observe rather than participate, which I found intriguing.

Most powerful men I knew couldn't resist being the center of attention.

Once his friends finally moved on to mingle elsewhere, Lucian turned his attention to me.

"How are you finding this sort of gathering?" he asked. "Those were some of my friends, by the way."

I nodded, putting on my most professional smile. "Tonight's quite enjoyable. Very fitting for something you'd host, Mr. West."

"If you find it too noisy, you're welcome to leave early," he offered unexpectedly. "I've noticed you seem a bit tired."

Was my exhaustion that obvious? I'd been working overtime all week to prepare for our collaboration.

"That's very kind of you," I replied with a small laugh, "but I couldn't possibly leave early from your event. That would be terribly rude."

Lucian raised an eyebrow, his tone surprisingly casual. "It's no trouble. Actually, I'm feeling somewhat tired myself. Perhaps I could drive you home?"

Maya, who'd been silently observing our exchange, suddenly perked up at his suggestion. I could practically see the alarm bells going off in her head.

"Mr. West, we wouldn't want to impose on your time," she interjected smoothly. "Serena and I were planning to leave together anyway."

Maya shot me a meaningful look, and I immediately understood her concern. We'd only recently begun working with Lucian, and despite his impeccable behavior so far, getting into a car alone with him late at night wasn't the wisest move.

"Maya's right," I nodded, playing along. "You're the host, Mr. West. You haven't been back in the city for a while - you should stay and catch up with your friends."

"It is getting rather late," I added, standing up. "Maya and I should be going."

Lucian didn't try to stop us, merely acknowledging our departure with a polite nod.

As we walked away, I caught a glimpse of him swirling his champagne, a peculiar gleam in his eyes that I couldn't quite interpret.

The moment we stepped outside, the cool night air hit me like a slap. I involuntarily shivered, wrapping my arms around myself. I'd dressed for style rather than warmth, a decision I was now regretting.

Maya glanced at me with concern. "Damn, I forgot to bring you a coat. Wait inside while I get the car, okay?"

I nodded gratefully and stepped back into the building's entrance, immediately feeling the welcome warmth envelope me.

The wait felt interminable. I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my messages, noticing that news of Dreamland's collaboration with Celestial Gems was already circulating in jewelry design circles. Many studios expressed admiration, while others weren't even trying to hide their jealousy.

I couldn't help but smirk at some of the envious comments. After everything I'd been through to build Dreamland from nothing, a little recognition felt well-deserved.

Just as I was about to put my phone away, I looked up and froze. Ryan was walking in, his assistant trailing behind him. His eyes widened slightly upon seeing me, clearly surprised by the coincidence.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his gaze taking in my formal attire and the venue.

I had no intention of answering him.

My anger from our last argument about Sophie was still simmering beneath the surface. Checking the time, I figured Maya should be arriving with the car any moment now.

Without a word, I pushed the door open and stepped outside, choosing escape over confrontation.

Ryan followed me, and I couldn't suppress a shiver as the cold night air enveloped me again. Before I could protest, he'd removed his suit jacket and draped it over my shoulders.

His familiar scent surrounded me - that expensive cologne I'd given him for his birthday last year mixed with something uniquely him. Despite myself, I felt my expression softening slightly.

"It's cold tonight," he said, his voice laced with something that sounded suspiciously like jealousy. "You shouldn't be out dressed so lightly."

I knew what he was thinking. My formal outfit, the exclusive venue, the recent news... it wouldn't take a genius to figure out I was meeting with Celestial Gems' CEO.

"I'm not cold," I lied, reaching up to remove his jacket. "Take your coat back."

Ryan caught my hand, holding it firmly but gently in place. "Serena, stop being stubborn. What if you get sick?"

I looked up at him, refusing to let my expression soften any further. "If I get sick, it's none of your concern."

His brows furrowed with frustration as he opened his mouth to say something, but the sound of a car horn interrupted whatever explanation he was about to offer.

Maya rolled down her window, calling out to me from the curb. "Serena, come on!"

I felt an overwhelming sense of relief, quickly shrugging off Ryan's suit jacket and thrusting it back at him before turning away.

I practically flew into Maya's car, closing the door and fastening my seatbelt in one fluid motion.

"Drive," I commanded, not even looking back as Maya hit the gas, leaving Ryan standing alone on the sidewalk.

"So," Maya ventured as we pulled away, "want to tell me what that was about?"

"Nothing worth discussing," I replied tightly, staring straight ahead. "Just Ryan being Ryan."

But as the city lights blurred past us, I couldn't help wondering why he'd been there tonight.

Was it truly a coincidence? Or had he somehow known I'd be there?

The thought that he might be checking up on me was both infuriating and... something else I wasn't ready to acknowledge.

I leaned my head against the cool window glass, closing my eyes briefly.

Chapter 117: Chapter 117 How strange

Author's POV

Ryan held the dark jacket loosely in one hand, his gaze fixed on Maya's car until its taillights disappeared around the corner. His expression was unreadable, but the faint tension in his grip betrayed what he was holding back.

Standing nearby, Simon glanced at his watch before speaking cautiously.

"Mr. Blackwood, we should head upstairs."

Ryan closed his eyes for a brief moment, steadying himself. He straightened his cuffs, drew in a slow breath, and finally moved toward the building's entrance.

The elevator doors slid open with a soft chime.

Lucian stepped out, his stride measured, his tailored suit immaculate. His eyes, cool and sharp, landed on Ryan for the briefest second—calculated, assessing—before moving on as if nothing had happened.

Ryan didn't notice. His head was slightly lowered, his thoughts still circling back to Serena, a trace of distraction dulling the usual edge in his expression. Even the sound of the elevator doors closing behind him barely registered.

Lucian turned, watching the doors seal shut.

After all these years, Ryan hadn't changed. That same effortless authority—the kind that made people instinctively keep their distance—still clung to him like armor.

Lucian's gaze hardened, a faint, humorless smile touching his lips as he motioned to his assistant.

"Find out who he's here to see," he said quietly.

The assistant blinked once, then nodded quickly and disappeared down the hall.

Serena's POV

The ride home was quiet. I could feel Maya stealing concerned glances my way, clearly picking up on my mood shift after that encounter with Ryan.

"Are you two still giving each other the cold shoulder?" she finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Mmm," I hummed noncommittally, keeping my expression carefully neutral. I had no desire to discuss Ryan right now.

"So what's going on between—"

"This partnership with Celestial Gems is crucial, Maya," I cut her off, deliberately shifting to work matters. "We need to keep a close eye on everything. Can't let competitors throw any wrenches in our plans. If this collaboration goes smoothly, we won't have to worry about overseas orders anymore."

Maya straightened up, immediately switching to business mode. "Speaking of which, I find something odd about Mr. West. The intel we gathered suggests he's quite the ruthless businessman, but the few times I've interacted with him, he seems... unusually approachable."

"Doesn't match what's in his file at all," she continued, frowning. "Could our information be wrong?"

I furrowed my brow, considering her observation. Something about Lucian had been nagging at me too.

"Perhaps Lucian West isn't as straightforward as he appears," I mused. "The friendliness might just be a facade. Men who've climbed to his position in the business world are rarely innocent lambs."

Maya nodded, looking relieved that I shared her concern. "Just be careful around him, okay? Keep your guard up."

"Trust me, I will," I assured her. "Let's get the design team moving on this project ASAP. The faster we deliver, the better—but quality can't be compromised."

Several days later, Lucian returned to Dreamland Studios. I'd prepared some preliminary designs and was eager to get his feedback.

He studied the sketches carefully, his expression thoughtful. After a few moments, he set them aside without much comment.

"I trust Dreamland's standards," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Actually, I came today for something else entirely."

I smiled politely, curious. "Please, go ahead."

"I'd like to propose we make this a co-branded collection," he said, watching my reaction closely. "What do you think?"

My eyes lit up instantly. A co-branded collection with Celestial Gems would dramatically boost Dreamland's international profile. But remembering Maya's warning, I tempered my excitement with caution.

"That's an intriguing proposition," I replied, keeping my voice measured despite my racing thoughts. "But since we'd be adding a whole new dimension to our project, I wonder if I might visit your flagship store first? It would help me better position the co-branded line."

It was a reasonable request that would also give me a chance to verify some things about Celestial Gems' operations. No matter how prestigious Lucian's company was, due diligence was non-negotiable.

Lucian nodded without hesitation. "Of course. Would the day after tomorrow work? I'll make all the necessary arrangements."

Celestial Gems had a branch in the city, and I knew it would take just one word from him to set everything up. His easy agreement was a good sign.

"Perfect," I agreed.

We discussed a few more business matters before I walked him out. As soon as he left, I briefed Maya on his co-branding proposal.

"Holy shit," she whispered, eyes wide with the same excitement I was trying to contain. "That's huge, Serena."

"I know," I said, unable to keep the smile from my face. "As long as there are no hidden catches, this could be exactly what Dreamland needs."

The only downside was that this collaboration would inevitably push our other projects back in the queue. But the potential benefits far outweighed that minor inconvenience. I had a good feeling about this partnership—provided everything checked out.

When the day came, Lucian personally arrived at Dreamland to pick me up. I was genuinely surprised by the gesture.

"You didn't have to come yourself," I said as I slid into the passenger seat of his luxury sedan.

"I wanted to," he replied simply, pulling away from the curb.

I'd visited Celestial Gems' branch store several times before, but always as a customer. Today felt entirely different—I was here as a potential business partner, scrutinizing the operation through new eyes.

The store manager had prepared comprehensive data on their performance over the past year, waiting for our arrival. Lucian and I sat in the second-floor VIP room, reviewing sales figures and market analytics.

I couldn't hide my amazement as I flipped through the reports. Celestial Gems was even more impressive than I'd imagined. Their market penetration, customer retention rates, and sales growth were phenomenal. My excitement about the co-branding opportunity grew with each page I turned.

After thoroughly examining the data, I broached the subject of terms.

"What conditions would you expect for this co-branding arrangement?" I asked directly.

Lucian gave me a slight smile. "I've always believed in mutually beneficial partnerships," he said, his answer elegantly vague yet clearly affirmative.

My smile widened, and I extended my hand across the table. "Then here's to the success of our co-branded collection, Mr. West."

He took my hand, but didn't immediately release it after our shake. Instead, his grip lingered just a moment longer than necessary.

"I have no doubt it will be successful," he said, giving my hand a subtle squeeze before finally letting go.

I arched an eyebrow involuntarily, caught off guard by the gesture. Was he... flirting with me?

Why would he do that? I was visibly pregnant, for heaven's sake.

How strange.

Chapter 118: Chapter 118 Unexpected Danger

Serena's POV

I filed away this peculiar interaction for later analysis. For now, the business opportunity before me demanded my full attention.

The rooftop garden was breathtaking. I didn't have to think twice when Lucian invited me to check out the terrace after our meeting. freewebnovel.com

"You have to see the view from up here," he said, leading the way with a casual confidence.

I was genuinely impressed. In the heart of the city, where every square foot cost a fortune, Celestial Gems had built this expansive rooftop terrace for their customers. The luxury of space spoke volumes about Lucian's business philosophy.

Since they'd closed the store just for my visit, we had the entire place to ourselves. No customers, no staff hovering nearby—just peaceful quiet and an incredible panoramic view of the city skyline.

We stood there side by side, neither of us speaking.

Something about the moment felt suspended in time, like we were floating above the noise and chaos of the world below.

I inhaled deeply, enjoying this rare moment of stillness in my otherwise hectic life.

A piercing scream suddenly shattered our tranquility. I glanced up toward the sound, but before I could process what was happening, Lucian yanked me backward behind him.

"Look out!" he shouted.

CRASH!

When my brain finally caught up with what had happened, I saw a shattered flower pot at my feet, soil scattered everywhere.

Lucian made a pained noise beside me, and that's when I noticed the gash on his arm, blood seeping through his expensive shirt.

My stomach dropped. If he hadn't pulled me back—if he hadn't stepped in front of me—that would have been my head, not his arm.

"Oh my god, you're hurt!" I gasped, my heart pounding. "We need to get you to a hospital right now!"

Gratitude and alarm flooded through me as I helped him toward the stairs. The store manager came running up, face pale with panic.

"Mr. West! Are you alright? It looks like someone threw something from above!"

Lucian nodded grimly, clutching his bleeding arm. "Look into it. I'm going to get this treated."

"Of course, sir. Right away."

I helped Lucian to his car, steadying him even though he didn't really seem to need it.

His driver took one look at the blood and hit the gas, racing through traffic like we were in an action movie.

At the hospital, they whisked Lucian away to treat his wound, leaving me alone in the waiting area, still processing what had happened.

Could it really have been an accident? Or was someone targeting Lucian? Or worse—targeting me?

Before I could follow that disturbing train of thought, the hallway erupted with hurried footsteps. I turned to see Ryan striding toward me, his face tight with worry.

"Serena! Are you hurt?" He grabbed my shoulders, eyes frantically scanning my body for injuries. His hands were warm against my skin, his touch both familiar and electric.

I blinked in surprise. "Ryan? How did you—"

"Are you okay?" he demanded, cutting me off.

"I'm fine," I assured him, touched by his obvious concern. "Not even a scratch."

Relief washed over his features, but only momentarily. His jaw tightened again as he realized the implications.

"Then who's injured?"

"Lucian West," I explained. "We were at Celestial Gems' store, on the rooftop terrace. Someone dropped or threw a flower pot from above. He pushed me out of the way and got hit instead."

Ryan's face darkened instantly. "He protected you?"

"Yes," I nodded, glancing anxiously toward the emergency room doors. "The wound looked pretty deep. I hope he's okay."

Ryan's expression grew stormy. "You seem awfully concerned about him."

I stared at him, confused by the bitter edge in his voice. Was he actually jealous? Over a business associate who'd just saved me from potential serious injury?

Before I could respond to his ridiculous insinuation, the emergency room doors swung open. Lucian emerged looking much better than when he went in, his arm properly bandaged.

When he spotted Ryan standing next to me, something cold and calculating flashed in his eyes for the briefest moment before his usual pleasant demeanor returned.

"Mr. West, are you alright?" I stepped forward, genuinely concerned. "I can't thank you enough for what you did."

Lucian shook his head dismissively. "No need for thanks, Ms. Quinn. Today was just an unfortunate accident."

"Maybe so, but you still protected me and got hurt in the process," I insisted, worrying now about our partnership. "What did the doctor say? Will this affect your work?"

I was terrified he might pull out of our collaboration because of this incident, but Lucian quickly put those fears to rest.

"My assistant will investigate exactly what happened," he assured me. "You were visiting my store at my invitation, so any failure in safety is entirely my responsibility."

He paused meaningfully, his gaze softening. "This has nothing to do with you, so please don't blame yourself."

His words were so considerate that my gratitude only deepened. I could feel Ryan bristling beside me, but I ignored him.

This wasn't about him or his jealousy—this was about my business and a man who'd potentially saved me from serious injury.

One thing was certain: Lucian West was proving to be far more complex than the ruthless businessman our files described.

Chapter 119: Chapter 119 The Truth Behind the Accident

Ryan's POV

I cleared my throat loudly, interrupting their animated conversation. The sound finally drew Lucian's attention away from Serena and toward me. He looked at me like he was just now noticing my existence.

"Ms. Quinn, and this gentleman is...?" His tone was polite but deliberate.

Serena smiled, reaching for my arm to pull me closer as she made a casual introduction. Her touch was light but sent electricity through my skin.

"Mr. West, this is Ryan Blackwood, CEO of Blackwood Group. I'm sure you've heard of him?"

Lucian made a drawn-out sound of recognition, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Ah, so you're Mr. Blackwood. Your reputation precedes you."

I assessed him coldly. Such bullshit. If my reputation truly preceded me, he'd have recognized me immediately. He was either deliberately pretending not to know who I was, or trying to knock me down a peg. Either way, it set my teeth on edge.

"I'm also Serena's family member," I stated firmly, watching his expression. "I've heard about what happened today. Thank you for what you did."

The words tasted bitter in my mouth, but I forced them out anyway. The man had protected her—that much I couldn't deny.

Lucian nodded, his gaze meeting mine directly.

The air between us practically crackled with tension.

My instincts about people had been honed through years of business deals and corporate takeovers, and everything about this man screamed danger.

Not the obvious kind—the calculating, patient kind that waits for the perfect moment to strike.

"No thanks necessary," Lucian replied smoothly, shifting his attention back to Serena. "After all, Serena and I are business partners now. Protecting my partner is simply what anyone would do."

The way he said "partner" made my jaw clench. This wasn't just courtesy—this was a challenge. But Serena, standing between us, seemed completely unaware of the silent power struggle playing out.

I slid my arm around her waist, pulling her against my side in a clear message of possession. Her body fit perfectly against mine, a reminder of what we once had. What we could have again.

"Just a business partnership," I remarked with a thin smile that didn't reach my eyes. "You seem awfully invested for a simple professional arrangement."

Lucian's gaze flicked to my hand on Serena's waist, then back to her face, deliberately ignoring my comment. "Serena, I'll leave the joint collection in your capable hands. I'm looking forward to seeing the results."

"I won't let you down," Serena promised, her voice full of that determination I'd always admired.

"I should get going now." Lucian gave me one last measured look before turning to leave, his bandaged arm held carefully at his side.

The moment he was out of earshot, Serena pulled away from me, her eyes flashing with irritation. "What was that about?"

I reluctantly withdrew my hand, though every instinct screamed to keep her close. The jealousy churning in my gut wasn't something I was accustomed to feeling.

"You and West seem very friendly," I observed, unable to keep the edge from my voice. The way they'd been talking—her using his first name, him looking at her like she was the only person in the room—it set off every alarm bell I had.

"And what if we are?" she shot back, her cheeks flushed with annoyance. "I need to get back to my studio. I have a thousand things to do today."

She turned sharply, heading toward the hospital exit. I immediately followed, easily matching her pace despite her quick steps. I could practically feel her frustration radiating as she muttered something under her breath about "long legs" and "unfair advantages."

"I don't trust him," I said bluntly as we walked. "You should keep your distance."

She ignored me completely, walking even faster. The stubborn set of her shoulders was so familiar it almost made me smile despite the tension. No matter how much time had passed, some things about her never changed.

Outside the hospital, I gestured toward my waiting car. "Let me drive you back."

She hesitated, glancing at the line of taxis nearby. I saw something flash across her face—a shadow of fear—and remembered the kidnapping incident. My chest tightened at the memory of almost losing her.

After a moment's consideration, she nodded and slid into the passenger seat without argument. As I closed the door behind her, I caught sight of Lucian watching us from across the parking lot, his expression unreadable.

Something told me this wouldn't be the last time our paths crossed—and next time, the stakes might be much higher.

Author's POV

Lucian West sat in his sleek black Bentley, his gaze fixed on Ryan's car ahead of them. A cold smile played across his lips as he watched the couple drive away from the hospital. The bandage on his arm was pristine white against his dark suit, a calculated prop in his carefully orchestrated performance.

"So Blackwood truly doesn't remember me," he mused, tapping his fingers rhythmically against the leather armrest. The realization amused him rather than disappointed. "Perfect. That makes our little game far more interesting."

His assistant, Davis, glanced at him through the rearview mirror. "Sir, how's your injury? Should we stop by the clinic for additional treatment?"

"It's nothing," Lucian dismissed with a casual wave. "Today's incident went exactly according to plan."

The "accident" at the design center—a strategically dropped object from several floors up—had been Lucian's creation from start to finish. The fact that Ryan Blackwood had rushed to the hospital immediately confirmed what he'd suspected: Serena Quinn was the man's weakness.

"What about the other matter we discussed?" Lucian asked, his voice dropping to a more serious tone as they pulled away from the hospital.

Davis hesitated before responding. "We've located the man named Derek. He's being held in a Blackwood property on the outskirts of the city. According to our sources, he was imprisoned after attempting to kidnap Ms. Quinn."

Lucian processed this information, connecting the dots of this increasingly complicated relationship web. A soft, derisive chuckle escaped his lips.

"Kidnapping Serena? That takes considerable nerve," he remarked, genuine surprise coloring his voice. Few people would dare target someone connected to the Blackwood empire, regardless of how estranged the relationship might be.

Davis nodded in agreement. "What would you like us to do about this situation, sir?"

Lucian's eyes gleamed with calculating intensity as he stared out at the passing cityscape. "If Blackwood is so determined to keep this Derek character locked away, perhaps we should... assist him in regaining his freedom. Create a small distraction for our dear CEO."

The implication wasn't lost on Davis. An enemy's enemy could be a useful tool, if nothing else.

"I'll arrange it immediately, sir."

"Be discreet," Lucian cautioned, his voice smooth as silk. "Once he's free, bring him to me. I want to hear what he knows firsthand."

"Of course, sir."

As his vehicle pulled away from the hospital, Lucian's mind was already racing ahead, plotting his next moves like a chess grandmaster anticipating his opponent's strategies.

Chapter 120: Chapter 120 Have dinner with Lucian

Author's POV

Across town, Serena buried herself in work at Dreamland Studio, grateful for the distraction from the morning's bizarre hospital encounter. The joint collection with Celestial Gems represented a significant opportunity, and she was determined to deliver something extraordinary.

"Maya, can you double-check these stone settings?" she asked, pushing a sketch across the table while making final adjustments to another design. "I'm thinking the central pieces should feature azure blue sapphires to complement their brand colors."

Her fingers worked deftly, translating her vision onto paper with practiced precision. The studio hummed with energy as her team worked together, everyone sensing the importance of this collaboration.

After completing the preliminary designs, Serena carefully organized the portfolio. The weight of the opportunity pressed on her shoulders, but it was the kind of pressure she thrived under.

"I should deliver these personally," she decided, glancing at her watch. "I want to get his feedback directly."

Maya looked up from her workspace, concern evident in her expression. "Want me to come with? After what happened this morning..."

"I'll be fine," Serena assured her, gathering her materials. "His workshop isn't far, and I want to check on his injury anyway."

The drive to Celestial Gems' satellite studio took less than fifteen minutes. Serena parked her car, clutching the portfolio case as she entered the sleek, modernist building. The receptionist recognized her immediately, offering a warm smile.

"Ms. Quinn, Mr. West is in his office. I'll let him know you're here."

Meanwhile, in his private office, Lucian was engaged in a very different type of business. Across from him sat a haggard-looking man with hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. Derek's hands trembled slightly as he recounted his ordeal, his hatred for both Ivy and Ryan evident in every bitter word.

"Blackwood's men know how to break a person," he explained, unconsciously rubbing his wrists where restraints had left marks. "If I weren't so determined to make them pay, I might not have survived."

Lucian listened impassively, noting the valuable information scattered throughout the man's vengeful ramblings. The connection between Ivy Hart and Ryan Blackwood particularly interested him—another potential weakness to exploit.

When Derek finished his tale, he leaned forward eagerly. "What can I do for you, Mr. West? I'll do anything."

"For now," Lucian replied, his voice deliberately neutral, "I have no specific tasks for you."

Desperation flashed across Derek's face. "Please, sir. I'll do whatever you need. I've got nothing left—no money, no resources. I'm practically homeless after escaping."

Lucian gave a slight nod, understanding the man's motivation. Another pawn to position on his chessboard.

"My assistant will see to your immediate needs," he said dismissively, waving toward the door. "We'll be in touch when the time is right."

Relief flooded Derek's features as he repeatedly expressed his gratitude. "I'll serve you loyally, Mr. West. Whatever you need—day or night—just say the word."

As Davis escorted the grateful man out, they nearly collided with Serena entering the reception area.

Derek immediately ducked his head, pulling his cap lower to shield his face. And he quickly slipped past, avoiding any chance of recognition.

Serena's POV

I squinted at the retreating figure, feeling that strange sense of familiarity wash over me.

Something about the way he hunched his shoulders, the nervous energy radiating off him—it triggered something in my memory.

I turned, intending to follow him for a better look, when the receptionist called out.

"Ms. Quinn, are you here to see Mr. West? He's in his office. You can go right in."

Just like that, my chance was gone. By the time I glanced back, the mysterious man had disappeared completely. With a small sigh, I nodded to the receptionist and headed toward Lucian's office, the nagging feeling of recognition still clinging to me.

"Serena, you're here," Lucian greeted me, rising from behind his desk with surprising ease for someone who'd been injured just hours ago. He gestured toward the plush sofa in the meeting area. "Please, have a seat."

I settled onto the sofa, my portfolio case beside me, but didn't immediately bring up work. "How's your arm? Is it bothering you much?"

Lucian extended his injured arm, demonstrating its mobility with a casual flourish. "It's nothing—just a surface wound. Not nearly as dramatic as it looked."

I nodded, relieved that the accident hadn't caused serious damage. "Good to hear it's not interfering with your work."

My mind drifted back to that furtive figure, and I couldn't resist testing the waters. "That man who just left your office—was he a client?"

He poured me tea with practiced grace. "No, actually. Just a relative of my assistant—fallen on hard times. I happened to see him and asked a few questions."

"I see," I murmured, noting how quickly he'd offered the explanation. I'd deliberately called the man a "client" to gauge his reaction. The shabby clothes, the nervous behavior—definitely not someone a CEO would typically meet with directly.

If he really was just some poor relation of his assistant, why did he practically run away when he saw me? That hunched escape had looked more like panic than mere shyness.

My mind raced through possibilities, dismissing each one as quickly as they formed.

"Serena?" Lucian's voice pulled me back to the present. "You came to see me about something?"

I snapped back to attention, pulling out the design portfolio I'd brought. "Yes, the final drafts for our collection are all here. Take a look and let me know if any changes are needed before we proceed."

Lucian took the designs, examining them with a practiced eye. I wasn't worried—I knew my work was solid.

"These look perfect," he confirmed, handing them back. "Let's move forward with these."

I nodded, launching into a discussion about market strategies and implementation timelines. ***freewebnovel.com***

The New York market was my territory, and I offered suggestions that would maximize our joint collection's impact.

Lucian listened attentively, occasionally adding insights from the international perspective.

After nearly an hour of detailed planning, I checked my watch, gathering my things. "I should get going. And we can touch base later if anything comes up."

"Why don't we have dinner? I've been back in New York for days and haven't properly sampled the local specialties. Since you know this city so well, perhaps you could continue being my guide?" Lucian said it smoothly.

I hesitated only briefly before agreeing. After all, he'd saved me from that falling debris, and he was my client. A thank-you dinner seemed appropriate.

I suggested One57—Manhattan's crown jewel, with breathtaking views and exceptional cuisine. Reservations were usually impossible to get, but my name carried enough weight in the city to secure us a table with a single call.

We took my car, Lucian declining his driver. As I slid into the driver's seat, I noticed his eyes briefly flicker toward my clearly rounded stomach.

"Perhaps I should drive?" he offered casually. "Is it comfortable for you in your condition?"

I fastened my seatbelt, shaking my head. "It's fine. The distance isn't far, and we should beat the traffic rush."

My prediction proved embarrassingly wrong within minutes as we hit a solid wall of unmoving vehicles.

I sighed as I braked behind a long line of cars. Lucian chuckled at my frustration.

"This is New York—traffic is part of the experience. We're in no hurry."

I felt oddly embarrassed. I'd wanted to treat him to a nice meal, and already things weren't going as planned. "Sorry about this, Mr. West."

"Didn't you mention One57 has amazing night views? If anything, arriving later means we'll see them at their best."

The gentle reassurance helped me relax. Soft jazz played through the car speakers as Lucian skillfully steered our conversation through various topics. I found myself genuinely impressed by his knowledge and the colorful experiences he shared from his international ventures.

"That's enough about me," he eventually said. "Tell me about yourself."

I laughed softly. "My life is like plain water compared to yours—nothing nearly as exciting."

Lucian smiled then smoothly shifted the conversation toward Ryan.

"Do you remember our last meeting? You and Mr. Blackwood seem... particularly close."

I felt heat creeping up my neck, thankful for the dimly lit car interior that hid my reaction. I managed a vague affirmative sound, not denying the implication.

"So your relationship truly is as intimate as Mr. Blackwood suggested."

The memory of Ryan's possessive behavior made me squirm. He'd practically declared himself my family member, marking his territory in the most obvious way.

"Ryan can be rather... direct sometimes," I started, then caught myself. Why was I explaining Ryan to Lucian? There was nothing between Lucian and me that required clarification.

"I can see that he cares for you deeply," Lucian continued thoughtfully. "Although..."

He deliberately left his sentence unfinished, leaving me burning with curiosity. Thankfully, the traffic finally began moving, giving me an excuse to focus on driving instead of that dangling thought.

The rest of our journey proceeded smoothly, and I breathed a sigh of relief as we arrived at One57.

Despite my earlier misgivings, dinner went surprisingly well. We ate excellent food, admired the spectacular city lights spreading below us, and maintained easy, professional conversation.

When the bill arrived, Lucian smoothly produced a black credit card, but I quickly intercepted it.

"Mr. West, you've helped me tremendously with this collaboration. Please allow me to treat you."

I handed my card to the waiter, who took it with a practiced smile. Lucian didn't protest further, accepting my gesture with good grace.

As the waiter announced our total and prepared to process payment, another black card suddenly appeared beside us.

"Charge it to mine."

The deep, familiar voice sent a jolt through my system. I didn't need to turn to know exactly who had just crashed our dinner.

