

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

- Chapter 121 He definitely has an ulterior motive

Chapter 121: Chapter 121 He definitely has an ulterior motive

Serena's POV

I glanced over, surprised to find Ryan suddenly there. I'd been sitting in this restaurant all evening and hadn't even noticed when he'd arrived.

"Sir, would you like to pay for this lady?" the waiter asked.

Ryan nodded, then reached over and took my card, sliding it back into my purse with a deliberate closeness that made my skin tingle.

"That small amount of money you earn," he said with a patronizing smirk, "better save it for yourself."

Lucian's gaze drifted between us, his lips curling into a slight, mocking smile. Ryan didn't even spare him a glance, just grabbed my hand and started making decisions for me.

"It's getting late. I'll take you home."

I tried to pull my hand away—twice—but couldn't break his grip. God, his hands were strong.

"Mr. West," I said with an awkward laugh, "do you have a driver picking you up?"

After all, I'd volunteered to drive Lucian here. We'd finished dinner, but I couldn't just abandon him. I was being polite, expecting Lucian's usual accommodating response.

Boy, was I wrong.

"Serena, aren't you going to drive me back?" Lucian asked, his voice honey-sweet.

Ryan's eyes turned to ice as he stared at Lucian.

"Doesn't Mr. West have his own driver?" Ryan asked coldly.

Lucian stood up unhurriedly, a slight challenge in his voice. "Tonight, Ms. Quinn is my driver."

I froze, not expecting this turn of events. The tension between them was so thick even I could feel it.

"Ryan, Mr. West did come in my car," I said, trying again to free my hand. "You should go back to whatever you were doing."

When Ryan wouldn't let go, I resorted to glaring at him, trying to communicate with my eyes since my words weren't getting through. But he wouldn't even look at me, so my warning glances were completely wasted.

"If that's the case," Ryan said smoothly, "my driver can take Mr. West back. Serena is pregnant and shouldn't be driving right now. You wouldn't force a pregnant woman to drive, would you, Mr. West?"

Ryan had effectively cornered Lucian. If Lucian insisted I drive him, he'd look like an inconsiderate businessman. If not, Ryan would get exactly what he wanted.

My heart skipped a beat. I clearly heard what Ryan was implying. I watched Lucian's expression, praying my potential client wouldn't get angry and walk away.

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If Lucian wanted to sabotage me, he could just keep rejecting my designs during our collaboration. Thinking about this, I wanted to pinch Ryan hard.

Why couldn't he just shut up!

Lucian's expression remained unchanged, though I could tell he was irritated.

"Since Mr. Blackwood has proposed a solution, I'll have to accept," he said smoothly.

Ryan's smile widened. "Mr. West is too kind."

He turned to instruct his assistant, "Take Mr. West downstairs."

His assistant nodded immediately. "Mr. West, please follow me."

Lucian said goodbye with a deliberate intimacy that made my skin crawl.

"Serena, the view tonight was exceptional. I look forward to our next meeting."

Just that one sentence made Ryan's face darken. I could practically feel the threatening aura radiating from him—the clear precursor to an explosion.

Not wanting anyone to notice the tension, I quickly waved to Lucian. "Goodbye, Mr. West."

Only after they disappeared from sight did I let out a breath of relief. Then I immediately pinched Ryan's soft spot at his waist.

He let out a muffled groan and turned to me in disbelief. "What are you doing?"

Taking advantage of his momentary pain, I yanked my hand free and glared at him fiercely.

"Ryan, what the hell were you doing? Lucian is my business partner. If you piss him off, who bears the loss? Me!"

Ryan lowered his voice, coughing twice, clearly not wanting to argue in public.

"Serena, let's go outside first."

I huffed and turned away, heading for the exit.

Once we were in the elevator, Ryan took my hand again, his tone bossy as ever.

"The loss would be on me."

Hearing this, my anger flared even hotter.

"This is MY business! What do you mean 'on you'? If you offend my partners, who will want to work with Dreamland in the future?"

"Next time, could you please think before you speak!"

I was furious. The elevator dinged open, and I shot him another cold glare.

"Let go!"

Ryan didn't release me—instead, he pulled me closer into his arms.

"Serena, you've been angry for so long. Isn't it time to let it go?"

I struggled but couldn't break free. Worried someone might walk by and see us, my face flushed with embarrassment.

"Let me go—we're in a public place."

Ryan seemed unusually thick-skinned tonight.

"I won't let go until you stop being angry. If people want to look, let them."

I couldn't help but laugh at his ridiculous behavior, finally cracking a smile.

Ryan's mood lightened when he saw me smile. He turned me to face him, apologizing sincerely.

"I know you're upset about what happened before. I'm sorry I didn't protect you properly, which put you in danger."

"It won't happen again, Serena."

I huffed, thinking he'd missed the point entirely. But what's done was done, and I didn't feel like arguing anymore.

"Weren't you going to take me home? Let's go then. But I'm warning you—don't be so hostile to Mr. West in the future. He hasn't done anything to you. What's your problem?"

At the mention of Lucian, Ryan's smile froze. His expression turned serious as he guided me out. "I'm not joking, Serena. Lucian West is a very calculating man. You shouldn't be alone with him."

I looked at his serious expression and couldn't help asking, "Are you serious? Is there something wrong with Lucian?"

Ryan hesitated, then ran a hand through his hair. "I've looked into him as much as I could, but there's not much to find. But his excessive attention toward you definitely has an ulterior motive."

My heart tightened. I half-believed him.

Lucian had been unusually accommodating, giving the collaboration to Dreamland Jewelry so easily. This was our first time working together—why would he trust me so much?

Was it really just because Dreamland had a good reputation in New York?

Lucian was a businessman, and businessmen prioritize profits. He wouldn't offer so many advantages just for something as intangible as reputation.

Thinking about this made me anxious.

If Lucian was approaching me with hidden motives... what exactly did he want?

Chapter 122: Chapter 122 Press conference

Serena's POV

I glanced at Ryan as he took my car keys from my hand.

"I'll have someone continue investigating Lucian," he said, opening the passenger door for me with surprising gentleness. "Just remember what I told you—try to avoid meeting him alone."

As I slid into the seat, I heard Ryan mutter under his breath, "That man had the audacity to treat you like his personal driver. He truly doesn't know his place."

I couldn't help but smile a little at his irritation.

The fact that Ryan was upset someone had "used" me when he himself would never do such a thing was almost... sweet, in his own possessive way.

Over the next few weeks, I personally oversaw every detail of the joint collaboration with Celestial Gems.

Every sketch, every prototype, every marketing plan—nothing escaped my attention. I wanted this partnership to be flawless.

But when Lucian invited me out again, something felt different. I couldn't shake Ryan's warnings from my mind.

These meetings were becoming suspiciously frequent. Why would a man with Lucian's international business portfolio have so much free time to spend in New York?

And why spend it with me, under the thin guise of "collaboration discussions"?

I kept my face carefully neutral as I slid into the seat across from him, despite the questions tumbling through my mind.

"Mr. West, I apologize for being late. Traffic was terrible," I explained politely.

Lucian barely acknowledged my apology with a casual nod, pushing a teacup toward me.

"Try this."

I lifted the delicate cup to my lips, inhaling the fragrant aroma before taking a small sip. The flavor was distinct—high-quality Dragon Well tea harvested before the spring rains. Even with my limited tea knowledge, I recognized its exceptional quality.

"It's excellent," I admitted.

A smile played at his lips. "You introduced me to grinding coffee beans last time. Now I'm introducing you to fine tea. Consider it returning the favor."

My suspicions deepened. Was this meeting really about work, or something else? Ryan's warnings echoed in my mind, making everything Lucian did seem loaded with hidden meaning.

"How's your overseas business, Mr. West?" I asked casually. "You've been in New York quite a while now. Remote management must be challenging."

Lucian's eyes flicked up to mine, studying me for a moment before answering with practiced ease.

"It's manageable. Being in New York is something of a vacation for me."

"A vacation?" I laughed lightly. "I find that hard to believe. Men like you don't simply take extended vacations."

My tone had grown increasingly formal, and I noticed Lucian's eyebrows draw together slightly.

Our relationship had developed into something almost friendly during previous meetings, but now I was deliberately creating distance, reverting to how we'd interacted when we first met.

Lucian seemed to notice the change but didn't comment on it. Instead, he smoothly changed subjects, engaging me in conversation about jewelry industry trends. Despite myself, I relaxed a little as we discussed our shared passion.

"The collaboration is nearly ready, Mr. West," I said, steering the conversation back to business.

He nodded, suddenly serious. "I'm planning a launch event for next week."

"Perfect. I'll arrange my schedule accordingly."

After discussing a few more details about the event, we prepared to leave. Lucian offered to drive me back to the studio, but I declined.

"I drove myself here. No need to trouble yourself."

"Serena," he said, using my first name with surprising intimacy, "I actually wanted to apologize for what happened last time."

I blinked in confusion. "I'm sorry?"

"Mr. Blackwood is clearly... significant in your life. The situation last time was awkward. I was concerned it might have caused problems between you two."

I shook my head. "You're overthinking it, Mr. West."

His eyes glinted with something I couldn't quite read. "I've been in New York for some time now and never heard about your deep connection with Mr. Blackwood. That's why the misunderstanding occurred."

My pulse quickened. Why did Lucian keep circling back to Ryan? His persistent interest in my relationship made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"Ryan and I have a... complicated history," I said carefully. "But then again, relationships between adults are always complex, aren't they?"

Lucian smiled. "Indeed. But remember, if you ever need assistance with anything, please contact me. We're friends now, aren't we?"

Friends. The word felt strange coming from a business partner—especially one I barely knew.

"Yes," I agreed, keeping my voice light while my mind raced.

When I returned to the studio, I immediately asked Maya to discreetly investigate Lucian's activities in New York. There had to be more to his extended stay than our collaboration.

Maya's investigation, careful as it was, apparently alerted Lucian. But I didn't know that then.

What I did know was that Lucian West had ulterior motives—I just couldn't figure out what they were.

The day of the launch event arrived with all the glitz and glamour you'd expect. Camera flashes created a constant strobe effect as journalists crowded the venue.

I arrived with Maya and several designers from our team, feeling the weight of how important this collaboration was for Dreamland's future.

Lucian's influence in New York was substantial—the event was packed with industry insiders who had come to show their support for Celestial Gems.

As I scanned the room, I noticed several familiar faces—competitors who'd lost the bid for this collaboration. My stomach tightened. Their presence here couldn't be a coincidence.

Maya leaned close to my ear. "These vultures never miss an opportunity. They're probably hoping to cozy up to Mr. West now."

I kept my expression neutral. "Today should go smoothly regardless. Let's not give them any attention."

"Got it."

Once the event began, Lucian and I took the stage together to introduce our collaborative collection.

I gripped the microphone, watching as models showcased our creations while lights and music created the perfect atmosphere.

The beautiful jewelry pieces captured everyone's attention, exactly as I'd hoped.

"This collaborative collection that Mr. West and I created is themed 'Moonlight,'" I announced, my voice steady despite my nerves. "We hope that Celestial Gems and Dreamland Jewelry will shine eternally like the moon in the night sky."

Applause erupted as cameras captured the moment between Lucian and me—a perfect symbol of our successful partnership.

Lucian reached for a bottle of champagne, preparing to pop it open in celebration. But before he could, a disruptive voice rose from the audience.

"Mr. West, was there something special behind this unusually smooth collaboration?"

Another voice chimed in: "Several design studios in New York competed for this opportunity, but we heard you immediately selected Dreamland Jewelry. Were you and Ms. Quinn previously acquainted?"

The previously harmonious atmosphere shattered instantly. Murmurs spread through the crowd like wildfire.

Lucian and I looked toward the source—entertainment reporters, always hunting for scandalous headlines.

Lucian took the microphone, answering with professional detachment. "Ms. Quinn and I weren't previously acquainted. Celestial Gems chose Dreamland Jewelry because I valued Ms. Quinn's unique design aesthetic and Dreamland's reputation in New York."

That should have been enough, but the reporter persisted.

"There are rumors that you two developed feelings for each other during this collaboration. Is that true?"

Chapter 123: Chapter 123 Back to Blackwood mansion

Serena's POV

I choked back a gasp as that entertainment reporter's question hung in the air.

In such a professional setting, asking about personal relationships was clearly meant to sabotage the event.

Lucian's face darkened immediately.

"Today is the launch event for the collaboration between Celestial Gems and Dreamland Jewelry," he stated coldly. "If anyone wishes to speculate on baseless gossip, I suggest you leave now."

The moment he finished speaking, security personnel materialized from the edges of the room and escorted the intrusive reporter out.

Thankfully, the guy was smart enough not to make a scene, or this would've definitely become juicy fodder for tomorrow's gossip columns.

Even so, the atmosphere had shifted. I hadn't expected trouble from my competitors, yet somehow this random entertainment reporter had the audacity to derail our event.

Thank god Lucian handled it swiftly before things got truly uncomfortable.

"Serena, it's over. Don't worry," Lucian murmured, leaning slightly toward me.

I nodded briefly, subtly stepping back to maintain a professional distance between us. The last thing we needed was to fuel more speculation.

The remainder of the event proceeded smoothly without further disruptions.

Online, our launch generated significant buzz, attracting numerous new followers to Dreamland's social media accounts.

Some people, after seeing Lucian in person, became instant fans. The trending topic #CelestialGemsCEOsGorgeous actually stayed on the hot list for several days.

I didn't waste my time on such ridiculous trends, focusing instead on the feedback about our collaboration—which was overwhelmingly positive. Only then did I finally breathe easy. **freewebmovel.com**

Maya shared her findings about Lucian's activities in Beijing, which seemed completely ordinary.

"Serena, I honestly don't see anything suspicious. Are you sure you aren't overthinking this?" Maya lounged in my office chair, scrolling through her tablet.

After seeing how Lucian handled the situation at the launch event, Maya's opinion of him had improved dramatically. The normalcy of his schedule made her believe my suspicions were unfounded.

"I think Ryan's jealousy is clouding your judgment," she said bluntly. "That man would prefer if no male species existed within fifty feet of you."

Her straightforward assessment made my doubts start to fade.

"You really think Lucian has no ulterior motives?" I asked, chewing my bottom lip.

Maya rolled her eyes. "If he had bad intentions, wouldn't he have made a move by now? Your collaboration is halfway complete. That's some serious patience if he's plotting something."

Her logic was simple but compelling, as always.

I nodded slowly. "You're right."

"Maybe he genuinely just sees you as a friend?" Maya suggested.

"I suppose that's possible."

"Of course it is! You're both in the same industry, and you're incredibly talented. He probably considers you a kindred spirit or something." She gave me a knowing look. "Honestly, Serena, I think pregnancy is making you paranoid. It's understandable."

"Fine, I'll drop it for now," I conceded, feeling a pang of guilt for suspecting Lucian based solely on Ryan's warnings.

Maya snatched the tablet from my hands. "The collaboration is almost finished anyway. You've been working yourself to death lately—go home and rest."

"But I still need to—"

"No buts," Maya cut me off with a sigh. "Have you forgotten you're pregnant? Why are you pushing yourself so hard?"

I opened my mouth to protest, but she was already calling my driver.

"Don't worry, I've got everything under control here. The studio won't collapse without you for a few days."

Before I knew it, I was in the car heading home. During the ride, my phone rang—Ryan's name flashing on the screen.

His voice sounded tense when I answered. "Where are you?"

"Heading home. Is something wrong?"

"Don't go home," he said urgently. "I'm sending someone to get you."

I straightened in my seat, suddenly alert. "What's happening, Ryan?"

"Derek got away. I'm worried he might come after you. You're not safe right now."

My heart hammered against my ribs. Derek—the man who'd kidnapped me, who'd threatened my life—was free?

"Tell your driver to pull over. I'll come get you myself."

My hands trembled slightly as I instructed the driver to stop and texted Ryan my location.

Fifteen minutes later, Ryan's sleek black car pulled up beside us. I quickly transferred to his vehicle, anxiety clawing at my throat.

"How did this happen?" I demanded as soon as he pulled away from the curb.

"He was being held in the basement of a villa outside the city with guards watching him," Ryan explained, his knuckles white against the steering wheel. "I've been busy with work and hadn't checked in recently. Only got the news last night."

"Did he escape on his own?"

Ryan shook his head grimly. "Someone must have helped him. The guards were skilled—no way he could have gotten past them alone."

His expression darkened further. "I've already got people investigating. In the meantime, you'll stay at the Blackwood mansion."

For once, I didn't argue about staying at his place. This was about my safety—and our baby's. With work momentarily under control, I could hunker down at the mansion until this threat was neutralized.

"Alright," I agreed quietly, one hand instinctively moving to protect my stomach. The situation was too serious for pride or stubbornness.

Chapter 124: Chapter 124 Long-awaited intimacy

Ryan's POV

The ride back to the mansion was tense, her body practically vibrating with anxiety beside me. I couldn't stop glancing at her, checking that she was still there, still safe.

When we arrived, I escorted her inside with my hand firmly on the small of her back. Protective. Possessive. Mine.

"I've increased security around the entire perimeter," I informed her as we walked through the foyer. "No one gets in or out without my approval."

Serena nodded, her eyes darting around the familiar space. It had been months since she'd stepped foot in what was once our home.

"Your old room is still available, but..." I hesitated, then decided to be direct. "I'd prefer you stay in the master suite with me. For security reasons."

She raised an eyebrow. "Security reasons?"

"Yes." I maintained a straight face. "Maximum protection."

A hint of a smile touched her lips before quickly disappearing. "Fine. For security."

I tried not to look too pleased as I led her upstairs. The staff had already been instructed to prepare the room and bring up her essentials.

"Hungry?" I asked, watching her sink onto the edge of the bed.

"Not really," she murmured, her hand absently stroking her baby bump. The sight made something primal stir inside me.

I sat beside her, careful to leave space between us. "You need to eat, Serena. Both of you do."

Her eyes met mine, softer than I'd seen in months. "I know. Maybe something light."

"I'll have the chef prepare whatever you want."

She nodded, looking around the room we once shared. "OK."

Then an uncomfortable silence settled between us.

"I'll run you a bath," I offered, standing abruptly. "You look tense."

She didn't object, which I took as a victory. In the bathroom, I filled the large marble tub with hot water, adding the lavender bath salts she'd always loved.

Small gestures. That's how I would win her back—remind her of all the ways I knew her, all the ways I could care for her.

When I returned, she was standing by the window, staring out at the darkening sky. The dying sunlight caught in her hair, turning it to liquid gold. My breath caught in my throat.

"Bath's ready," I managed.

She turned, her eyes meeting mine across the room. "Thank you."

As she moved past me toward the bathroom, I caught her wrist gently. She stopped, her eyes questioning.

"I know you don't trust me anymore," I said quietly. "But I will keep you safe, Serena. Both of you. I swear it on my life."

Something flickered in her expression—vulnerability, perhaps. She nodded once, then disappeared into the bathroom.

I ordered dinner while she bathed, instructing the chef to prepare all her favorites. By the time she emerged, wrapped in the silk robe I'd left for her, a spread waited on the small table in the sitting area of our suite.

"You didn't have to do all this," she said, eyeing the food.

"I wanted to."

She sat across from me, her damp hair falling in waves around her shoulders. We ate mostly in silence, but it wasn't entirely uncomfortable. Progress, I thought.

"How are you feeling?" I asked finally. "The pregnancy, I mean."

Her hand moved instinctively to her stomach. "Good days and bad. The morning sickness has mostly passed."

I nodded, drinking in every detail she offered. "And the business? Maya taking good care of things?"

"She is." A small smile. "Though she practically forced me to leave today. Said I was working too hard."

"She's right," I said firmly. "You push yourself too much."

Serena rolled her eyes, a familiar gesture that made my heart ache with nostalgia. "Not you too."

"Yes, me too." I leaned forward. "Let me take care of you, Serena. Just until this threat is dealt with."

She studied me for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "Alright. But don't get any ideas."

I raised my hands in mock surrender. "No ideas. Just security."

After dinner, I cleared the plates while she sat on the edge of the bed, combing through her damp hair. The domesticity of the moment wasn't lost on me—how many nights had we spent just like this before everything fell apart?

I moved behind her and gently took the comb from her hands. She stiffened momentarily, then relaxed as I began carefully working through her tangles.

"You don't have to—"

"I want to," I interrupted softly.

Her shoulders relaxed as I continued combing, my fingers occasionally brushing against her neck. The simple intimacy was intoxicating after months of separation.

"You've changed," she observed quietly.

I paused. "Have I?"

"Yes." She didn't elaborate.

I resumed combing, savoring each stroke through her silken hair. When I finished, I couldn't resist placing my hands on her shoulders, my thumbs gently kneading the tension there.

She exhaled softly, her head tilting forward as I massaged deeper.

"You're still carrying all your tension here," I murmured, working at a particularly stubborn knot.

"Old habits," she whispered, her voice lower than before.

My hands moved down her back, finding more tight muscles. She didn't stop me, didn't move away. I took it as permission to continue.

"Lie down," I instructed gently. "I'll give you a proper massage."

She hesitated only briefly before stretching out on her side. I positioned myself behind her, my hands resuming their work along her spine, her shoulders, down her arms.

"Ryan," she breathed, and the sound of my name on her lips after so long broke something inside me.

I leaned down, pressing my lips against her exposed shoulder. She tensed, but didn't pull away. Emboldened, I trailed kisses up to her neck, breathing in her familiar scent.

"Serena," I murmured against her skin. "I've missed you so fucking much."

She turned then, facing me, her eyes dark with something I hadn't seen in months. "This doesn't change anything," she warned, even as her hands reached for me.

"I know," I lied, before capturing her lips with mine.

The kiss ignited immediately, months of separation and tension exploding between us. Her hands clutched at my shirt, pulling me closer as I deepened the kiss, my tongue sweeping into her mouth.

"God, I've missed your taste," I growled, my hand sliding down to cup her breast through the thin robe.

She gasped, arching into my touch. "Ryan..."

I untied her robe, revealing her naked body beneath. My eyes devoured every inch of her, lingering on the slight swell of her stomach. "You're so fucking beautiful," I whispered reverently. "Even more beautiful now."

She flushed, suddenly self-conscious. I wouldn't allow it. Lowering my head, I captured one nipple in my mouth, sucking gently. She cried out, more sensitive than before.

"That's it, baby," I encouraged, moving to the other breast. "Let me hear you."

My hand slid lower, between her thighs, finding her already wet for me. "Fuck, Serena," I groaned. "Look how soaked you are for daddy."

She whimpered, hips bucking against my hand as I circled her clit with my thumb. "Please," she whispered.

"Please what, princess?" I teased, my fingers sliding inside her. "Tell me what you need."

Her eyes met mine, pupils blown wide with desire. "You," she admitted. "I need you."

I nearly came in my pants at her words. Quickly, I stripped off my clothes, my cock springing free, hard and aching for her.

"How do you want me?" I asked, hovering over her.

In answer, she pulled me down, guiding me to her entrance. I pushed in slowly, savoring each inch as her tight heat enveloped me.

"Christ," I hissed, fully seated inside her. "You're squeezing me so tight, baby. So perfect for me."

She wrapped her legs around my waist, urging me deeper. I began to move, each thrust controlled, mindful of her condition despite my desperate need.

"Harder," she demanded, nails digging into my shoulders.

"Don't want to hurt you," I gritted out, struggling to maintain control.

"You won't." Her eyes locked with mine. "I need it. Need you."

Something primal roared to life inside me. I grasped her hips, angling them upward as I drove into her with renewed force.

"Is this what you need?" I growled, watching her face contort with pleasure. "My cock stretching that tight little pussy?"

"Yes!" she cried, her walls clenching around me.

"Missed this, didn't you?" I taunted, grinding against her clit with each thrust. "Missed being filled by your daddy's cock."

Her eyes rolled back as I hit a particularly sensitive spot. "Right there," she gasped. "Don't stop."

I maintained the angle, pounding into her relentlessly. "Look at you, taking me so well. Such a good girl for daddy."

Her walls began to flutter around me as she approached her peak. I slid a hand between us, rubbing her clit in tight circles. "Come on my cock, princess. Let me feel it."

She shattered, her back arching off the bed as she cried out my name. The sight of her coming undone—coupled with the vice-like grip of her cunt around me—pushed me over the edge. I buried myself deep inside her, groaning as I filled her with hot spurts of cum.

We collapsed together, breathless and sweaty. I rolled to my side, careful not to crush her, and pulled her against my chest.

"Stay," I murmured into her hair, knowing I meant more than just tonight.

She didn't answer, but she didn't pull away either. For now, it was enough.

Chapter 125: Chapter 125 What's happening?

Serena's POV

I woke to the sensation of gentle kisses being pressed against my stomach. My eyes fluttered open in the dim morning light to find Ryan's dark head between my thighs, his hands splayed possessively across my hips.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, my voice still husky from sleep.

Ryan looked up at me, his eyes dark with hunger. "Appreciating what's mine."

My breath caught as his thumbs traced circles on my inner thighs. "I thought we were done last night."

"Not even close, princess." His voice was rough, commanding. "I've been starving for you for months."

I shivered as he lowered his head again, pressing reverent kisses to the small swell of my belly. The tenderness in his touch made my chest ache with conflicting emotions.

"Ryan, I-"

"Shhh," he interrupted, sliding lower. "Let daddy take care of you."

Before I could protest, his tongue made contact with my sensitive core, causing my hips to buck involuntarily. He chuckled, the vibration sending shockwaves through me.

"Still so responsive," he murmured against my flesh. "So fucking wet for me already."

I grabbed fistfuls of the sheets as he worked his tongue in deliberate, knowing circles. This man knew my body better than I did - every spot that made me tremble, every touch that drove me wild.

"Oh god," I gasped as he slid two fingers inside me, curling them expertly while his tongue continued its relentless assault on my clit.

"Not god, baby. Just me." His eyes locked with mine, possessive and proud. "Say my name."

"Ryan," I breathed, unable to look away from his intense gaze.

He shook his head slightly, adding a third finger and stretching me deliciously. "Try again. What do you call me when you're desperate to come?"

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment and arousal. "Daddy," I whispered.

"Louder." His fingers thrust deeper, hitting that perfect spot inside me.

"Daddy!" I cried out, shameless now in my need.

"Good girl," he praised, his tongue flattening against my clit as his fingers worked me mercilessly. "Now let me feel you come on my tongue."

The combination of his skillful mouth, commanding words, and the taboo thrill of our power dynamic sent me spiraling. My thighs clamped around his head as pleasure exploded through me, wave after intense wave.

"That's it, squeeze my head with those gorgeous thighs," he growled, not letting up for a second. "I want to drown in you."

Just as I thought I couldn't take anymore, he sucked hard on my oversensitive bundle of nerves while pressing firmly on that spot inside me. I screamed as a second, more powerful orgasm tore through me, my body convulsing uncontrollably.

Ryan finally pulled away, his chin glistening with my arousal as he crawled up my body. His expression was pure male satisfaction.

"Fucking beautiful," he said, voice thick with desire as he took in my flushed face and heaving chest. "I could feast on your sweet pussy all day."

I lay there, boneless and spent, as he gathered me against his chest. I could feel his hard length pressing against my thigh, but he made no move to seek his own release.

"You didn't..." I trailed off, confused.

"That was just for you," he murmured, pressing a kiss to my temple. "Consider it an appetizer."

His eyes darkened instantly, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you or the baby."

"You won't," I assured him, reaching down to wrap my fingers around his impressive length. "I need you."

A primal growl escaped him as he positioned himself between my spread thighs. "I've dreamt of being back inside you every fucking night."

He pushed in slowly, inch by exquisite inch, stretching me deliciously. We both moaned as he bottomed out, his cock pulsing inside me.

"Fuck, you're tight," he hissed, his forehead pressed against mine. "Like a goddamn glove around me."

I wrapped my legs around his waist, urging him deeper. "Move, please."

He began a torturous rhythm, each stroke deliberate and measured. His eyes never left mine, watching every flicker of pleasure cross my face.

"You belong to me," he growled, his hips snapping forward with more force. "This sweet cunt belongs to me. Say it."

"I'm yours," I gasped, my nails digging into his shoulders as he hit that perfect spot inside me.

"And I'm yours," he countered, surprising me. "Only ever yours, Serena."

The sincerity in his voice nearly undid me. He increased his pace, driving into me with controlled power, one hand sliding between us to circle my clit.

"Come with me this time," he demanded, his movements growing erratic. "Let me feel you squeeze every drop out of me."

I was climbing rapidly toward another peak when the shrill ring of a phone cut through our passionate haze. Ryan cursed viciously but didn't stop his movements.

"Ignore it," he commanded, grinding against me in a way that made me see stars.

The ringing stopped, then immediately started again. With a frustrated groan, Ryan stilled inside me.

"It might be important," I panted, trying to clear the fog of lust from my brain.

He reached for his phone on the nightstand, still buried deep inside me. "This better be fucking life or death," he growled into the device.

The expression that crossed his face told me immediately that something was very wrong. His body tensed, his grip on my hip tightening.

"When?" he demanded, all traces of pleasure vanishing from his features. "I'll be there in twenty."

He hung up, already withdrawing from me with obvious reluctance.

"What's happening?" I asked, pulling the sheet up to cover myself.

Chapter 126: Chapter 126 Sophie brought this on herself

Sophie's POV

I was frozen in terror as Derek's hand clamped over my mouth, dragging me into the dark alley. The cold knife pressed against my cheek twice, making my heart shatter with fear. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

"Sophie Hart," he sneered, his voice dripping with malice. "Long time no see. When you left me to die, did you ever imagine there'd come a day like this?"

I whimpered pathetically, my body already trembling uncontrollably. He wasn't here just for revenge—he wanted something from me.

"I'll uncover your mouth, but don't scream. If you bring trouble, I'll slice up this pretty face of yours." His eyes gleamed dangerously in the dim light. "Without that beautiful face, how will you seduce men anymore?"

God, he knew exactly where to hit. I nodded frantically, desperate for him to remove his sweaty palm from my mouth.

When he finally released me, I gasped for air while he casually played with his switchblade, flicking it open and closed.

"Surprised to see me, Sophie?" His tone was conversational, as if we were old friends meeting for coffee.

I took several deep breaths, trying to calm myself enough to think clearly. "Derek, let's not be hasty. Whatever you want, we can discuss it. No need for violence."

He snorted. "At least you're smart enough to understand the situation. Hand over the money."

Money I could part with—my life was worth more. I quickly pulled a card from my purse and held it out with shaking fingers.

"How much is on this?" He snatched it roughly.

"Three hundred thousand," I forced a placating smile. "It's all yours, brother Derek. Take it."

He pocketed the card but wasn't satisfied. "I suffered because of you, almost lost my fucking life. This pittance? Are you kidding me?"

I inhaled deeply and reluctantly pulled out my wallet. He grabbed it before I could even offer it, clearly intending to take everything.

I bit my lip hard but stayed silent. "Are we good now, brother Derek?"

After examining my wallet, he nodded with satisfaction. "Sophie, this only makes up for a small portion of what you owe me. When I run out, I'll be back for more. Count on it."

He walked away with a smug smile. Once he disappeared from sight, I collapsed to the ground, my legs finally giving out.

Looking at his retreating figure, a flash of deadly hatred crossed my eyes.

I thought he wouldn't come back for me, but I was wrong. A few days later, I was horrified to find Derek barging into my apartment. I was in my nightgown and nearly jumped out of my skin.

"How did you get in?" I gasped.

He snorted dismissively. "I live in the underworld, sweetheart. Picking a lock? Child's play."

I felt despair washing over me. Being targeted by someone like him meant I'd never know peace again.

"Cut the crap, hand over the cash!" He thrust his hand out impatiently.

My body trembled as I tried to sound pitiful. "Brother Derek, I gave you everything last time. I really don't have anything left."

Of course I had more money hidden away—my emergency fund for when things in New York inevitably went south—but I'd rather die than give him that.

Derek didn't believe me for a second and began ransacking my apartment, searching for valuables. Terrified, I discreetly reached for my phone to call for help.

Before I could dial, he lunged at me, snatched the phone, and smashed it to the floor. Without warning, his hand cracked across my face in a vicious slap.

"You fucking bitch, am I being too nice to you?" he snarled.

My cheek burned, swelling immediately as tears sprang to my eyes. I looked pathetic, and I knew it.

"Let me warn you," he growled, "if you dare tell Ryan Blackwood where I am, I'll fucking end you." He paused, roughly grabbing my chin.

"But before I kill you, I'll carve up this pretty face, let you experience what it's like to wish you were dead."

I shook violently as he released me with a shove, sending me crumpling to the floor.

Ignoring my distress, he methodically looted my apartment—jewelry, limited-edition handbags, even two custom designer dresses. Anything valuable disappeared into his greedy hands.

Before leaving, he gave me one last chilling smile. "Sophie, doesn't this feel familiar? When you hired me back then, you paid me to make a mess like this, didn't you? For your little show?"

"How ironic—what was once an act is now reality. Funny how life works out, isn't it?"

He left in high spirits, pleased with his haul. It would fund his debauchery for a while longer.

After he left, I gritted my teeth, finally making the decision I'd been avoiding.

Serena's POV

Ryan pulled away from me, his expression transforming from passionate lover to ruthless businessman in seconds. The phone call had clearly shattered our intimate moment.

"What's happening?" I asked, clutching the sheet to my naked body, suddenly feeling vulnerable.

"It's about Derek," he said tersely, already pulling on his boxer briefs with sharp, efficient movements. "I'm taking some men to check it out."

"Where?" I whispered, watching Ryan dress with military precision. "I want to go with you."

"I can't tell you that," he said, buttoning his shirt with quick fingers. "And you're staying here, where it's safe."

"Why can't you tell me what's happening" I demanded, already sliding my legs over the edge of the bed. "If Derek's involved, I have every right to know."

Ryan sighed heavily, running a hand through his tousled hair. "Sophie says she's been threatened by Derek."

My blood ran cold at the mention of her name. Sophie. The woman who'd pretended to be dead, who'd manipulated Ryan for years, who'd been complicit in my kidnapping.

And now she was claiming to be Derek's victim? Something didn't add up.

"And you believe her? Just like that?"

"I don't know what to believe," Ryan admitted, his jaw tense. "But if Derek is really back, we need to handle it. This affects your safety too."

"Exactly why I'm coming with you," I insisted, already reaching for my clothes despite my growing belly making movements less graceful than before.

"I don't trust Sophie's word. I need to see for myself if it's true."

Ryan watched me dress, his expression darkening with each passing second.

I could practically see the battle raging inside him—protect me by keeping me away, or protect me by keeping me close.

"Serena, think about the baby," he said, his voice softer now.

"I am thinking about our baby," I countered, pulling a sweater over my head. "If Derek is really back, I need to know exactly what we're dealing with. I can't just sit here wondering and worrying."

Ryan's jaw tightened as he watched me, clearly unhappy with my decision. But after a moment of internal struggle, he finally nodded in agreement.

"Fine. But you stay close to me the entire time. If anything feels off—anything at all—we're leaving immediately."

The drive to Sophie's apartment was tense, my mind racing with possibilities. What if this was just another one of her manipulative games? Or worse, what if Derek really had returned? The man who'd smirked as he'd tried to kill me, who'd threatened my unborn child without a flicker of remorse.

Ryan kept one hand on the steering wheel and the other on my thigh, his thumb absently stroking back and forth as if to remind himself I was still there, still safe.

When we arrived at Sophie's apartment, we were both shocked by the scene before us.

Serena's POV

When we arrived, Sophie's normally pristine apartment looked like a hurricane had torn through it. Furniture was overturned, drawers pulled out and emptied onto the floor. Designer clothes were strewn everywhere, and there was a small splatter of blood on the cream carpet.

Sophie herself sat huddled on her couch, mascara streaking down her cheeks, her lip split and swollen. She looked up when we entered, and I couldn't miss how her eyes brightened at the sight of Ryan.

I stared at Sophie's pathetic form huddled on the couch, feeling absolutely zero sympathy wash over me. The mascara streaking down her cheeks, her supposedly split lip—all of it looked more like theater than trauma.

Honestly, whatever trouble she'd found herself in, she probably deserved every bit of it.
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"Oh Ryan," she cried, leaping up and throwing herself into his arms. "I was so scared! He said he'd kill me!"

Ryan awkwardly patted her back, his eyes finding mine over her shoulder. I crossed my arms, trying to ignore the possessive anger flaring in my chest.

"Sophie, tell us exactly what happened," Ryan said firmly, disentangling himself from her grip.

She sniffled dramatically, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. "It was Derek. He came in the middle of the night. He—he said I left him to die, that I owed him. He took everything valuable, said he'd be back for more."

Her voice cracked. "He said he'd carve up my face next time."

"Did he mention anything else?" Ryan pressed. "Anything about his plans, where he's staying?"

Sophie shook her head, then winced as if the movement hurt. "No, just that he needed money. Sophie shook her head, wincing like it hurt. "No, just that he needed money." She paused before adding, "But I bet he'll show up again in a few days."

"How would you know that?" I asked sharply.

She hesitated, clearly caught off-guard by my question, before finally explaining how Derek had been here before—something she'd conveniently failed to mention earlier.

"It's only been a few days since his last visit. He must be gambling again. That's why he keeps coming back for money."

Her guess actually made sense, and Ryan immediately seized on it.

"Send some men to check all the local casinos," he instructed someone on his team. "Don't miss anything."

I'd seen enough of this performance. "We've seen what we came to see. Let's go," I said to Ryan, not even bothering to acknowledge Sophie directly.

Ryan was about to follow me when Sophie grabbed his arm, her fingers digging in desperately. "Ryan, please don't leave me alone here. I'm terrified! What if Derek comes back? He threatened to cut up my face!"

God, I couldn't stomach watching another second of this. I headed straight for the stairs, the bodyguard following close behind me. Let Ryan extract himself from her clutches on his own.

Downstairs in the car, I drummed my fingers impatiently against my thigh.

When Ryan finally slid in beside me five minutes later, I couldn't help the sarcastic comment that slipped out.

"Decided not to stay and comfort your precious Sophie after all?"

Ryan's mouth twitched in irritation. "Serena, I only came here to find out Derek's whereabouts. He's dangerous. If we don't find him quickly, your safety could be at risk."

I glared at him. "You make it sound so noble. Tell me, did you or did you not just comfort Sophie up there?"

Ryan looked exasperated. "Serena..."

"Look, Derek is Sophie's ex-husband. She knows exactly what kind of man he is. This probably isn't the first time he's hit her," I said, unable to hold back. "She made her own bad choices in men, and now she wants you to clean up her mess."

I huffed, turning away to look out the window.

Night had fallen, and exhaustion was creeping in.

Back at Ryan's mansion, I headed straight for the guest room before he could attempt to smooth things over.

I closed the door firmly, ignoring his knocking, and went straight to the bathroom to shower.

When I emerged, the hallway was silent. Good.

I changed into pajamas and checked messages on my phone. The studio was running smoothly—nothing to worry about there. Maya had sent some follow-up information about upcoming orders, just keeping me in the loop.

"How's life at the Blackwood mansion? No fighting, I hope?" her message read.

Leave it to my best friend to predict trouble. I felt a surge of irritation and texted back simply: "No."

I wasn't sure if I was lying to her or to myself.

I put down my phone and prepared for bed when someone knocked at my door again.

"Stop knocking! I'm trying to sleep!" I called out in frustration.

The knocking stopped. "Miss, I've brought your warm milk," came the voice of one of the household staff.

I exhaled slowly. I'd forgotten about my nightly glass of warm milk that helped me sleep.

I opened the door, reaching for the tray. "Thank you."

As I took the glass, Ryan suddenly appeared, blocking the doorway as the staff member discreetly retreated.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

"Serena, are you going to bed? I can't sleep," Ryan said, smoothly sliding into the room and closing the door behind him.

With the milk in my hand, I didn't have the energy to push him out. "What do you want?"

"Don't be angry. I barely spoke to her," he said, moving closer.

"That's not the point. Now get out, I need to rest."

Ryan didn't move, his eyes falling to the milk in my hands. "At least finish your milk first. I'll take the glass back."

I studied him suspiciously, but decided not to overthink it. I drank the milk and handed him the empty glass. "There. Now you can leave."

Chapter 128: Chapter 128 I only have one person I treasure

Ryan's POV

I took the empty glass from Serena's hand, my eyes lingering on the small trace of milk clinging to her upper lip. Without thinking, I reached out and gently brushed it away with my thumb.

She froze at my touch, her breath catching. Before she could protest, I leaned in and captured her lips with mine, tasting the sweetness of the warm milk still lingering there.

I carefully set the glass on the nightstand without breaking our kiss, my body remembering exactly how perfectly she fit against me.

My hand cradled the back of her head, fingers threading through her soft hair as I gradually eased her down onto the bed beneath me.

The air around us thickened with desire, the familiar heat building between us like it always did. When Serena finally came to her senses, she pushed against my chest, creating just enough space to speak.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was breathless, eyes wide.

I couldn't help the small laugh that escaped me as I gentled my movements, tracing my fingers along her jawline. God, I'd missed this—missed her—more than I wanted to admit.

We lay tangled together for several minutes, just holding each other, before finally pulling apart. Her cheeks were flushed a delicious pink, her eyes sparkling in the dim light of the bedroom.

She looked absolutely irresistible, and my body responded accordingly, heat pooling in my lower abdomen.

But I wouldn't push further—not tonight, not with everything going on. Her safety came first.

"Let's get some sleep," she murmured, pushing gently against my chest again, though she made no real effort to escape my arms.

"Alright, sleep," I agreed, pulling her closer instead of letting go. To my surprise, she didn't fight it, just nestled against me with a soft sigh.

We fell asleep like that, wrapped in each other's arms, and I slept better than I had in months.

The next afternoon, my team brought news they'd tracked Derek to an underground casino. I immediately assembled a group to go after him, leaving Serena safely at the mansion under heavy security.

When we burst into the dimly lit gambling den, Derek was in the middle of a hot streak, stacks of chips piled in front of him.

His luck ran out the moment he spotted me—he bolted for a window, disappearing into the maze of back alleys behind the building.

I knew these streets, though. Cutting through a narrow passage, I managed to corner him against a brick wall in a dead-end alleyway.

"Nowhere left to run?" I said, barely winded despite wearing a full suit.

With a few quick moves, I had his arms pinned behind his back, face pressed against the rough brick.

"Mr. Blackwood, please," he whimpered, struggling uselessly. "I swear I'll never bother Miss Serena again, I promise—"

"Shut up," I snapped, reaching for my phone to call in my team. That's when I felt someone behind me.

I spun just in time to avoid a blow, but in that split second, Derek was snatched away by a masked figure in dark clothes. I could only see eyes behind sunglasses and a medical mask—the rest of his face completely obscured.

Something about his build seemed vaguely familiar, though I couldn't place it.

"Let him go. This doesn't concern you," I warned.

The stranger remained silent, already retreating with Derek in tow.

I gave chase, engaging him in hand-to-hand combat that quickly proved he was no amateur—we were evenly matched, trading blows that neither of us could fully land.

Derek seized the opportunity to escape in the confusion, disappearing from sight within seconds.

I managed to land a kick that caused the mystery man to stumble, his collar coming loose to reveal a glimpse of what looked like a tattoo on his neck. Before I could see more, the sounds of my security team approaching echoed through the alley.

The masked man didn't stick around to continue our fight. He turned and vanished around a corner, my men unable to catch him despite my shouted orders to pursue.

Back at my office, I sketched what I remembered of the tattoo—a black butterfly design on the neck, small enough to be concealed by most clothing.

Despite this potentially crucial clue, my team's investigations turned up nothing concrete, just similar designs that didn't match what I'd seen.

I was still brooding over this when Serena appeared in the doorway of my study, her eyes immediately drawn to the sketch on my desk.

"What's that?" she asked, moving closer.

"A tattoo I spotted on the man who helped Derek escape today. It was on his neck," I explained, pointing to the spot on my own neck.

Something flashed across her face—recognition?

"Neck..." she murmured, staring at the drawing.

"Do you recognize it?" I asked sharply.

She shook her head, then nodded, confusing me further.

"Serena, what does that mean?"

"I just remembered something. Lucian has a tattoo on his neck too. I never saw it clearly, though," she said thoughtfully.

My jaw tightened involuntarily. "You've seen Lucian's tattoo? When exactly were you close enough to notice something like that?"

"Don't use that tone with me," she shot back. "We were discussing business once, and his button came undone. I just happened to notice it.

Besides, didn't you tell me yourself that Lucian was someone to watch carefully? So I did."

I nodded reluctantly, thinking back to my confrontation with the masked man. The build and height were similar to Lucian's, now that I considered it.

But what possible connection could exist between the CEO of Celestial Gems and Derek?

"Ryan, I'm just speculating," Serena continued. "Lucian's not exactly simple, but he is the heir to a major corporation. It would be more suspicious if he didn't have some complexity to his character."

"You can't seriously suspect him based on just this," she added, defending him in a way that irked me more than I cared to admit.

I made a dismissive sound. "Whether it's his tattoo or not isn't hard to verify. I'll find out."

"Oh," she said flatly, her tone suddenly dripping with sarcasm. "Since you couldn't catch Derek, doesn't that make things more dangerous now? Aren't you worried about your precious Sophie being threatened?"

I sighed, tucking away the sketch. I'd learned my lesson about engaging with these comments. "I only have one person I treasure—and that's you."

"I'll handle this quickly. In the meantime, please stay here where it's safe. If you absolutely need to go out, take my security team with you. Can you do that for me?"

Serena made a small huffing sound, waving her hand dismissively as she turned and headed downstairs.

I watched her go, fighting the urge to follow. Maybe I was getting better at this—knowing when to let her cool off instead of making things worse. At least I hoped so.

Chapter 129: Chapter 129 It is a trap

Serena's POV

I settled into life as Ryan's pampered houseguest surprisingly quickly.

The Blackwood mansion was like a fortress—I felt completely safe here, with no need to look over my shoulder constantly.

After binging two episodes of some mindless show on the massive living room couch, I felt the couch dip beside me. Ryan had come downstairs, looking annoyingly handsome in his tailored suit.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked, his eyes taking in my sprawled position and the empty snack bowl beside me.

"Immensely," I replied dryly. "Your Netflix subscription is the real MVP here."

He laughed, then leaned down and pressed a soft kiss against my forehead. "I have to head to the office. Try not to burn the place down while I'm gone."

"No promises," I shot back, fighting the warmth spreading through my chest at his casual affection.

After he left, the huge mansion felt oddly lonely around me.

My phone rang—it was Maya.

"Lucian came by the studio today," she said excitedly. "Since you weren't there, he talked to me about his plans. He wants Dreamland Jewelry to host an overseas jewelry exhibition! What do you think?"

"Overseas? A jewelry exhibition?" I sat bolt upright, my heart racing with excitement. This was exactly the kind of opportunity I'd been dreaming of—a chance to break into international markets under the prestigious Celestial Gems banner.

"That was my reaction too," Maya laughed, "but the overseas schedule is really tight. You're pregnant, Serena—can your body handle it?"

"Of course I can handle it! I'd just be attending as the founder. We'll bring extra designers and split the workload. How exhausting could it really be?" I was already calculating all the angles, refusing to consider letting this opportunity slip through my fingers.

"Well, there's still time to think about it. Are you still staying at the Blackwood place?"

I confirmed I was, even as I mentally planned my exit strategy. Derek had already shown himself, and Ryan had people protecting him. Derek wouldn't dare come after me in broad daylight.

If he did try anything, he'd fall right into Ryan's trap. Win-win.

"I'll call you back later," I promised.

"Alright, think it through carefully. This opportunity isn't once-in-a-lifetime or anything. No need to rush."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Talk later." I hung up and headed straight for Ryan's study.

I fired up his computer with practiced ease, searching for information about the upcoming overseas fashion events. Next month was the international Fashion Week—a critical time slot. Lucian must have had his eye on that timing when proposing this collaboration.

After hesitating briefly, I quietly gathered my things, planning to sneak back to the studio for a closer look at Lucian's proposal.

I'd barely made it out the door when the housekeeper caught up with me.

"Mrs. Blackwood, where are you going?" he called after me, sounding genuinely concerned.

"I told you not to call me that," I said with a grimace, shoulders tensing. So much for slipping out unnoticed.

"Then what are you...?"

"Ryan said if I had important business, I could go handle it. He's assigned people to protect me," I explained confidently, mentally adding, *not that I need his permission anyway*.

The housekeeper sighed with relief. "Very well, but please return early."

I didn't respond, just climbed into the waiting car. Sure enough, another vehicle pulled out behind us—Ryan's security detail, no doubt. I rolled my eyes. Subtle.

When I arrived at the studio, Maya nearly jumped out of her skin.

"You're here already? Didn't you just say on the phone you needed time to think?" She stared at me like I'd teleported.

I nodded casually. "I did think—and decided to come see what Lucian left. I assume he left a proposal?"

Maya shook her head at me but handed over the folder Lucian had left behind. "The overall plan is incredibly thorough. We'd barely have to lift a finger."

"And that's exactly what makes me suspicious," I muttered, flipping through the pages. "When have we ever gotten something for nothing?"

The proposal was indeed suspiciously perfect. Every detail meticulously planned, every contingency accounted for.

"It's too perfect," I said, tapping my fingers nervously against the glossy pages.

Maya nodded vigorously. "When things seem too good to be true..."

I sat down, suddenly less certain about this collaboration than I'd been initially.

"Should I just decline for you? Say your health won't allow it?" Maya offered, looking genuinely concerned.

After hesitating, I shook my head. "Let's wait a bit."

"We might have time to wait, but will Lucian be patient? This exhibition plan seems urgent."

"For such an important project, Lucian couldn't possibly have just come up with it on the spot. He must have been planning this for a while. If we don't go, there will be dozens of other studios fighting for the opportunity."

"Don't worry—we might lose out, but Celestial Gems won't suffer either way."

I sighed, deciding not to rush the decision.

"If you put it that way, we can wait," Maya agreed.

We chatted a while longer about my health and recent living situation before she returned to her work.

Ryan's POV

At my company, I quickly received news—not about Lucian, but about my "houseguest."

"Serena went to her studio? With her things? Why didn't the housekeeper stop her?" I demanded, already reaching for my jacket.

"Sir, Miss Quinn said she'd be back shortly, but she's been at the studio this whole time with no sign of leaving."

I sighed almost imperceptibly. This woman was determined to give me gray hairs. "Any news about Lucian?"

"Yes, Lucian went to Dreamland Jewelry this morning to discuss an overseas collaboration."

My assistant provided the details as my expression grew increasingly dark.

"Did Serena agree to it?" I asked sharply, a knot forming in my stomach.

"That's... unclear, sir."

I couldn't sit still any longer. My instincts screamed that this was a trap.

"Get the car. We're going to find Serena."

When I arrived at the studio, Serena was in a meeting. She'd been away from work for too long—there were many matters that needed her attention.

Through the meeting room door, I watched her focused expression, her hands gesturing animatedly as she spoke to her team. The sight of her safe and in her element brought me unexpected relief.

"Mr. Blackwood, perhaps you could wait in her office?" the receptionist suggested nervously. "Ms. Quinn's meeting is rather important."

I nodded and headed straight to her office. The proposal Lucian had left was sitting on her desk. I picked it up, examining it carefully, my expression darkening with each page.

"What are you doing here?" Serena asked, finding me brooding by her desk after her meeting ended.

She wasn't surprised I'd tracked her down, just that I'd done it so quickly.

"Was there some emergency at the studio that required your immediate attention?" I asked coolly, masking my concern with detachment.

She raised an eyebrow. "Is that an interrogation?"

"Is this from Lucian?" I waved the proposal before placing it back on her desk.

She nodded without hesitation. "I'm considering it. The collaboration looks perfect, with almost no downside for Dreamland."

We really were thinking alike on this.

"If it's perfect, what's there to consider?" I asked, my tone lighter now that I knew she was suspicious too.

"That's exactly it—it's too perfect. If what you said about Lucian working with Derek is true, wouldn't I be walking right into their trap by going overseas?"

"So you do have some sense after all." The compliment carried an unmistakable hint of personal affection that earned me a sharp glare from her.

After discussing it together, Serena finally decided to decline the overseas project. Her excuse was straightforward—she didn't have the energy, and Dreamland Jewelry needed to take a break from major projects for a while.

"Miss Quinn, are you absolutely certain? Mr. West genuinely values this collaboration."

Serena sighed dramatically into the phone, feigning deep regret. I had to admire her acting skills—the little pout she added was a nice touch.

"I appreciate Lucian's offer, truly. But the timing simply isn't right. My energy and health can't keep up, and if problems arose later, we'd have no way to make amends."

"I hope Lucian can understand," she added, keeping it brief before saying goodbye and hanging up.

As she set down the phone, our eyes met across the desk. For once, we were completely aligned. The tiny smile she tried to hide told me everything I needed to know.

Chapter 130: Chapter 130 His plan

Author's POV

Lucian's assistant stood at the office doorway, gripping her phone tightly, her face screaming that she was mentally preparing for whatever reaction her news would trigger.

After a deep breath, she knocked softly and stepped in cautiously.

"Mr. West, I've heard back from Dreamland Jewelry. Ms. Quinn said..." Her voice trembled slightly under Lucian's piercing gaze.

Lucian sat in his massive black leather chair, fingers drumming rhythmically against the solid wood desk.

Sunlight slanted through the window, highlighting his cold profile. He glanced up at his assistant, several unsigned contracts spread before him.

"Said what exactly?" His voice was unnervingly calm.

"She said her energy levels and health conditions won't allow her to participate in the overseas collaboration project." The assistant lowered her head, bracing for the storm of her boss's anger.

The office air hung thick for several seconds.

Surprisingly, Lucian showed no irritation. Instead, his lips curved into an enigmatic smile. He swiveled his chair to face the panoramic city view, his back to his confused assistant.

"Mr. West, are you...?" she probed hesitantly, bewildered by his positive reaction to rejection.

"I'm fine. If she declined, so be it. This overseas collaboration isn't exactly urgent." Lucian's fingers tapped lightly on the armrest, seemingly calculating something. "Some things simply can't be rushed."

The assistant nodded, unable to decipher her boss's true thoughts, but clearly this collaboration was just one piece in Lucian's larger scheme.

"By the way, what about that matter I asked you to handle?" Lucian suddenly changed topics, his eyes flashing with razor-sharp intensity.

The assistant snapped back to attention, opening her tablet to report everything she'd discovered about Blackwood Enterprises—recent project progress, supply chain partnerships, market movements, and Ryan Blackwood's personal schedule. Nothing was missed.

"Blackwood recently acquired two tech companies, expanding their smart jewelry division. Also, their contract with Mills Group expires next week, and negotiations for renewal are quite tense right now."

Lucian listened carefully, his long fingers tapping the desk thoughtfully. "Arrange meetings for me with Blackwood's suppliers, especially Mills Group and Thompson Manufacturing."

"Right away, Mr. West." The assistant quickly noted his instructions, though uneasiness crept through her mind.

That evening, Lucian met with representatives from both companies in a private club lounge. After several rounds of drinks, he began discussing his "special project," using generous profits and future partnerships as bait.

"We can offer order prices 20% higher than Blackwood," Lucian said, swirling his amber drink under the soft lights. "Provided, of course, that you're willing to accommodate some... minor adjustments."

The Mills Group representative frowned, setting down his glass hesitantly. "Mr. West, this sounds like contract violation. There would be penalties. Besides, business partnerships thrive on trust, and we've worked with Blackwood for years..."

"I'm not asking you to break trust," Lucian interrupted smoothly, his gaze sharp as ice. "But doesn't your supply chain ever experience delays?"

He leaned forward, his voice dropping low: "If certain crucial components suddenly become 'out of stock,' requiring extra time for import, wouldn't delivery naturally need postponing?"

"During that time, Blackwood's projects can't move forward on schedule, and it's hardly your fault, is it?" Lucian's mouth curved into a cold smile. "After all, these are market fluctuations—uncontrollable factors."

At this point, the two executives exchanged knowing glances. Blackwood might be dangerous to cross, but West's offer was too tempting. Plus, they only needed to create some "accidental delays" to earn handsome rewards. Why not?

"We'd like to hear more about your... suggestions," Thompson Manufacturing's CEO finally spoke, greed glimmering in his eyes.

After the meeting, Lucian stood alone by the floor-to-ceiling windows, staring at the city lights with a cruel smile.

He raised his glass in a silent toast to the distant Ryan Blackwood: "Causing you some trouble occasionally makes for quite an entertaining game."

Over the next few weeks, Lucian meticulously orchestrated a series of disruptive actions. Beyond the "accidental delays" in the supply chain, he frequently competed against Blackwood for the same projects and resources.

Sometimes he deliberately bid well above market price to drive up costs, only to withdraw at the last minute, forcing Blackwood to bear the inflated expenses.

More insidiously, he used intermediaries to spread false rumors about potential problems with certain Blackwood projects, creating investor doubts.

Each move was carefully planned—seemingly unrelated on the surface, yet part of a deliberate strategy.

In Ryan Blackwood's office, tension hung thick in the air. He massaged his temples wearily, his desk buried under urgent reports from various departments.

"Mills has delayed shipment another week. That's the third time," he said, his voice filled with suppressed anger. "And now Thompson's quality control has suddenly raised new issues, claiming our designs need modification or they can't guarantee production quality."

Simon Graves, Ryan's personal assistant, handed him the latest financial report. "Sir, due to supply chain issues, our new product line might miss the Christmas season. Also, the bank has suddenly requested additional guarantees for the East District project financing."

Ryan stood up and walked to the window. This string of "accidents" was too coincidental to be random.

"Someone's messing with us," he said grimly, his jaw tight. "Look into the companies that have been competing with us for projects lately, especially those that suddenly raised prices then pulled out."

Days later, an investigation report appeared on Ryan's desk.

The clues vaguely pointed toward Lucian West—though the evidence was murky, the stack of "coincidences" was highly suspicious.

"Keep digging," Ryan commanded tersely, his gaze hardening. "Track all his recent activities, particularly any connections to Derek."

Meanwhile, someone finally obtained a private photo of Lucian—faintly showing a tattoo on his neck. Ryan examined the blurry image, his suspicions confirmed.

"You're certain this is Lucian West?" he verified repeatedly, his eyes piercing.

"Absolutely. We paid good money to get this from a paparazzo who shot it at his private Manhattan pool." *freewebnovel.com*

Ryan's expression darkened as he braced his hands on the desk. So the masked man in the parking garage really was Lucian West.

What deal existed between Derek and Lucian? Was their target Serena, Blackwood Enterprises, or both?

In the following days, Ryan became engulfed in various crises, holding emergency meetings almost daily, personally resolving one problem after another.

He had to temporarily shelve his investigation into Lucian to focus on the company's urgent issues.

This hectic schedule drastically reduced his time with Serena. Sometimes he'd return home after midnight when she was already asleep; when he left at dawn, she'd still be in bed. Their communication gradually dwindled to hastily scribbled notes and brief phone calls.

It was during this period that Lucian visited Dreamland Studio again, ostensibly to rediscuss overseas collaboration possibilities with Serena, but with hidden motives.

He entered the studio like an elegant yet dangerous leopard, slowly closing in on his prey.