

# CEO's Regret After I Divorced

## - Chapter 131 Sophia's poor performance

*Chapter 131: Chapter 131 Sophia's poor performance*

Serena's POV

I'd been staring at Lucian for too long, trying to process his bizarre proposal. My hand instinctively moved to my swollen belly, feeling the gentle movement beneath.

"Mr. West, I'd genuinely love to collaborate, but as you can see..." I gestured to my pregnant stomach. "I'm pretty far along now. Traveling overseas next month would be risky. If something triggered early labor, that would be a disaster."

This wasn't just an excuse—I genuinely prioritized my babies over any business opportunity, no matter how lucrative. Some risks simply weren't worth taking.

Lucian nodded smoothly. "I completely understand your concerns. However, we could modify the arrangement—promote locally in New York first, then handle the overseas component later when you're ready."

He leaned forward slightly. "Dreamland's logo would feature prominently in all Celestial Gems promotions. I assure you, you won't lose out on this deal."

God, it was tempting. Almost too tempting, which is exactly why alarm bells started ringing in my head.

"Mr. West, I have a question, if you don't mind," I said carefully. "Feel free not to answer if it seems offensive."

Lucian gave a gracious nod. "Of course."

"This is our first collaboration, and truthfully, we barely know each other. Why would you offer such an incredible opportunity to Dreamland specifically?" I tried to sound merely curious rather than suspicious, but the question had been nagging at me.

His lips curved into that enigmatic smile again, the one that never quite reached his eyes.

"So that's what's bothering you. Do you think I have ulterior motives?"

I waved my hands frantically, forcing an awkward laugh. "No, no! I'm just curious, that's all."

"From the beginning, you've been exceptionally supportive of Dreamland. Our collaborations have gone suspiciously smoothly. Is it really just because we deliver satisfactory results?"

Lucian nodded slowly. "You're right. I take special care of suitable business partners."

"Besides," he continued, voice softening, "during our collaboration, I've genuinely been impressed by your talent, Serena. We're friends now, aren't we? Shouldn't I reserve good opportunities for friends?"

His explanation sounded perfectly reasonable, but something felt off. My suspicions only deepened. There was definitely something fishy going on.

Suddenly, Lucian's expression changed. He sighed deeply, lowering his head with an unexpected display of sadness that caught me completely off guard.

Before I could ask what was wrong, he sighed again, more heavily this time.

"The truth is, from the first moment I saw you, you reminded me of someone from my past."

He massaged his temple, offering a bitter smile. "Serena, my behavior must seem strange to you. Showering attention on a business partner you barely know—it looks suspicious, doesn't it?"

"But your every gesture, every movement is so much like—"

My eye twitched involuntarily. Seriously? Was I suddenly trapped in some twisted replacement therapy scenario?

Lucian didn't finish his sentence, just looked up with such profound sorrow that I started panicking he might actually cry.

"Mr. West, please, calm down a bit."

Thank god he wasn't actually crying—I would've had no idea how to handle that.

"Serena, I apologize. I didn't mean to..."

"These memories are in the past, but I still find myself wanting to look after you, which is why I—"

I managed an awkward "oh," finally understanding a bit more. But even with this explanation, there was no way I was accepting his proposal now.

"Mr. West, after I've had my babies, if another opportunity arises, I'd definitely be interested in collaborating."

Lucian sighed. "I suppose that's the only option. I truly didn't consider your circumstances properly."

I forced another uncomfortable laugh, having no idea how to respond. Thankfully, he didn't stay much longer before leaving the studio.

After showing Lucian out, I immediately filled Maya in on everything. Her reaction mirrored mine exactly.

"You've got to be kidding me," she gasped. "Mr. West actually—"

"It's his private business, so I didn't want to pry further," I shrugged. "But it explains a lot about his behavior, doesn't it?"

Maya nodded, then shook her head, clearly processing this revelation.

"Hmm, speaking of which, have you seen Ryan lately? He seems incredibly busy," Maya asked casually.

I confirmed with a sigh that I hadn't. He'd been overwhelmed with work recently.

"No time like the present! The studio's quiet today—why not surprise him?" Maya suggested with her usual directness.

The idea seemed good, so I decided to go for it. What I didn't anticipate was my spectacularly bad timing.

When I arrived at Blackwood Enterprises, Ryan's assistant looked uncomfortable.

"Mr. Blackwood is discussing business matters with Ms. Hart right now. The company's having some project issues."

I nodded. "That's fine, I'll wait here. Don't let me interrupt your work."

The assistant hesitated but got called away by a phone. Since Ryan's office door wasn't completely closed, I couldn't help overhearing their conversation.

At first, Sophie really was discussing business. But after a few sentences, her tone shifted completely.

"Ryan, you look thinner—you've been working so hard. Are you eating properly?"

"I remember your stomach has always been sensitive. You can't keep pushing yourself like this. Let me get you something from that restaurant you like nearby."

Ryan glanced at her. "That won't be necessary. I've already eaten."

Sophie wasn't deterred. She immediately started reminiscing about their past.

"Remember when you worked late, I'd always keep you company in your office? You'd eat properly then, even without an appetite, just because I asked you to."

Her voice had that wistful, almost syrupy tone that made my teeth ache.

"It's only been a few years," she went on softly, "but everything feels so different now."

I clenched my fists, resisting the urge to march in there and tear her apart.

No—I wanted to see how Ryan would handle this. Did he still feel anything for her? Did he still hold on to their past?

"If there's nothing else work-related," Ryan said at last, his tone glacial, "you can leave. I need to get back to work."

A flicker of relief went through me—he wasn't giving her any room. But Sophie... Sophie was nothing if not shameless.

"Ryan, I regret everything so much. If I hadn't experienced those accidents back then, if Kane hadn't—"She paused dramatically. "Couldn't we have had a different ending? Don't I have any place in your heart anymore?"

Sophie actually reached out and grabbed Ryan's arm. The audacity!

"Ryan, is there really no way back to how things were? Has your heart completely forgotten me?"

Ryan pulled his arm away, but before he could respond, I pushed the door open and walked in.

Sophie saw me and immediately looked guilty, her eyes darting nervously.

"Serena! I didn't expect to see you here."

"That's none of your business," I snapped. "I don't need your permission to see Ryan whenever I want."

"Serena, you might be misunderstanding the situation. I—"

The sight of her acting all innocent made me nauseous. And calling me "Serena" with that fake sweetness—who was she trying to fool?

"I'm not misunderstanding anything. I've been standing outside that door for quite a while. I heard everything you said."

I took two steps closer, letting out a cold laugh.

"Has anyone ever told you how shameless you are? Constantly bringing up the past, rehashing old stories—do you enjoy picking through cold leftovers that much?"

"If you truly cared about Ryan, why did you remarry afterward? You made your choices. Why are you suddenly full of regrets now? Where was this attitude before?"

*Chapter 132: Chapter 132 He was about to learn a very painful lesson*

Ryan's POV

I could feel my heart leap when I spotted Serena at the door. Her timing couldn't have been more perfect - saving me from this increasingly uncomfortable situation with Sophie.

Sophie stood there speechless after Serena's takedown, her face draining of all color. She turned to me, her eyes already filling with tears, clearly expecting me to come to her defense.

I merely gave her a brief glance, completely uninterested in her act. Instead, I addressed my wife.

"Serena, what brings you here?" I asked warmly.

"If I hadn't come, I would've missed quite the performance," Serena replied with a sharp edge to her voice. She looked Sophie up and down. "You really should consider a career in acting. What a waste of talent!"

"You—!" Sophie started, clearly struggling to maintain her carefully constructed sweet persona. I could practically see her biting back whatever she really wanted to say.

Serena didn't let up. "Let me make something perfectly clear to you. Stop chasing after Ryan. Even if he's the man I divorced, he still wouldn't be available to you!"

I felt my face drop at her words. Ouch.

"Serena," I said, my tone strained.

She huffed, completely unapologetic. "What? Am I wrong? We're divorced, aren't you technically the man I didn't want anymore?"

I sighed heavily, unable to argue with her technically correct but painful logic. "Alright, enough. Don't get worked up."

Then I turned to Sophie, my voice cooling significantly. "You should leave now."

Sophie's face cycled between multiple shades of red and white. The humiliation of being dismissed so abruptly was clearly not something she was accustomed to.

The way Serena stood there, pregnancy making her even more beautiful, confidence radiating from her - it made me want to pull her into my arms right there.

Meanwhile, Sophie looked pathetic in comparison, and I couldn't believe I'd ever fallen for her act.

"Ryan..." she tried one last time, her voice soft and pleading.

"Leave now," I repeated firmly. "Unless you have actual work to report, don't come to my office again."

Sophie finally left, though not before shooting a venomous glare at Serena. She slammed the door behind her with enough force to rattle the frame.

Serena looked incredibly satisfied with herself, like a cat that just knocked over an expensive vase and felt zero remorse about it.

I moved to her side immediately, gently guiding her to the sofa. My hand instinctively went to her lower back, supporting her.

"You didn't need to get upset," I murmured, helping her sit down. "I would have sent her away regardless."

Her skin was warm beneath my palm, and I couldn't resist letting my touch linger longer than necessary.

"Serena, trust me," I continued, my voice dropping to a more intimate tone. "I have absolutely no intention of having anything to do with Sophie ever again."

I knelt before her, placing my hands on either side of her on the sofa, effectively caging her in. The closeness was intoxicating.

"Is that so?" she challenged, her eyes narrowing. "Then why was she in your office talking about old times and trying to feed you?"

"Business," I replied simply, leaning closer. "Which quickly derailed into her usual tactics."

Serena's scent was driving me crazy - that unique combination of her perfume and something distinctly her. I couldn't help but move closer.

"You know," I whispered, my fingers boldly tracing the curve of her cheek, "seeing you storm in here like an avenging angel was incredibly attractive."

Her breath hitched, and I noticed the subtle dilation of her pupils. Despite her sharp words, her body still responded to mine. **freewebnovel.com**

"Are you saying I'm jealous? I'm not jealous at all," she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

I couldn't help but laugh at her adorable attempt to appear indifferent.

God, she was perfect.

Without warning, I leaned forward and captured her lips with mine. She resisted for just a moment - stubborn as always - before melting against me.

My hand slid up her thigh, underneath her dress, finding that sweet spot between her legs. Even through her underwear, I could feel her warmth.

"Ryan," she gasped against my mouth. "What are you—we're in your office!"

"Doors lock for a reason, sweetheart," I murmured, my fingers slipping past her underwear to find her already wet. "Look how ready you are for me."

Her head fell back as I stroked her, finding that perfect rhythm that always made her fall apart. I watched her face contort with pleasure, her lip caught between her teeth trying to stay quiet.

"Let go, baby," I encouraged, increasing the pressure. "No one will hear you."

When she came around my fingers, clutching my shoulders and burying her face against my neck to muffle her cries, I felt like the king of the fucking world.

"So," I whispered as she came down from her high, "when do I get my full privileges back? When do I get upgraded from ex-husband to current husband again?"

She flushed beautifully, still breathing hard. "That depends on how you behave."

"And how was my behavior just now?" I asked, bringing my fingers to my mouth and tasting her, watching her eyes widen. "Not good enough?"

She glared at me, but there was no heat behind it. I laughed, feeling genuinely happy for the first time in ages.

My fingers gently caressed her swollen belly. "How is he today? Still practicing his kickboxing routines?"

"No, surprisingly quiet today," she said, her expression softening as she placed her hand over mine. "I think he's sleeping."

I pressed a soft kiss to her temple, breathing in her familiar scent. "You know, I've been thinking... we should finalize the nursery this weekend. I've cleared my schedule completely. No calls, no emails, just us."

"Really?" Her eyes lit up. "You've actually cleared your entire weekend?"

"For you and our baby? Always."

She smiled and nodded. "Okay then. This weekend it is."

I didn't let myself get too comfortable with Serena for long—I still had work to finish. Before she left, though, she brought up something concerning.

"I didn't expect Lucian to be using me as some kind of substitute," she said, her brow furrowed in disgust.

I frowned, watching her face carefully. The idea of West seeing her as anything other than herself made my blood boil. How dare he?

"Even if people have similar appearances, they're completely different inside," she continued. "Projecting feelings onto someone else... it's disrespectful to both the original person and the substitute."

"It's pathetic that he'd even try that excuse," I replied, barely containing my contempt.

Any man who couldn't see Serena for the unique, irreplaceable woman she was didn't deserve a second of her time.

She nodded, "I don't understand it, but I'm going to keep my distance from him from now on."

"Looking at me but seeing someone else... it makes my skin crawl."

I laughed softly, relieved at her reaction. "Good. That's exactly right."

I walked her to the door, wishing I could keep her by my side longer. "Go home and rest. Once I've handled everything here, I'll come pick you up from the studio."



She blushed slightly, avoiding my gaze. "That's not necessary. I'll see you later."

I watched her leave, not taking my eyes off her until she disappeared from sight. Only then did I let out a deep breath.

I hadn't told her about the tattoo situation—I didn't want her getting tangled up in this mess. The Lucian problem was mine to handle.

After Serena left, my assistant brought new information about West.

"We've confirmed it, sir. The project issues were indeed Lucian's doing. He bought off our partners."

My face hardened. "Is he deliberately trying to challenge Blackwood Enterprises?"

After a moment's contemplation, I gave my assistant several specific instructions.

First priority: stabilize the company and prevent West from exploiting any vulnerabilities.

Second: teach Celestial Gems a lesson they wouldn't forget. This was my territory, not theirs.

As my assistant left to execute my orders, I allowed myself a cold smile.

West clearly had no idea who he was messing with. If he thought he could target my company—or worse, try to manipulate Serena—he was about to learn a very painful lesson.

*Chapter 133: Chapter 133 I know what you want*

Sophie's POV

I slammed the door to Ryan's office so hard I almost cracked the glass. That bitch Serena. She'd ruined everything! And Ryan...how could he dismiss me like I was nothing?

My perfect plan was falling apart. I'd worn his favorite color, styled my hair exactly how he used to love it, even practiced that soft, vulnerable voice that used to make him melt. But then she had to show up—pregnant and somehow still looking like she owned the place despite being his ex.

My phone rang just as I was storming through the lobby. Unknown number. I almost ignored it, but something made me answer.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end made my knees buckle. I had to grab the wall for support.

"Sophie, you've got some nerve telling Ryan about my business. Very impressive."

I bit my lip, wanting to hang up immediately.

"You better keep listening," he warned, voice dripping with menace. "Or I'll make sure you can't even sleep peacefully at night."

Finding an empty corner where no one could overhear, I finally responded.

"Derek, what do you want?" My voice came out shakier than I intended.

"What do I want? I think you know exactly what I want."

Cold fear spread through my body, making me tremble. Derek had always been my biggest mistake—and my darkest secret.

"I don't have any money left. You took everything last time."

"Not my problem," he sneered. "With that pretty face of yours, getting money should be easy, shouldn't it?"

I struggled to breathe properly, fury and terror mixing inside me. Something about his last escape bothered me.

"I'll get you money, but tell me who helped you escape those two times?"

He laughed coldly. "Sophie, it's better if you don't ask too many questions. Not good for your health."

Something snapped inside me. My eyes hardened. If Derek was determined to ruin my life, I might as well go down fighting. He couldn't control me forever!

"Derek, if you're just threatening me for money, I'm done. I won't give you another cent."

"Threaten my safety all you want," I continued, surprised by my own boldness. "Ryan has people protecting me constantly. The moment you show your face, they'll catch you. Try it if you don't believe me!"

His breathing grew rapid and harsh. He was losing his cool.

"You ungrateful bitch! Don't push me! I can expose everything you've done!"

I scoffed. "Didn't you already try that when you got caught? Ryan didn't believe you, did he?"

Derek slammed something—probably his fist against a wall. I'd caught him in his own trap.

"You little slut. You're really pushing your luck. What if I come slice up that pretty face of yours in the middle of the night?"

"I told you already—show yourself and Ryan's men will grab you. They're waiting for you to make that mistake."

"You—!"

My mind was working quickly now. The tables had turned, and I wasn't in a rush anymore. I could use this situation.

"Derek, think about it. Why not work with me instead? You're obviously desperate for cash—gambling debts again, I'm guessing? Those loan sharks will do worse than Ryan's men if they catch you. Why not sell me some information?"

Silence stretched on the other end. I waited patiently.

After several minutes, Derek finally broke. "Fine. But you can't say it came from me. And I need three hundred thousand today. Non-negotiable."

I hid my satisfaction, calmly bargaining. "One hundred thousand. Not a penny more."

Derek cursed viciously, but I could tell he was desperate enough to accept. He needed that money badly.

"Fine, transfer it immediately!"

"No way. I need valuable information first. Otherwise, I'm just throwing money away."

He cursed me out thoroughly. I ignored it, staying perfectly calm. When someone has leverage over you, sometimes all you can do is endure.

After his tantrum, he finally gave me a name.

"It's Lucian West."

My eyes widened in surprise. Lucian West? The CEO of Celestial Gems?

The collaboration between West's company and Dreamland Studio had been major news in the city. Serena had gained even more recognition because of it. It made my blood boil.

I'd assumed West favored Serena because he wanted her, but apparently, there was more to the story if he was connected to Derek.

"Did you hear me, Sophie? Get my money ready!"

"Yes, yes. I'll have it transferred today."

I hung up, already plotting how to approach West. If I could establish a connection with him, it might lead to unexpected benefits.

As for Derek's payment, I'd send it despite hating to part with the money. Derek was a liability, and even a cornered rabbit will bite. Better to avoid unnecessary trouble.

I spent some time considering my options before returning to my office.

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That afternoon, I paused outside a coffee shop, pretending to be on a call.

"Girl, I'm already here."

"I'll go in and wait for you then. Take your time in that traffic."

"Okay, bye now."

I made a show of complaining after hanging up. "That Mei always keeps me waiting when we meet for coffee. Honestly!"

I fixed my hair before entering the café, unaware that Ryan's men were watching my every move from a black car nearby.

Inside, I went straight upstairs where the private rooms offered better confidentiality.

I quietly gave West's name and was led to the most private room at the back. As I entered, I felt his gaze immediately assessing me.

I deliberately brushed my hair back, showcasing my best features, and smiled warmly.

"Mr. West, I'm Sophie Hart."

West barely acknowledged me with a nod. I sat down, noticing his assistant remained in the room. Clearly, he wasn't planning to leave us alone.

"I wanted to speak with you about Serena," I said directly. I could tell he wasn't one for beating around the bush.

West finally took a sip of his coffee but still didn't respond.

My smile began to feel strained. I hadn't expected him to be this difficult.

Taking a deep breath, I finally revealed my cards. *freewebnovel.com*

"I know you helped Derek escape, Mr. West. I'm here partly out of curiosity about your motives, but also to discuss a potential partnership. I know what you want."

*Chapter 134: Chapter 134 Shattering Their Connection*

Author's POV

Hearing Sophie's words, Lucian West arched an eyebrow, his expression remaining perfectly composed.

Those sharp eyes of his maintained their coolly assessing gaze, as if he were facing prey not worth his concern.

"So Miss Hart wants to discuss a partnership with me?" His voice was deep, tinged with disdain.

"That's right." Sophie sat straight-backed, attempting to project confidence.

Lucian gave a soft snort. "And what exactly do you bring to the table, Miss Hart?"

Sophie's gaze flicked toward the assistant standing in the corner.

Clearly one of Lucian's trusted people, which meant there was no point in being coy. She adjusted her position, trying to take control of the conversation.

"Mr. West, if you're not interested in working with me, then I have no reason to keep your secrets. I wonder how Serena would feel about you if she knew the truth."

Lucian narrowed his eyes, a dangerous glint flashing through them. "Are you threatening me?"

"Mr. West, let's not use such harsh words," Sophie forced a casual smile. "Your special interest in Serena is already gossip around town, but the man by her side is Ryan Blackwood."

Sophie's words carried an unmistakable challenge. The best way to diminish one man was to compare him to a stronger one.

"If Mr. West wants to win Serena, a few business collaborations simply won't be enough."

Lucian gave Sophie a cold look while inwardly mocking her stupidity. He couldn't understand how Ryan had ever been interested in such a foolish woman. Such amateur tactics, yet she dared play games with him.

When Lucian remained silent, Sophie mistook it for hesitation. She continued with her persuasion, fanning the flames.

"You're just a little late to the game, Mr. West. I believe with the right tactics and my cooperation, we could be incredibly effective."

"Is that so? After all this talk, what exactly do you want?" Lucian's voice remained calm but carried an undercurrent of danger.

Sophie's lips curled into a smile, the desire evident in her eyes. "I want Ryan."

Lucian smiled meaningfully. "From what I understand, Miss Hart, although you and Ryan were once together, he now has no interest in you."

Despite being called out so directly, Sophie didn't flinch. She was well-practiced in deception and lies.

"The current situation doesn't matter to me. If Mr. West helps me, wouldn't we both win? Once there's a rift between Serena and Ryan, you can make your move."

Sophie spoke with such ease that Lucian found it almost amusing.

"Mr. West, I've been needing a partner, and with you, my chances would be much better. This is Ryan's territory - fighting alone will take you considerable time. Don't you want to expand your overseas operations?"

Lucian finally gave Sophie a proper look. Though she had misread his intentions, she was hitting all the right points. He needed to move quickly on Ryan's turf.

"A partnership isn't out of the question, but Miss Hart needs to prove her capabilities first."

Sophie's face lit up with a smile. "No problem, but Mr. West must guarantee one thing - keep that mad dog Derek from causing me trouble."

Lucian smiled. "That's easily arranged."

Sophie raised her cup in a small toast to Lucian. "To a fruitful partnership, then."

Lucian nodded, taking a sip of his coffee - his tacit agreement to this dangerous alliance.

After leaving the coffee shop, Sophie finally let out a breath. Working with Lucian was clearly dancing with a tiger, but if Derek continued causing problems, she'd lose everything she had left. The choice was clear in her mind.

"Sir, Sophie can't be trusted, can she?" Lucian's assistant asked quietly.

Lucian scoffed softly. "Even if she can't be trusted, letting her irritate Ryan works in our favor."

"Have someone keep an eye on Sophie, and warn Derek to stop bothering her."

"And remind him I didn't break him out so he could gamble. If he doesn't stop, he can get out of this city. I won't have him interfering with my plans."

The assistant nodded. "I'll take care of it, sir."

Lucian waited until Ryan's men following Sophie had left, then exited the coffee shop. Their meeting had been extremely confidential - he hadn't even arrived in a company car.

Over the next few days, Sophie caused trouble at Blackwood Group, frequently finding excuses to see Ryan. Finally, Ryan lost patience and confronted her.

"Stop these little games. What we had is in the past. If you make Serena misunderstand our relationship again, I won't be so considerate anymore."

Sophie felt deflated but maintained her composure.

"Ryan, I only wanted to show I care. I never meant to make things difficult for you."

"Don't worry, when Serena's around, I absolutely won't disturb you."

Ryan waved his hand impatiently. "Just go."

After leaving Ryan's office, Sophie devised another plan. *freewe&novel.com*

If Ryan wouldn't budge, she'd make Serena jealous and upset instead. In any relationship, the collapse of trust was the most dangerous thing.

If their relationship was really so strong, why hadn't they reconciled yet?

Sophie immediately called her sister Ivy, instructing her to handle a few tasks.

Ivy quickly followed her sister's instructions, gathering some friends to visit the Dreamland jewelry studio. The group wore sunglasses and dressed impressively, making the receptionist initially mistake them for mysterious VIP clients.

"Do you have an appointment? Which designer are you here to see?" the receptionist asked politely.

"Appointment? We're Sophie's friends. She recommended this studio - Ryan ordered lots of jewelry here to please her, so we came to check it out."

The leader removed her sunglasses with an arrogant flourish. She kept mentioning Sophie and dropping Ryan's name, making sure everyone would hear.

The receptionist frowned, completely confused. "Do you actually have an appointment?"

"Are you deaf? We're Sophie's friends. Ryan ordered jewelry here, and we want to see it."

"Mr. Blackwood?" The receptionist's smile was faltering. This made no sense at all.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Blackwood hasn't placed any recent orders with Dreamland. Perhaps there's been a misunderstanding?"

Ivy, standing at the back, jumped in to support the story.

"Misunderstanding? Years ago, Ryan promised my sister he'd order a unique diamond ring from this famous studio as an engagement gift."

The receptionist's eyes widened in disbelief. Everyone at Dreamland knew about Serena and Ryan's relationship. How could there be such explosive history she didn't know about?

"Don't believe me? Look at this!"

Ivy unlocked her phone screen and thrust a photo in front of the receptionist's face.

"See? Aren't these two Ryan and my sister?"

*Chapter 135: Chapter 135 A press conference1*

Author's POV

The receptionist had seen Ryan Blackwood at the studio several times before. His commanding presence was truly unforgettable.

The photo, though taken from what looked like a sneaky angle, clearly showed Ryan as the man in the background.

Ivy deliberately held the phone longer than necessary, her expression growing increasingly smug. She knew rumors spread fastest when they caused chaos.



"See it clearly now? Ryan and Sophie are the real couple. This Serena who suddenly appeared is nothing but a homewrecker!"

The receptionist snapped back to reality, finally realizing these people had come specifically to cause trouble.

"If you don't have an appointment, I'll have to ask you to leave."

Serena was a generous boss who treated her employees exceptionally well, offering benefits unmatched elsewhere. Naturally, the receptionist's first instinct was to protect her.

"Is this how you treat potential customers? Is this Dreamland's idea of customer service?"

Ivy secretly pointed her phone camera at the receptionist, recording everything.

"Without an appointment, Dreamland cannot accommodate you. Please leave."

The receptionist's expression had hardened, though she was still trying to maintain professional courtesy.

When the group continued making a scene, security was called to escort them out.

At the base of Dreamland's tower, , Ivy reviewed the secretly recorded video with satisfaction, a small smile playing on her lips.

The women surrounding her immediately changed their demeanor, crowding her and asking for payment.

Since her reputation as a designer had been tarnished, Ivy had few real friends left. These women were merely hired help.

Still, the performance had gone well, and she was happy to pay. Sophie would cover the expenses anyway.

Finding a quiet corner, Ivy dismissed the women and sent the video to a gossip blogger along with some old photos of Sophie and Ryan.

"Job done. There'll be a bonus in it for you."

"Don't worry, I'll handle this perfectly!" replied the blogger.

The blogger edited the video skillfully, cutting out the group's initial provocations and emphasizing the receptionist's changing expressions.

Half an hour later, the first viral headline appeared:

"DREAMLAND JEWELRY: ELITIST BOUTIQUE REFUSES SERVICE TO 'UNWORTHY' CUSTOMERS!"

An army of paid commenters flooded the post with vicious reviews, each more scathing than the last.

Dreamland's reputation took an immediate hit. As more genuine users joined the conversation, the scandal exploded.

Maya spotted the news while scrolling through her phone and immediately confronted the receptionist.

"I had no idea it would blow up like this," the receptionist explained frantically. "They came in claiming Mr. Blackwood ordered jewelry for some woman named Sophie, then showed photos of them together and said terrible things."

"If you don't believe me, we can check the security footage."

Maya immediately reviewed the surveillance videos, confirming everything the receptionist had described.

"They were clearly here to stir up trouble! Thank God Serena wasn't here or this would have upset her terribly."

Maya had the full security footage uploaded online to clear the air, urging people not to judge based on edited clips.

The PR team immediately began damage control, working to counter the false narrative.

But this was just the beginning. Within an hour, another bombshell headline appeared:

"DREAMLAND FOUNDER SERENA QUINN: THE OTHER WOMAN WHO STOLE RYAN BLACKWOOD? Original girlfriend Sophie Hart allegedly pushed out of the picture!"

The article included several photos of Ryan with Sophie, presented as evidence.

The piece dramatically described how Ryan and Sophie had once been deeply in love, until Serena allegedly seduced Ryan and got pregnant to secure her position.

The term "homewrecker" has always inspired public outrage, and the added suggestion of pregnancy as manipulation quickly inflamed readers' anger.

The two stories combined created a perfect storm against Serena.

"No moral character AND her business treats customers like dirt! Talk about karma!"

"BOYCOTT DREAMLAND JEWELRY! Don't support homewreckers!"

"Ryan and Sophie look so perfect together. How could such a vicious woman come between them?"

"So the other woman becomes a famous designer while the real girlfriend gets pushed aside? What kind of world are we living in? So unfair!"

Lucian West scrolled through the online firestorm, a slight smile playing on his lips.

"This Sophie certainly has some talent," he remarked quietly.

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Serena's POV

The moment Ryan and I stepped onto the stage and took our seats at the long press table, the room erupted into a frenzy—reporters shouting over each other, camera flashes going off like fireworks, and the low hum of livestream feeds buzzing in the background.

I sat down stiffly beside him, keeping my face composed, even as my heart pounded from the sheer chaos of it all. I hadn't agreed to this. Not really. Not like this.

Ryan held up a hand, calm and authoritative. Just like that, the noise began to die down.

"I'll address all your questions," he said, his voice cool and commanding. "But first, let me make a statement."

And of course, they listened. They always did. I watched him command the room with just his presence, feeling a mix of irritation and—damn it—reluctant admiration.

"The purpose of this press conference is simple," Ryan stated firmly, his voice carrying effortlessly through the packed room. "We're here to address the false rumors circulating online."

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair, my lips pursed in annoyance.

What was he thinking? Sure, clearing up the homewrecker accusations was necessary, but a whole press conference?

This felt like he was trying to define our relationship publicly before I'd even agreed to anything. Classic Ryan—making executive decisions about my life without consulting me first.

I hated the way that felt.

*Chapter 136: Chapter 136 A press conference2*

Serena's POV

Then he continued, his admission sending an immediate ripple through the crowd. "Sophie Hart and I did have a relationship, but that was in the past."

The room erupted in a cacophony of voices and camera clicks. I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

Great. Now he was confirming the photos were real, which only made me wonder again why he'd looked at her that way—with an intensity he'd never shown me during our marriage.

"Mr. Blackwood, you've never publicly acknowledged your girlfriends before. Was Sophie special to you?" a reporter shouted.

Another called out, "Was your relationship destroyed by a third party like the rumors suggest?"

"Mr. Blackwood, why did you break up?" **freewebnovel.com**

I shot Ryan a venomous glare as the questions grew increasingly personal. My head was pounding from the noise and the lights and the absolute absurdity of this situation. He caught my glare and calmly tapped the table, commanding silence again.

"Please allow me to finish before asking questions," he said, somehow managing to quiet the room with just those few words. God, how did he do that? The power this man wielded was infuriating.

And then, without warning, he dropped the bomb.

"Serena and I were legally married three years ago. Here's our marriage certificate."

My jaw literally dropped as he pulled our marriage certificate from his pocket. What the actual fuck? I'd thrown mine away the day we divorced—why the hell was he still carrying it around?

"Our marriage lasted three years," Ryan continued while I sat there in shock. "During that time, Serena sacrificed a great deal for me, but I failed to appreciate what we had."

He sighed, pulling out another document—our divorce papers—and placing them next to the marriage certificate. My eyes fixated on those papers, remembering how I'd felt that day, signing away what I thought would be my forever.

"It wasn't until I lost her that I understood what our marriage truly meant to me," he said, his voice softening just enough for me to notice. "I've been trying to win her back ever since."

I sat frozen, my emotions a tangled mess inside me. Was he really saying these things? In front of all these people?

The same man who'd barely acknowledged my existence during our marriage was now declaring he wanted me back?

And yet... despite everything—despite the hurt, the years of silence, the way he used to shut me out—my heart gave the smallest, most infuriating flutter.

I hated that it meant something to me.

But it did.

Hearing those words... it made me happy. Quietly. Deeply. Stupidly.

The room erupted again, journalists scrambling to get closer looks at the documents, shouting questions over each other. The dates and official stamps were clearly visible—undeniable proof that contradicted all the homewrecker narratives.

"Mr. Blackwood, please confirm—was Ms. Quinn really not the other woman?" someone yelled above the noise.

Ryan's expression hardened instantly. "Absolutely not. Serena has never been 'the other woman.' She has never destroyed any relationship. What happened between Sophie and me had nothing to do with her. I want that perfectly clear."

His voice had taken on an icy edge that made even me shiver slightly. I'd rarely seen this side of him during our marriage—this fiercely protective stance.

"This press conference was called to correct the false narrative surrounding Serena and our relationship. For those responsible for spreading these lies, Blackwood Enterprises will pursue legal action. This matter will not be dismissed."

His cold gaze swept across the room, effectively silencing any remaining murmurs. I breathed a small sigh of relief. At least the homewrecker accusations would die down now.

Then Ryan reached for my hand, his fingers warm against my skin. When he smiled at me—a real, genuine smile that reached his eyes—I felt my traitor heart skip a beat.

"Today, besides clearing up these rumors, I also want to do something I've been wanting to do for a long time."

I froze, a sense of foreboding washing over me. No... he wouldn't. Not here. Not now.

The lights suddenly dimmed, leaving just one spotlight shining down on us. Ryan pulled a small box from his pocket and dropped to one knee in front of me.

Camera shutters clicked frantically around us. Whispers filled the darkened room.

"No way... is he using a press conference to propose?"

"I bet this whole scandal was just his ex trying to get attention."

"If they really loved each other, why'd they divorce in the first place?"

"Didn't you hear him? He said he didn't appreciate her until she was gone."

I leaned forward, panic rising in my chest, and whispered urgently, "What are you doing? Get up!"

Ryan shook his head, his expression more determined than I'd ever seen it. He opened the small velvet box, revealing a diamond ring that caught the spotlight and scattered brilliant fragments of light across the room. Gasps rippled through the crowd.

I stared at him wide-eyed, blinking in disbelief. Was he seriously proposing? Here? Now? In front of all these people? My mind raced frantically. If I rejected him, it would be front-page news tomorrow. But I wasn't ready to say yes either. What was I supposed to do?

My heart pounded so loudly I was sure the microphones could pick it up.

*Chapter 137: Chapter 137 An invitation celebration gala from Celestial Gems*

Serena's POV

I felt the velvet box snap shut between my fingers, the satisfying "click" cutting off that blinding diamond sparkle. No way was I falling for this grand gesture crap. Not again. Not in front of all these people with their cameras and hungry eyes waiting to capture my reaction like vultures.

I shoved the box back into Ryan's pocket and yanked him up from his ridiculous kneeling position. My smile never faltered—professionally pleasant and completely disconnected from the absolute hurricane raging inside me.

"I believe the reporters have all heard what needed to be clarified today," I announced smoothly, ignoring Ryan's bewildered expression beside me. "I trust everyone will report the facts accurately going forward."

I swept my gaze across the room, making deliberate eye contact with several journalists whose pens had frozen mid-air.

"The reputation of Dreamland Studio and my personal character are in your hands. As for the private matters between Mr. Blackwood and myself—" I paused, letting my words sink in, "—we won't be taking up any more public resources to discuss them."

I turned slightly toward Ryan, keeping my voice steady despite the hammering of my heart. "I have another commitment. Excuse me."

Before anyone could react, I pushed my way through the crowd of stunned reporters. The shock of my rejection had created a momentary paralysis in the room—perfect for my escape. I heard the commotion start up again behind me, questions being shouted, camera shutters clicking frantically.

I made it halfway down the hallway before hearing Ryan's hurried footsteps catching up. Damn him and his long legs. I quickened my pace, heading straight for the elevator.

"Serena, wait!" His voice echoed down the corridor, tinged with an unfamiliar desperation that almost—almost—made me turn around.

I jabbed the elevator button repeatedly, as if that would make it arrive faster. The doors opened just as Ryan caught up, and we both stepped inside, the tension between us thick enough to cut with a knife.

"What the hell was that?" I hissed once the doors closed, my carefully maintained composure finally cracking.

Ryan ran his hand through his hair, messing up his perfectly styled locks. "I thought—"

"You thought what? That you could ambush me with a proposal during a press conference? That I'd just swoon and say yes with fifty cameras pointed at my face?"

"I wanted to make a statement," he said, his jaw tightening. "To show everyone how serious I am about us."

"There is no 'us,' Ryan!" I snapped, feeling my cheeks flush with anger. "You can't just decide we're getting back together because it suits you now. That's not how relationships work!"

The elevator doors opened to the parking garage, and I strode toward my car with Ryan following closely behind.

"Serena, I'm sorry. I should have discussed it with you first," he admitted, grabbing my wrist gently to stop me. "But I'm not sorry about wanting you back."

I yanked my arm away. "Do you have any idea how humiliating that was? You've turned our relationship into tabloid fodder—again! As if I haven't been through enough public scrutiny these past few days."

His eyes softened. "I was trying to fix that—"

"By creating an even bigger spectacle? Great plan," I scoffed, fumbling for my car keys.

Ryan sighed, leaning against my car. "Let me drive you back. You're upset."

"I'm perfectly capable of driving myself," I said, finally locating my keys. "And I don't need you following me to my office. "

"At least let me explain—"

"Not today, Ryan," I cut him off, sliding into the driver's seat. "I need space."

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I slammed the door shut, refusing to look at him again. But as I started the engine and pulled away, I couldn't help it—I glanced in the rearview mirror.

He hadn't moved.

Just stood there, his tall frame silhouetted against the afternoon light, shoulders tense, eyes full of something between regret and helplessness.

I clenched the steering wheel tighter, jaw locked.

God, why did he always have to look like that?

I told myself I had every right to be angry. And I did. But that didn't stop the ache in my chest or the way my breath caught for just a second too long.

Stupid heart. Always one step behind my head.



When I arrived back at Dreamland Studio, my staff descended like vultures to carrion, their eyes glittering with unrestrained curiosity.

"Ms. Quinn, are you and Mr. Blackwood getting remarried?" Lucy asked, practically bouncing with excitement.

I stared at her, momentarily confused. "How do you—"

"We saw the videos online! It was incredible!" Celeste gushed, completely abandoning her usually reserved demeanor.

"Videos?" My stomach dropped. "Already?"

"They're everywhere!" another designer explained, showing me her phone.

Sure enough, the screen displayed multiple news sites already running the story, complete with video clips of Ryan on one knee and me shutting the ring box. Good lord, the internet moved fast. And so did the commentary.

"This is a homewrecker?" read one popular comment beneath a clip where Ryan looked at me with undisguised adoration. "The man's eyes are practically overflowing with love!"

"She doesn't seem interested in getting back together," another person wrote. "Why else would she turn down such a perfect opportunity?"

"How could anyone think she's the other woman? Are we all blind?" a third comment declared, quickly gaining thousands of likes.

Thank God. The tide was turning—just as Ryan had promised.

It was the only thing that brought me any comfort at the moment.

Before I could fully process the relief, someone from the back of the office let out a whistle.

"That was some real alpha male energy! You have to invite us to the wedding, boss!"

I sighed deeply, thankful I hadn't let Ryan follow me inside. Hearing these comments would only have inflated his already massive ego.

"It was just to clear up the false rumors," I said firmly. "There are absolutely no plans for remarriage."

Their faces fell in collective disappointment, but thankfully Maya swooped in like an avenging angel.

"Don't you all have deadlines to meet? Back to work, now!" she barked, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Once safely in my office with Maya, I expected a reprieve. Instead, her businesslike demeanor instantly transformed, her eyes sparkling with the same gossip-hungry gleam I'd just escaped.

"So, are you really getting back together with him?" she demanded, dropping into the chair across from my desk.

I rolled my eyes so hard it almost hurt. "Seriously? Not you too."

"He obviously staged that whole thing," I continued, slamming my water glass down harder than intended.

"The marriage certificate, the divorce papers, the ring—all of it calculated for maximum effect. Thank God I got out of there before he could corner me into saying yes."

Maya made a skeptical sound in her throat. "I don't know... you didn't look entirely displeased to me. More like you were playing hard to get."

"Don't be ridiculous," I snapped, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. "This isn't some simple misunderstanding. I bet Sophie's behind this whole scandal somehow."

"Actually, I've already started investigating," Maya said, suddenly serious. "The photographer who leaked those photos said it was a man who contacted him, not Sophie."

I frowned, confused. "Not Sophie? Then who would do this?"

Other than Sophie, who else would have any interest in destroying my reputation and business? The list of people who might benefit from my downfall wasn't exactly long.

"We don't have enough evidence yet," Maya said, patting my hand reassuringly. "I'll keep digging. In the meantime, you need to focus on your health and the business."

She reached into her bag and pulled out an elegant cream-colored envelope. "This just arrived from Celestial Gems. It's an invitation to their celebration gala. Our collaborative collection has been incredibly well-received, and they've specifically requested your attendance."

I took the invitation, running my fingers over the embossed lettering as I considered my options.

"If you don't want to go, I can send your regrets," Maya offered. "Someone else from the studio could represent us."

I shook my head. "No, Celestial Gems gave us this opportunity when we needed it most. It would be rude not to attend myself."

"Alright then," Maya nodded. "I'll have Celeste accompany you, just in case you need backup."

"Good idea," I agreed, already dreading the social minefield I'd have to navigate at the gala. After today's public spectacle, I'd be the center of attention whether I wanted it or not.

### *Chapter 138: Chapter 138 Celebration gala*

#### Author's POV

Sophie stared at her phone screen, her eyes narrowing as she watched Ryan's press conference unfold. She hadn't expected him to go this far—kneeling down in front of all those reporters, presenting a ring to Serena, all to publicly defend her reputation.

"Unbelievable," she muttered, watching Ryan's adoring gaze fixed on Serena. The familiar twist of jealousy coiled in her stomach, distorting her features into an ugly grimace.

She couldn't bear to watch Serena's reaction, hitting the pause button before the clip finished. Her perfectly manicured nails dug crescents into her palm as she closed the browser window with a forceful tap.

Finding a secluded corner in the busy café, Sophie quickly dialed Lucian's number, glancing nervously over her shoulder to ensure no one was within earshot.

The call connected after three rings. Lucian's cool, measured voice came through clearly, though Sophie could detect the underlying tension. He too had seen the press conference—Ryan Blackwood's grand public declaration had caught them both off guard.

"Miss Hart, your competence appears to be... lacking," he said, his voice dripping with disdain.

Sophie bit her lip hard enough to taste blood. "Mr. West, Ryan is already investigating this matter. I need you to help cover my tracks."

Lucian responded with a cold, dismissive laugh. "You fail to deliver results and still expect my assistance? On what grounds?"

"This is just the beginning," Sophie insisted, lowering her voice further as a waitress passed by. "Even if Serena manages to weather this scandal, keeping me around will prove useful to you in the future."

"And if Ryan's investigation leads back to me? That wouldn't benefit either of us, would it?"

Sophie's pulse quickened. She knew she couldn't handle Ryan's resources and connections alone. She needed Lucian's protection—needed an ally with enough power to shield her from the inevitable fallout.

After what felt like an eternity, Lucian finally broke the silence. "Very well. I'll extend my assistance this once."

"Thank you, Mr. West," Sophie exhaled with relief. "Next time, I promise I won't disappoint you."

After ending the call, Lucian glanced toward his assistant who stood attentively by his desk, the city skyline stretching out behind them through the floor-to-ceiling windows of his penthouse office.

"Have you taken care of covering Miss Hart's involvement?" he asked, loosening his silk tie slightly.

"Yes, sir. We've redirected the digital trail and paid off the necessary parties."

Lucian nodded, running his finger thoughtfully along the edge of his mahogany desk. "What about the invitation to the celebration gala? Has it been delivered?"

"It has, sir. Miss Quinn will likely attend."

"Good." Lucian's lips curved into a satisfied smile. "Make all the necessary arrangements. This time, we need to ensure Serena moves one step closer to us."

"Understood, Mr. West," his assistant replied with a slight bow, already mentally cataloging the tasks ahead.

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Serena's POV

The night of the celebration gala arrived faster than I expected. Celeste and I got to the venue early, but as soon as we stepped out of the car, I spotted Ryan following close behind us.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise. The invitation hadn't included Blackwood Enterprises at all.

"I wasn't comfortable with you meeting Lucian alone," he said, his eyes scanning the entrance. "So I decided to accompany you."

"Fine, you can come," I conceded, "but this is a celebration gala. Don't pull any ridiculous stunts tonight." I fixed him with my sternest glare. "I mean it."

Perhaps the impromptu proposal attempt at the press conference had traumatized me more than I realized.

I was constantly on edge around Ryan now, terrified he might try another grand public gesture when I least expected it.

Ryan furrowed his brow, looking somewhat hurt, but nodded in agreement nonetheless.

I presented my invitation to the doorman, who examined it carefully before glancing at Ryan with uncertainty. Ryan's face was instantly recognizable in the city - everyone knew who he was.

The doorman seemed conflicted about letting him in when Blackwood Enterprises wasn't on the guest list.

Before the poor man could figure out how to politely refuse entry to one of the most powerful men in the country, Ryan smoothly interjected.

"I'm Miss Quinn's plus one. Essentially part of Dreamland Studio's entourage."

I almost snorted at that. Plus-one? Team member? The man owned half the city!

"That's right," I added, playing along despite myself. "This gala celebrates our successful collaboration. Bringing a guest isn't exactly outrageous."

The doorman wisely decided not to argue with us and waved all three of us inside.

Once in the grand ballroom, Celeste leaned close, whispering, "Damn, Serena. Celestial Gems really went all out. The champagne alone probably costs more than my monthly rent."

I nodded absently, surveying the opulent space with its crystal chandeliers and marble floors. Turning slightly toward Ryan, I asked in a low voice, "Lucian didn't send Blackwood an invitation? That's... interesting."

Ryan made a noncommittal sound, his expression unreadable. I studied his face, searching for clues.

"That's practically unheard of. Nobody in this city dares exclude Blackwood from major events," I pressed. "Is there some bad blood between you two that I should know about?"

Ryan's eyes darkened momentarily as if remembering something unpleasant. Instead of answering, he deflected.

"Let's find somewhere to sit. It's still early."

We found a quiet table in the corner.

Celeste made a speedy exit the moment more guests started arriving. "I see the Vogue editor who featured our collection. I should go say hello," she announced before scurrying away.

With Celeste gone, the atmosphere relaxed slightly.

I sipped my sparkling water, scanning the room. Many familiar faces dotted the crowd, but with Celeste handling the social butterfly role, I felt content to remain in my corner, observing.

I'd grown surprisingly comfortable with avoiding these networking duties lately. Maybe I was getting lazy—or maybe I was just tired of the game.

Several business owners spotted Ryan and approached, eager to make conversation with the elusive Blackwood heir. Ryan maintained his trademark cool demeanor, answering with polite but minimal engagement.

The men dropped increasingly obvious hints about potential partnerships, practically salivating at the opportunity to connect with him.

Ryan cut one particularly persistent man off with a pointed look. "I apologize, but I'm here accompanying Serena tonight. No business talk. Have your assistant contact mine for a proper meeting."

Their attention swiveled to me, eyes widening slightly as they processed this information. They offered hasty compliments about Dreamland's "remarkable growth" and "innovative designs" before retreating.

"That was almost impressive," I murmured once they'd gone. "You actually redirected without completely freezing them out."

Ryan's lips quirked. "I can be diplomatic when necessary."

After what felt like an eternity of small talk and champagne-sipping, the man of the hour finally made his entrance.

Lucian West glided into the room wearing an impeccably tailored white suit that contrasted sharply with his dark features.

He greeted various guests with practiced charm before making a beeline directly toward us. Beside me, I felt Ryan's body tense, his expression cooling several degrees.

I stood to greet Lucian, plastering on my professional smile. "Mr. West, good evening."

Lucian nodded to me before glancing at Ryan. "Mr. Blackwood, your presence tonight truly elevates our humble gathering."

Ryan's lips curved into the barest hint of a smile, remaining seated. "You flatter me, Mr. West. Tonight I'm here as Serena's guest, not as a representative of Blackwood Enterprises."

Something flashed in Lucian's eyes, but he quickly turning to invite me to mingle with the other guests.

I agreed readily enough, but when Lucian extended his arm for me to take, the temperature around Ryan seemed to drop ten degrees. I could practically feel his jealousy radiating like a physical force.

I laughed awkwardly, already sensing the testosterone-fueled tension building. Instead of taking Lucian's arm, I grabbed my drink. "Lead the way, Mr. West."

Lucian recovered gracefully, lowering his arm without comment as we walked together toward the center of the room.

We stood side by side while Lucian gave a brief welcome speech, thanking everyone for coming to celebrate the successful collaboration.

I noticed he barely mentioned Dreamland Studio's contribution, focusing instead on Celestial Gems' "visionary direction" and "market leadership."

The moment the formalities ended, Ryan materialized at my side as if teleported there. I was still chatting with potential clients when I felt his warm presence behind me, a silent but unmistakable claim of ownership.

After his public display at the press conference, everyone in the room knew exactly what was between us—or what Ryan wanted between us, anyway.

"Mr. Blackwood and Ms. Quinn make such a striking couple," one jewelry distributor commented with a knowing smile. "When the happy announcement comes, please don't forget to send an invitation our way."

"Indeed," another chimed in. "The city hasn't seen such an exciting match in years."

"Mr. Blackwood must be quite devoted, accompanying you to a business celebration that isn't even his," added a third with a meaningful look.

Ryan's expression softened at these remarks, clearly pleased by the public acknowledgment of our connection—former connection, I mentally corrected myself.

I forced a smile, offering vague pleasantries before steering the conversation back to business matters.

Ryan stayed silent but remained my shadow, following two steps behind me everywhere I went. I noticed several envious glances from women around the room.

Eventually, Ryan's phone rang with what sounded like an important call. Seeing I was deep in conversation with a potential investor, he gestured that he'd step outside to take it.

When I finished my discussion and realized Ryan had disappeared. Scanning the room, I decided to find Celeste—we needed to coordinate our departure strategy.

As I made my way across the crowded floor, I heard a startled cry behind me.

"Oh my goodness!"

I turned just in time to see a woman stumble on her stiletto heel, sending her half-full glass of red wine flying—directly onto my cream-colored designer dress.