

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

#Chapter 151 Preliminary Round1 - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 151 Preliminary Round1

Chapter 151: Chapter 151 Preliminary Round1

Serena's POV

I returned to my hotel room, my mind still swirling with thoughts about what had just happened. Ethan Quinn's shocked expression and his not-so-subtle way of getting close to me was definitely strange. What was his deal anyway?

After changing out of my formal dress, I finally checked my phone. Five missed calls from Ryan. Damn it. I'd set it to silent mode and completely missed them all.

My heart raced as I immediately called him back. "Ryan, I had my phone on silent, so I didn't see your calls."

There was a brief silence on the other end before he let out an audible sigh of relief. "It's fine. It's getting late, you should get some rest."

"Tomorrow the preliminary round starts," I said, feeling a twinge of guilt. "I might not be able to check your messages right away, but please don't worry. I'll take good care of myself."

"Alright, I understand."

I reassured him a bit more before hanging up. After washing my face, I crawled into bed, but my mind kept replaying that strange interaction with Ethan Quinn.

Something about the way he looked at me felt... familiar somehow. Like he was seeing someone else when he looked at me.

The next morning, I sat patiently as the makeup artist worked on my face, prepping me for the design competition. The preliminary round was about to start, and the atmosphere backstage buzzed with nervous energy.

A staff member brought over the list of competitors for the judges to review beforehand.

"Good morning, Ms. Quinn."

I looked up to see Ethan Quinn standing there. Today he wore a crisp white suit that made him look both elegant and devastatingly handsome. He wasn't just a sponsor; he also had a seat on the judges' panel.

"Good morning," I replied politely before returning my attention to the list.

He smoothly took the seat next to mine, also reviewing the names. I noticed several familiar designers listed – all with established reputations across the country. There were hardly any newcomers, which indicated the competition would be fierce.

I put the list away, mentally preparing myself for the day ahead. The competition would be livestreamed, adding another layer of pressure. I silently hoped everything would go smoothly.

A few minutes later, we judges made our entrance together. The host was doing the opening speech on stage, and the audience applauded enthusiastically. I waved gracefully toward the crowd and cameras, maintaining my professional smile.

Ethan leaned slightly toward me, his voice low. "I heard this is being livestreamed. You might want to smile a bit more, Ms. Serena. It makes you appear more approachable on camera."

I blinked in surprise at his advice, then adjusted my expression. "Thank you for the reminder."

Our whispered exchange was subtle, but I wondered if the cameras caught it.

The preliminary round officially began, with designers taking the stage one after another to present their work and inspiration. As time passed, I provided my professional assessment of each piece. I didn't sugarcoat my opinions, but I made sure to be constructive, offering pathways for improvement even in my criticisms.

After the first half concluded, we took a break. The moment the cameras stopped rolling, I felt my shoulders relax.

"Feeling tired after sitting for so long?" Ethan asked.

His performance as a judge during the first half had actually impressed me. He wasn't just some rich company heir; he clearly knew his stuff. So when he initiated conversation, I didn't brush him off.

"I'm managing," I said, unscrewing my water bottle and taking a sip to soothe my throat.

This competition brought back memories of when I was a contestant myself. The roles were reversed now, but I found the experience enlightening rather than exhausting.

"I've heard your name before," he said, looking genuinely interested, "but I never realized your understanding of design was so profound. Perhaps our companies could collaborate sometime."

The word "collaboration" immediately caught my attention. Business opportunities always did.

"Of course," I replied, perking up. "It would be an honor for Dreamland Studio to work with LUXE Jewelry."

"You're too modest," he said with a smile.

I waved dismissively. "We're probably the same age. Let's drop the formalities—it feels a bit awkward otherwise." I paused, then added, "You can call me Serena."

"Gladly," Ethan replied smoothly.

We chatted a bit more about potential collaboration when a staff member hurried over.

"Ms. Quinn, someone's here to see you."

"To see me?" I stood up, glancing toward the entrance. My heart nearly stopped when I spotted a familiar figure standing there.

Ryan? What the hell was he doing in San Francisco?

He was supposed to be at work in New York!

My body tensed as I stared at him in disbelief. Was something wrong? Had something happened ?

A thousand scenarios raced through my mind as I excused myself from Ethan and made my way toward my unexpected visitor.

"Ryan?" I called out, my voice a mixture of surprise and concern. "What are you doing here?"

The look on his face—equal parts relief and determination—told me everything.

He'd come all this way because he was worried about me.

My heart did a little flip despite myself. Even after everything that had happened between us, he still cared enough to fly across the country just to check on me.

"I needed to make sure you were okay," he said simply, his eyes scanning me from head to toe as if checking for injuries.

I felt a bubble of laughter rise in my throat. "You could've just called again," I said, trying to sound annoyed but failing miserably.

"Calling isn't the same as seeing you in person."

I shook my head, torn between feeling touched and irritated by his overprotectiveness. This man had ignored me throughout our marriage, and now he couldn't stand being away from me for a couple of days?

"Well, as you can see, I'm perfectly fine," I gestured to my pregnant belly. "We all are."

Our eyes met, and for a moment, I felt that old familiar pull.

Damn pregnancy hormones making me emotional. I cleared my throat and glanced back toward the judging area. "I need to get back. The second half is about to start."

"I'll wait," Ryan said firmly. "We can talk after the competition."

I nodded, knowing there was no point arguing with him when he had that determined look in his eyes.

Source:

Chapter 152: Chapter 152 Preliminary Round2

Ryan's POV

I stood in the hallway, waiting patiently as Serena headed off to judge the second half of the competition. I couldn't help but notice that Quinn guy watching her every move.

Something about him bothered me—the way he looked at her seemed too familiar, too interested.

"Mr. Blackwood, would you like to watch from the audience? The view is much better down there," Mr. Brook, the event organizer, approached with an eager smile.

I turned to him, keeping my expression neutral. "That won't be necessary. I have other matters to attend to. Serena is here under your care—I trust you'll ensure everything goes smoothly."

"Of course, Mr. Blackwood! Ms. Quinn is our specially invited judge. Nothing inappropriate will happen, I assure you."

He pulled out a business card from his pocket and handed it to me with both hands.

"I hope we might have the opportunity to collaborate in the future."

I glanced at the card briefly before accepting it. "Fine."

As I walked away, I instructed Simon to order coffee for everyone at the event—judges, staff, and contestants alike. "And get Serena something different. Something without caffeine. A fruit smoothie, perhaps."

"Right away, sir."

I had a meeting scheduled with Stellar Tech across town—a potential partnership that could expand Blackwood's tech division significantly. When I arrived at their headquarters, the CEO's eyes widened at the sight of me.

"Mr. Blackwood, we... we weren't expecting you personally," he stammered, clearly surprised I hadn't sent a representative.

"I happened to be in San Francisco. Seemed efficient to handle this myself."

The meeting went smoothly—better than expected, actually. When business concluded, the CEO attempted to extend our interaction.

"Would you join us for dinner? There's an excellent restaurant nearby."

I checked my watch and shook my head. "Another time, perhaps. I need to pick someone up."

Serena's POV

I barely paid attention during the first half of the competition, too distracted by Ryan's sudden appearance. When we took our intermission break, a staff member approached with drinks.

"Compliments of Mr. Blackwood," she said, handing me a strawberry smoothie while distributing coffees to everyone else.

My heart did a little flip. That thoughtful bastard. He remembered I couldn't have caffeine because of the pregnancy. And the fact that he'd bought different drinks for everyone else—that was definitely his way of marking territory. I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face as I sipped my smoothie.

The second half of the competition proved more exciting than the first, with several renowned designers scheduled to close out the preliminary round. I maintained my straightforward approach, not pulling punches even with the more established names.

"Our next designer is Georgina, recently returned from overseas where she won several prestigious awards. She currently works with Quinn Jewelry," the announcer introduced.

A confident young woman took the stage, presenting her piece with flair.

"Hello everyone, I'm Georgina. Today I present 'Dream Lake Fish.' The dream lake represents utopia, while the fish symbolizes freedom. Only by transcending worldly concerns can one find true happiness."

I examined her piece carefully, my brows furrowing as I studied it. I glanced again at her profile information, then couldn't help shooting a sideways look at Ethan. After all, she was his employee.

Ethan's expression had darkened slightly. He clearly wasn't impressed with Georgina's work either. Despite her poetic explanation and seemingly profound concept, the piece itself was nothing but flashy—all show and no substance. It felt like she was just showing off technical skills without any real heart.

Our eyes met briefly, and Ethan raised an eyebrow. We'd obviously reached the same conclusion.

"Mr. Quinn, what's your assessment?" I asked.

Ethan gave a dry laugh, looking somewhat resigned. "I'll refrain from commenting."

I nodded, understanding his need to avoid any appearance of bias.

"Then I'll—" I began.

"Feel free to speak honestly," he interrupted, clearly not intending to shield his employee from criticism.

When my turn came to speak, I started with the customary pleasantries before shifting tone.

"This piece lacks a distinctive style or charm. Overall, I find it somewhat disappointing," I said directly.

Georgina's smile froze on her face. She clearly hadn't expected such blunt criticism, especially as one of the featured designers.

"I've seen your previous work, which was quite impressive," I added, softening my approach slightly. "Perhaps this competition caught you somewhat unprepared. I look forward to seeing more of your genuine talent in the future."

"I'll continue to work harder," she replied with a tight smile before leaving the stage.

With the preliminaries officially concluded, scores would be tallied and advancement announcements would follow shortly. I checked the time, planning to contact Ryan once I left the stage.

To my surprise, he was already waiting by the backstage door when I arrived.

"Ryan, have you been waiting long?" I asked, feeling an unexpected flutter of happiness.

"Not at all," he replied, a small smile playing on his lips as he reached out to place his hand on my shoulder.

"Let's go."

"Wait a moment. I need to change clothes first," I told him, gesturing to the event outfit that wasn't particularly comfortable.

He nodded, watching as I followed a staff member to the changing room. Even though I tried to maintain my composure, I couldn't deny how nice it felt having him here, waiting for me.

Maybe these pregnancy hormones were making me soft, or maybe I was just tired of fighting against what my heart wanted.

Source:

Chapter 153: Chapter 153 A moment of precious happiness

Author's POV

Ethan coming off stage, clearly intending to greet me, when Georgina intercepted him.

Her eyes were slightly red, looking rather pitiful. "Mr. Quinn, I'm so sorry I messed up the preliminaries," she said.

Being scheduled as the final presenter was already a courtesy from Mr. Brook, considering her connection to Quinn Jewelry. Although the results hadn't been officially announced yet, it was obvious from the scoring that she wouldn't be taking first place.

Ethan glanced at her, his brows furrowing slightly. "Since you know you messed up, prepare better for the next round," he said curtly.

His relationship with Georgina was strictly professional—boss and employee, nothing more. Having offered that brief advice, he attempted to leave.

Georgina wasn't ready to give up though. She stepped closer to him, invading his personal space. "Mr. Quinn, do you also think my work wasn't good enough? I tried so hard. I just didn't expect Lazuli to be so harsh."

Ethan's displeasure visibly increased as he stepped back, clearly uncomfortable with her proximity. "She wasn't being harsh. Look for the reasons in yourself," he replied bluntly. The woman's perfume was overpowering, making him wrinkle his nose in distaste.

Georgina's expression froze, obviously not expecting Ethan to be so unforgiving. "Mr. Quinn, I—"

"Do you have anything else? If not, you should go," he cut her off.

Georgina bit her lip, not daring to detain him further.

After dismissing Georgina, Ethan noticed Serena emerging from the changing room with Ryan. He approached them, greeting both politely.

"Do you have any plans for tonight?" he asked. "I heard from Serena this is her first time in San Francisco. Perhaps I could be your host and treat you both to dinner?"

Ryan glanced at him coolly. "That won't be necessary. I've already made reservations."

Sensing the awkwardness, Serena quickly stepped in to smooth things over. "Mr. Quinn, let's get together another time. Ryan has already booked a restaurant. Thank you for your kind offer."

Ethan nodded. "Alright then. We can discuss potential collaboration another time."

"See you soon," Serena said before leaving with Ryan, her arm linked with his.

Ethan remained standing there, his gaze following them as they walked away. He truly had no ulterior motives—he only wanted to befriend Serena because, for some reason, she bore a striking resemblance to the Quinn family.

Georgina watched the entire exchange with cold eyes, taking in every detail, her face filled with resentment and jealousy. She had worked at Quinn Jewelry for years and had never seen Ethan treat any woman with such warmth and civility.

What was so special about this Serena Quinn?

"Miss Georgina, the results are out," her assistant said cautiously, clearly afraid to deliver what was obviously bad news. "And the online response is also..."

"Is also what?" Georgina snapped irritably, snatching the assistant's phone. "Never mind, I'll look myself."

As she scanned the screen, her expression darkened considerably.

[S City's rising designer Georgina flops unexpectedly, going from potential winner to mere supporting role.]

[Stop defending her—wasn't her skill level obvious in the preliminaries?]

[Are you claiming to be more professional than Lazuli?]

[When someone's skills aren't up to par, it shows immediately in competition. That's what happens with Quinn Jewelry's overrated designers.]

[This clearly shows how fair and honest Lazuli is with her critiques.]

"That Lazuli again!" Georgina hissed through clenched teeth. This competition was supposed to elevate her career to the next level, but instead, it had backfired completely.

"Miss Georgina, please don't be upset. We should head back and focus on preparing for the next round," her assistant urged anxiously.

They were still in the organizer's backstage area—if Georgina lost control of her emotions and someone captured it on camera, the situation would only get worse.

The online response was already negative; they couldn't afford another mistake.

Georgina's chest heaved as she struggled to contain her frustration. "Let's go," she finally managed to say.

Serena's POV

I let out a big yawn as I collapsed against Ryan's shoulder in the car, pretending to doze off. The competition had taken more out of me than I'd expected.

Ryan sighed softly, his voice tinged with that protective concern I'd grown so accustomed to. "You're exhausted, aren't you? I knew you shouldn't have accepted this event."

"I'm fine," I mumbled lazily, not even bothering to open my eyes. "Just resting for a minute."

There was a brief pause before he asked, "What's the deal with that Ethan Quinn?"

"What deal?" I kept my eyes closed, which earned me a displeased little grunt from Ryan.

"You two just met, yet he seems quite eager to get close to you."

I couldn't help but laugh softly. "Are you seriously jealous? He's younger than me, and he was only interested in discussing potential collaboration."

Ryan made a noncommittal "Oh" and dropped the subject, thankfully.

When we finally reached the restaurant, I opened my eyes and gasped at the breathtaking view. "Wow!" The restaurant sat right on the oceanfront, where you could hear the waves crashing against the shore through the windows. Utterly romantic.

"This is gorgeous!" I exclaimed, pressing closer to the window.

Ryan's lips curled into a satisfied smile as he watched my reaction. "I heard the food's excellent too."

I rubbed my hands together in excitement, my eyes sparkling. "Then I better dig in properly!"

Halfway through our meal, Maya called to check on me. I couldn't help the happy smile that spread across my face as I glanced at Ryan sitting across from me.

"I'm fine, don't worry. Ryan's here in San Francisco on business, and we're having dinner together right now," I told her.

Maya's voice took on that teasing tone I knew so well. "Ahhh, I watched the design competition livestream. No wonder you sound so chipper—you've got company! That makes me feel much better."

"The internet is going crazy for you right now. Everyone's calling you the brutally honest judge. You've gone viral!"

I raised an eyebrow, genuinely surprised. "Viral?"

"Don't tell me you haven't seen it yet! Too busy being all lovey-dovey, I guess. Anyway, I'll let you get back to your dinner. Call me if you need anything."

"Sure thing," I said before hanging up.

Immediately, I checked the trending topics online. Several were about me, with the engagement numbers climbing rapidly. I clicked on one and scrolled through the comments—all overwhelmingly positive.

Grinning, I turned my phone toward Ryan. "Look! Everyone's praising me. Guess participating in this design competition was worth it after all."

Ryan barely glanced at the screen. "I know. I've already seen them."

I knew that look. If there had been any negative comments, he would have had them buried immediately. Still, I feigned surprise. "You saw and didn't tell me?"

Ryan placed a perfectly peeled shrimp on my plate before handing it to me. "You've always been exceptional. Nothing new to report." He nodded toward my food. "Eat up."

San Francisco's seafood was incredible. I hated dealing with shrimp shells, but Ryan didn't mind doing it for me.

After our feast, I suggested walking along the beach—it seemed a waste not to when we were so close. Ryan didn't protest, just slipped his jacket off and draped it over my shoulders.

"The beach gets cold at night," he warned.

"I'll be fine. Let's go!" I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the shoreline.

The sea breeze was indeed stronger than I'd expected, whipping my hair in all directions. Thankfully, Ryan's jacket kept the worst of the chill at bay.

"San Francisco is beautiful," I remarked, taking in the moonlit waves.

Ryan hummed in agreement, reaching over to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Weren't you tired earlier? We should head back so you can rest."

"Don't be such a killjoy," I clicked my tongue. "Let's take some photos before we go."

I pulled out my phone and adjusted the angle. Ryan's expression was stoic as usual, but he moved closer when I asked.

"Come on, smile," I coaxed softly.

Ryan's arm slid around my waist as his lips curved into a rare smile. The moment captured perfectly on my phone screen made my heart flutter.

"Perfect," I said, admiring the photo. "Now we can head back."

As I set the picture as my phone wallpaper, I couldn't help feeling that this moment—this happiness—was something truly precious.

Source:

Chapter 154: Chapter 154 The interview was interrupted

Serena's POV

After our beach stroll the night before, I'd barely had time to catch my breath. The competition organizers weren't about to let their newly viral judge lounge around—they'd scheduled back-to-back activities and interviews for the next two days before the finals.

Online buzz about the design competition was exploding, and apparently I was dominating at least half the trending topics. So much for any hope of downtime.

Ryan had come to San Francisco specifically to accompany me, which meant he was backstage for every single one of these exhausting events. We weren't exactly hiding our closeness, either. His hand would rest casually on the small of my back, or he'd brush hair from my face without a second thought about who might be watching.

I could hear the whispers from the production staff whenever we passed by.

"I heard she's his ex-wife. They supposedly divorced because of relationship problems, but look at them now..."

"You know how these wealthy families operate—it's like diving into the deep end. Unless they come out and tell us what's really going on, we'll never know."

"They make such a power couple though. A successful businesswoman and a CEO—they're perfectly matched."

"Do you think those kids she has might actually be his...?"

The rumors flew wild, but nobody dared approach Ryan directly. When he wasn't with me, his face screamed "KEEP AWAY" in bold capital letters. Only around me did that intimidating exterior soften.

I had just finished another event and headed backstage to change when Ryan followed me in. I could feel his eyes scanning my face, his brow furrowing when he noticed my pallor.

"Are you tired?" His voice carried that concern I was growing reaccustomed to.

I took a sip of water and sighed deeply. "Just been sitting too long. I'll be fine after a short break."

The weather was uncomfortably hot today, and this backstage area had no air conditioning. The combination of the stuffy atmosphere and my heavy outfit was making me feel slightly lightheaded.

"No, I'm taking you back to rest," Ryan declared, his tone brooking no argument.

I shook my head. "I have another interview in a few minutes. It'll be quick—just a few minutes—then I can go back and rest. I already promised Mr. Brook I'd do it."

Ryan's face hardened with displeasure, but seeing my determination, he reluctantly backed down.

I decided against changing into the outfit the organizers had prepared, sticking with my more comfortable clothes instead.

The makeup artist dabbed extra blush on my cheeks to hide how pale I looked.

Before I headed onstage, Ryan caught my arm, his expression deadly serious. "Remember—just a few minutes. If you start feeling unwell, you tell them immediately."

"Don't worry," I smiled, trying to reassure him. "I'm perfectly fine right now."

The interview started pleasantly enough. The questions were standard and predictable—the kind I could answer in my sleep without having to think too hard. Wearing my casual clothes actually helped me feel more relaxed in front of the cameras.

But after a few softball questions, things took an uncomfortable turn when one reporter decided to dig into my personal life.

"Ms. Quinn, we've heard you have a special 'Knight' personally escorting you during this event. There are even photos circulating. Should we expect happy news soon?" The reporter didn't directly name Ryan, clearly aware they were treading dangerous ground, instead using a playful euphemism.

I froze momentarily. I've never enjoyed putting my private affairs on public display. Besides, this interview was supposed to focus on the competition—this question was completely out of bounds.

Maintaining a polite smile, I tried to redirect. "Life is full of uncertainties. You never know what might happen next—just like this competition. No one can predict who'll take home the final prize."

"So you're saying you have no immediate plans to remarry?" the reporter pressed, completely twisting my words.

My smile stiffened. I'd been patiently enduring this final interview, and now this? Before I could respond, other reporters jumped in with their own invasive questions.

"Ms. Quinn, rumor has it you have more than one admirer in attendance..."

"Ms. Quinn, you've unexpectedly gone viral as a judge. Was this a deliberate marketing strategy?"

The malicious questions came like bullets, making my head spin. I felt my eyebrows knitting together as my chest tightened uncomfortably.

Suddenly, there was movement at the edge of the crowd. "Excuse me. Move aside." Ryan's commanding voice cut through the chaos as he pushed through the reporters, reaching for my hand and pulling me up without ceremony.

Camera flashes exploded around us, lenses all turning toward Ryan, who couldn't have cared less. My head was getting fuzzy, and the tightness in my chest was getting worse.

Being surrounded by so many people wasn't helping.

He led me away from the stage, effectively cutting the interview short.

I faltered for a moment, glancing back at the stunned reporters and staff.

"This isn't right..." I murmured, guilt blooming in my chest. "The interview—"

Ryan didn't even slow down. "Your health comes first," he said firmly. "I'll handle the rest."

Something in his tone—calm, unwavering—made my resistance crumble. I let my weight lean into him, resting my head lightly against his shoulder.

Maybe he was right.

I shouldn't have pushed myself this far.

I should have listened to Ryan.

I shouldn't have pushed myself.

Once we reached the backstage area, Mr. Brook rushed over, looking panicked. The abruptly terminated interview would not only disrupt their schedule but could also invite malicious speculation.

"Mr. Blackwood, is Ms. Quinn—"

My face must have been ghostly pale by now as I leaned weakly against Ryan's chest.

"She's not feeling well," Ryan cut him off coldly. "Don't schedule any more of these interviews for her."

Without warning, Ryan scooped me into his arms and shot Mr. Brook a glacial look. "I don't want to see anything from that interview online. Handle it."

The warning in his voice was unmistakable as he carried me away, leaving behind a wake of whispers.

"Did you see how concerned Mr. Blackwood looked? He really cares about her!"

"Talk about a man who'd move mountains for his woman—I'm swooning!"

"That interview's definitely toast. Guess we're working overtime again."

"The life of a working stiff is so hard..."

Ryan carried me to the car and immediately instructed the driver to take us to the hospital.

"No," I shook my head against his chest. "That's unnecessary. I'm just exhausted. Let's go back to the hotel."

After a moment of hesitation, Ryan reluctantly agreed, his jaw still tense with worry as he held me close.

After returning to our hotel, I felt the exhaustion washing over me like a tidal wave. Ryan carefully placed me on the bed, his eyes never leaving my face as he studied every flicker of discomfort.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked, brushing hair from my forehead with gentle fingers.

I managed a weak smile. "Better. Just tired."

While Ryan was calling room service to order some food, I checked my phone and winced. Social media was blowing up with news about the aborted interview, with wild speculation running rampant.

"Put that away," Ryan commanded when he noticed what I was doing. "You need rest, not more stress."

I sighed and set the phone aside. "The finals are tomorrow. I can't just disappear."

"You can and you will if necessary." His tone left no room for argument. "Your health comes first."

As I dozed off, I felt Ryan's weight settle beside me on the bed, his hand gently stroking my hair. The comfort of his presence lulled me into a deep sleep.

Source:

Chapter 155: Chapter 155 The rumour of being two-timing

Author's POV

Back at LUXE Jewelry Company, Georgina was frantically reworking her competition piece. She'd consulted several colleagues and finally felt satisfied with her design.

After tidying up her workspace, she checked her phone, scowling at the latest news about Serena. The competition organizers had apparently arranged special activities and interviews for me, and pictures showed me looking radiant, surrounded by admirers.

Georgina bit her lip in frustration and immediately called her assistant.

"Didn't I tell you to dig up dirt on this 'Lazuli' woman? Have you found anything yet?" she snapped.

Her assistant trembled slightly. To the outside world, Georgina was a gentle, sophisticated designer. Only those close to her knew about her volatile temper and how she leveraged her family's connections to boost her career.

"I'm sorry, Georgina, but her past is incredibly well-guarded. I couldn't find anything substantial."

Georgina glared at her assistant. "You can't even handle this simple task? How am I supposed to clear my name without something to take her down?"

She checked the time, realizing Serena's interviews must have concluded. A malicious idea formed in her mind.

"Contact the reporters who interviewed Serena today. Buy a negative trending topic about her."

She explained her plan in detail. "Do you understand?"

Her assistant nodded. "Yes, completely."

"Then get to it! I want to see those negative topics trending by tonight. The semifinals are the day after tomorrow, and I'm running out of time."

After her assistant hurried out, Georgina took several deep breaths to calm herself. She gathered her design drafts and headed to Ethan Quinn's office.

"Knock, knock."

Ethan didn't look up, still focused on his work. "Come in."

Georgina entered with a practiced smile. "Mr. Quinn, it's me."

Ethan glanced up briefly. "Do you need something?"

Georgina nodded, pushing her draft toward him. "I'm worried about embarrassing the company in the semifinals, so I wanted you to review my work first. If anything doesn't look right, I can still fix it."

Her voice was honey-sweet as she leaned closer to him while passing the draft.

Ethan scanned the design and his expression darkened. "Review it? For what purpose exactly?"

Oblivious to his displeasure, Georgina began explaining her design. "Mr. Quinn, for this piece, I drew inspiration from—"

Ethan impatiently tapped the desk, cutting her off. "Do you realize what you're doing? I'm a judge for this design competition. Showing me your draft beforehand is completely against the rules."

Georgina's smile froze, but she scrambled for an excuse. "You misunderstood, Mr. Quinn. I just wanted to share my ideas with you. After my poor performance in the preliminaries, I feel so guilty..."

"Enough, Georgina. As a designer for LUXE, can't you use your brain for once?"

Georgina's eyes welled with tears, looking wounded. "Mr. Quinn, you're misunderstanding my intentions..."

"Take your draft and get out of my office."

Ethan coldly dismissed her, returning to his work. Georgina sniffled but didn't leave immediately.

"Are you disappointed in me, Mr. Quinn? You used to praise my work."

Ethan sighed wearily and looked up at her again. "I've praised every designer at LUXE. If you lacked talent, you wouldn't be working here."

"Georgina, are you reading too much into things?"

Ethan wasn't stupid. Georgina constantly found excuses to visit his office, making small talk. There could only be one explanation – attraction.

"Unless it's work-related, please stop coming to my office. I'm busy. Now leave."

Georgina's expression turned ugly, her facade of sweetness crumbling completely.

Ethan had always been cordial to her before. It was all because of this damn competition! If she hadn't participated, she wouldn't be in this position now!

Georgina returned to her office with her head down, tearing her draft to shreds. If Ethan didn't appreciate her work, what was the point in keeping it?

Her phone rang – a message from her assistant.

[Georgina, I found the reporters, but the organizers have deleted all photos and videos from the interview.]

Georgina immediately called back. "What do you mean 'deleted'?"

"The entire interview with Serena Quinn – no photos or videos were kept. The organizers seem to have scrapped it completely."

Georgina laughed coldly. "You idiot, don't you see? If there wasn't something sketchy happening, why would they delete everything?"

"Some reporters keep backups. If the price is right, we can get it."

Her assistant promised to try again, and Georgina hung up with a sinister smile.

Eventually, her assistant couldn't find the complete video, but managed to purchase some clips and photos from an entertainment reporter at a steep price.

"This is all I could get," the assistant said, handing over the material.

Georgina watched the video eagerly. The first few minutes contained standard official questions, but around the three-minute mark, there was a turning point.

In the footage, she visibly tensed when asked about remarriage. Georgina paused the video and gestured for her assistant to come look.

"Enlarge this part and claim that 'Lazuli' was being a diva during the interview."

Her assistant nodded. "I understand."

"Pay attention. I shouldn't have to explain everything. You're so troublesome."

Georgina glared at her assistant. If the woman wasn't so discreet and obedient, she'd have replaced her long ago.

As the video continued playing, the questions became increasingly aggressive.

"Replace these questions with the earlier official ones. That way, her diva behavior will seem even more outrageous by comparison."

The final part showed Ryan pushing through the crowd and taking she away.

Georgina's eyes lit up as she snickered. "Such devotion between husband and wife. How did they ever end up divorced?"

Looking through the remaining photos, she found one showing Ethan and Serena chatting backstage, both smiling warmly.

Georgina's face darkened instantly. She slammed her laptop shut with a loud bang, startling her assistant.

"What's wrong, Georgina?"

She snorted. "Where did you get these ridiculous photos?"

Her assistant pouted – just moments ago, Georgina had been watching with excitement.

"Never mind. Just go handle it," Georgina said, removing the USB drive and handing it over.

As her assistant was leaving, Georgina called her back.

"Wait. Include that photo of Ethan Quinn and Serena. Say she's playing both men, not responding to her ex-husband while also trying to curry favor with powerful figures."

The assistant hesitated. "Georgina, that's our boss. Are you sure about this?"

"Just do what I tell you! Why all these questions?"

Georgina rolled her eyes impatiently. The assistant didn't dare argue further and simply agreed.

"Do this properly and discreetly. I'll add a bonus to your paycheck this month. Just make sure no one traces it back to us!"

"I understand, Georgina."

After leaving the office, the assistant sighed heavily. If her mother wasn't seriously ill and in need of money, she wouldn't compromise her conscience by working for Georgina.

The verbal abuse was nothing compared to Georgina's increasingly reckless behavior – now even targeting Ethan Quinn. If discovered, she'd certainly be fired.

After a moment's hesitation, the assistant still chose the bonus. She edited the video maliciously and sent it to her regular tabloid contact with specific instructions:

[Remember to blur faces. Don't let anyone trace this back to you.]

She then transferred the agreed payment.

The trending topic appeared at midnight when most involved parties were asleep, though bored internet users were still active. Ryan's and Ethan's faces were blurred – they were too powerful to target directly.

Serena was the main target, with numerous paid trolls piling on with malicious comments:

[She's got it made – catching men even while heavily pregnant.]

[Why blur the faces? That's obviously CEO Blackwood and the Quinn heir.]

[An ex-husband and a current flame? Serena Quinn, you're living the dream!]

[Can't you read? The headline says she's two-timing. Did you even finish elementary school?]

Serena's POV

When I finally checked my messages after breakfast, I was already trending online—for all the wrong reasons.

"What now?" I muttered, scrolling through my notifications until I found the gossip headline:

[Lazuli caught two-timing, shows diva behavior during interview. Her brain-dead fans still defend her.]

I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow as I skimmed through the comments. Surprisingly, most people were actually defending me against these accusations. Still, the "two-timing" part left me genuinely confused.

"Ryan," I turned to him as he sipped his coffee across the breakfast table, "have I developed some secret love life I'm not aware of?"

Ryan glanced up from his phone, his eyes cool but amused. "What about Ethan Quinn? Doesn't he count?"

I burst into laughter at the absurdity. "These people are unbelievable! Ethan and I barely know each other. Wonder what he'll think when he sees this nonsense."

I tossed my phone aside, completely unbothered by the malicious rumors. They didn't deserve my energy or attention. Ryan's expression remained neutral, clearly not threatened by these ridiculous claims either.

I suppose this is the price of sudden internet fame—people inventing drama where none exists. The worst comments were already being buried under supportive ones anyway.

Ryan didn't comment further, but I caught him sending a quick text.

Knowing him, he was probably already having someone trace the source of this hit piece and let his people handle the investigation quietly.

Whatever desperate person started this rumor clearly didn't know who they were messing with.

Between Ryan's resources and my growing supporter base online, this would blow over faster than yesterday's interview fiasco.

Source:

Chapter 156: Chapter 156 How's the investigation going?

Author's POV

Meanwhile, Ethan Quinn was fuming. He never imagined his photo would be dragged into some tawdry scandal.

Worse still, his face had been blurred out!

"Find out who's behind this," he snapped, his anger filling the office. "Who dares smear my name in San Francisco?"

His assistant quickly agreed, not daring to waste time before rushing off to investigate.

Across town, Georgina sat staring at her screen with a face like thunder, refreshing the page repeatedly.

"What's going on? Why can't I find any of yesterday's news stories?" she demanded, hurling a nearby object at her assistant.

The assistant suppressed a groan of pain, not daring to dodge. She simply endured the abuse.

"How incompetent are you?" Georgina snarled.

"Ms. Georgina, last night's campaign was actually quite effective, but early this morning, everything got suppressed," the assistant explained timidly.

"I asked around, and someone must have—"

Georgina slammed her hand on the desk. "It shouldn't happen this fast! Did you not pay enough?"

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Or did you pocket the money yourself?"

The assistant looked up, frantically shaking her head. "Sister Georgina, I swear I didn't take anything. Please don't accuse me wrongly."

"Everyone knows your family needs money. If I hadn't taken you in, you'd probably be sleeping on the streets by now. And this is how you repay me? By stabbing me in the back?"

Georgina stood up and violently shoved her assistant, who stumbled backward, nearly falling. The woman bore the abuse silently, head bowed, too afraid to express her anger.

Not satisfied, Georgina grabbed a ruler from her desk and struck her assistant, the sharp crack echoing in the office.

"That's what you get for your incompetence!"

She continued her assault, cursing with each blow. The assistant tried dodging at first but eventually just stood there, numb to the pain.

"Knock knock—"

The sound at the door interrupted the scene. Georgina quickly tossed the ruler aside, plastered on a smile, and went to answer.

Ethan's assistant stood outside, there to inform her about the semifinals.

"Designer Cloud, the semifinal schedule has been confirmed. Please have your work ready before 2 PM."

Georgina's smile widened. "Of course. Please tell Mr. Quinn that I'll definitely make a splash in this round."

The assistant nodded curtly, his gaze briefly drifting to the woman standing behind Georgina.

"I'll be going now."

"Wait," Georgina called, grabbing a small bag from her desk and holding it out. "These are pastries from my family's kitchen. Could you give them to Mr. Quinn? I remember he enjoys sweets."

The assistant accepted the gift, nodded, and left.

Once the door closed, Georgina's expression darkened again, though she didn't resume her physical abuse.

"Find a solution immediately," she hissed. "I don't care how. We spent too much money on this news story for it to just disappear."

"The semifinals are this afternoon. Contact the paparazzi to smear Serena during the livestream."

"I refuse to believe a mere designer has this much power to shut things down."

"Knock knock—"

Georgina jumped at the sound, her tirade interrupted. The office had decent soundproofing, but not perfect—someone might have overheard.

She cleared her throat nervously before opening the door.

Ethan's assistant stood there again, holding out the bag of pastries.

"Designer Georgina, I apologize, but you're mistaken. Mr. Quinn doesn't enjoy overly sweet foods. I'm returning these to you."

Georgina laughed awkwardly but didn't take the bag.

"These aren't too sweet, they're quite fragrant. If he just tries them, he'll see. It's just a small token of my appreciation."

The assistant's cold gaze swept over her, making Georgina increasingly uncomfortable.

Not wanting to prolong the awkward exchange, she finally accepted the bag back.

"If Mr. Quinn doesn't want them, I won't insist. Thank you for your trouble."

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, she closed the door again.

The assistant pondered for a moment before returning to Ethan's office.

"How's the investigation going?" Ethan asked irritably. Even though the news had been suppressed, he still felt annoyed by the whole situation.

"Sir, we've identified the paparazzi who maliciously edited and spread the footage, but we're still looking for whoever's behind it all."

Ethan sighed. "Never mind. It's hard to uncover everything in such a short time."

"Mr. Quinn, when I went to inform Designer Georgina about the semifinals, I overheard something... strange."

"What was it?"

"She said she couldn't let her money go to waste and instructed her assistant to spread the rumors again."

"She also mentioned hiring trolls to smear Ms. Serena during the semifinals."

The assistant reported everything he'd heard without holding back. It was Georgina's carelessness, thinking he'd already left, that had made her speak so freely.

Ethan turned in surprise. "Georgina? She really said that?"

"I might have misunderstood the context, but we should verify the facts."

Ethan drew a deep breath, dismayed to discover such a person within LUXE Jewelry.

"Go ahead and investigate further. I need concrete evidence."

"Yes, sir."

As his assistant hurried away, Ethan received a new message. Checking the time, he realized he needed to leave soon.

The semifinals were again divided into two sessions, and as a judge, he needed to arrive early.

When he reached the backstage area, he spotted Serena already waiting in the green room.

Ryan wasn't with her, so Ethan decided to approach.

"Did you see last night's news?" he asked.

Source:

Chapter 157: Chapter 157 She should withdraw from the competition

Serena's POV

I nodded slightly when Ethan approached me about the news. "Yes, I saw it. You're aware of it too, Mr. Quinn?"

Ethan settled into the seat beside me, his face clouded with displeasure. God, he seemed genuinely bothered by this whole mess.

"It's ridiculous how these people fabricate stories," he grumbled. "You're clearly not that type of person. I've already ordered an investigation."

I raised an eyebrow, surprised he cared so much. We'd only just met, yet here he was, rushing to defend my honor. "Thank you for your concern, Mr. Quinn."

"It's the least I can do. This is San Francisco—practically my territory. Anyone pulling stunts like this won't get away with it." His jaw tightened as he spoke.

I waved dismissively. "Don't get worked up. I'm used to baseless gossip by now." Reaching over, I handed him the participant list a staff member had given me earlier. "Here's the lineup for the first half. Take a look."

Ethan accepted the paper, scanning it briefly before setting it down. His eyes returned to me, studying me with an intensity that made me slightly uncomfortable.

"Once the semifinals are over, the competition will be wrapping up soon. Are you planning to return to New York immediately after?"

I shook my head. "I haven't decided yet."

"About our potential collaboration," he leaned forward slightly, "why don't we put that on the agenda? After the competition ends, we could sit down and discuss details properly."

His eagerness caught me off guard. I studied his face, trying to read his motivations. "Mr. Quinn, we've only just met. Why do you trust me so readily?"

Ethan seemed startled by my directness. He glanced away momentarily, looking almost... embarrassed?

"These past few days, I've gotten the sense that you're genuinely talented. I've heard about Dreamland Jewelry's reputation. A partnership between us actually makes perfect business sense."

He met my eyes again. "And regarding collaboration, I trust your abilities and your character."

His compliments warmed me more than I expected. There was something about Ethan that felt comfortable, natural—like we'd known each other much longer than a few days.

Some connections form instantly, while others never develop despite years of trying. Perhaps this was one of those rare, immediate bonds.

The atmosphere at the semifinals was noticeably tenser than the preliminaries. I found myself being more cautious with my evaluations, weighing each word carefully.

The livestream chat quickly filled with trolls.

[Who does Lazuli think she is? Just a somewhat famous designer—what qualifies her to judge others?]

[It's all about connections! Didn't you see yesterday's news? It got suppressed within hours. If that's not having powerful backing, what is?]

[Her sugar daddy must have paid to kill those negative stories. How charming!]

[Listen to her critiques—nothing but empty words.]

Some comments with sensitive words got filtered, which only fueled more outrage from the trolls. My fans jumped in to defend me, and the chat devolved into utter chaos.

But what I didn't know at the time, Georgina watched the disorder unfold on her screen, unable to contain her glee.

"You did well with this. What a delightful mess," she told her assistant, who pressed her lips together without responding.

Georgina shot her a glare. "Go check on my work. My presentation's this afternoon. Stop looking so miserable—you're ruining my mood!"

The assistant nodded and hurried off to ensure everything was ready.

Meanwhile, Georgina kept her eyes fixed on the screen, occasionally adding fuel to the fire with comments from her alternate account.

What started as targeted attacks soon erupted into full-scale arguments as legitimate competition viewers became irritated and joined the fray.

By the time the first half of the livestream ended, nobody cared about the results—they were too busy tearing me apart.

The viewership numbers had increased dramatically, but not in the way the organizers had hoped.

Mr. Brook stared at his screen, his face rigid with dismay. "How did this happen?" he sighed heavily. "Control the comments immediately! If this continues, we'll have to cancel the afternoon broadcast."

He'd wanted publicity, sure, but not this toxic kind that threatened the competition's reputation.

Unaware of the online drama, I massaged my stiff neck after leaving the stage.

Checking my phone, I saw Ryan had messaged just minutes ago saying he'd arrive soon.

I decided to wait in the green room, letting my mind wander as I replayed the morning's events.

The contestants had shown promise, but something felt off about the whole competition atmosphere.

I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but tensions seemed to be brewing beneath the surface—and somehow, I suspected I was at the center of whatever storm was coming.

Author's POV

Ethan Quinn had intended to approach her for a chat but suddenly recalled what his assistant had mentioned earlier that morning.

As he made his way back to the break room, he glanced at the livestream replay on his phone, his expression darkening considerably.

These attacks matched Georgina's style perfectly. Could she also be behind yesterday's incident?

"Excuse me, coming through."

"Mr. Quinn, I've brought lunch for you. You must be tired after this morning's session," Georgina's assistant announced, placing a bag on the table and unpacking neatly packaged meals.

Georgina was busy fawning over Ethan, completely ignoring Serena who sat nearby.

Serena didn't particularly mind the snub. She couldn't understand where Georgina's hostility came from in the first place.

Was it really just because of those few comments during the preliminaries? Talk about petty.

Serena mentally rolled her eyes while quietly sliding farther down the bench, giving Georgina more space to perform her little show. She was honestly amused by the display.

To her surprise, Georgina didn't completely ignore her after all. The woman suddenly turned toward her.

"Miss Serena, today's livestream was quite fascinating. I suppose you haven't seen it yet?" Georgina pulled out her phone and thrust it in Serena's face. "Some of the comments weren't very pleasant. Would you like to take a look?"

Serena hesitated, reaching out for the phone when Ethan abruptly intercepted.

"Out," he commanded coldly.

Georgina's smile froze on her face, clearly confused by Ethan's sudden anger.

"Mr. Quinn, what—"

"Come with me. Now." Ethan's expression was ice-cold as he strode toward the door.

Serena settled back in her seat and flashed Georgina a cool smile. "You'd better hurry. Mr. Quinn is waiting for you."

Georgina shot Serena a venomous glare before finally exiting the room.

"What did you need, Mr. Quinn?" she asked once outside.

"Those comments on the livestream—that was your doing, wasn't it?" Ethan didn't bother with niceties, going straight to the point, catching Georgina completely off guard.

"Mr. Quinn, what are you talking about? I... I don't understand."

"So you're saying you don't know anything about it?" His voice had taken on a dangerous edge, his expression darkening further.

"Mr. Quinn, you're being unfair. I have no grudge against Miss Serena. Why would I do something like that?"

"That's exactly what I'm curious about—why would you?"

As Georgina prepared to defend herself further, Ethan held his phone out for her to see.

On the screen were clear chat logs between her assistant and a tabloid reporter, including explicit instructions on spreading the malicious comments. Georgina's body stiffened, her smile crumbling.

"This... this wasn't me!"

"It appears... it was my assistant," Georgina recovered quickly, immediately shifting blame. "Mr. Quinn, please don't accuse me unfairly. This was clearly her doing alone!"

Ethan drew a deep breath, his patience clearly wearing thinner by the second.

"Wait here, Mr. Quinn. I'll call my assistant right over and find out why she did this."

Georgina turned and hurried to find her assistant, who was waiting in the car. She immediately grabbed the young woman's arm and twisted it viciously.

The assistant nearly cried out in pain. "Miss Georgina, what's wrong? What did I do?"

"They found out about everything. How could you be so careless?" Georgina hissed through gritted teeth.

The assistant froze. "How is that possible..."

"When we go back, you'll take full responsibility for everything. Understood?"

Meanwhile, Ethan had returned to the break room and sat down next to Serena.

"What happened? You looked pretty angry," Serena said with a slight smile, unable to resist her curiosity.

Ethan nodded and explained the whole situation, showing her the evidence his assistant had just uncovered.

"So all this was Georgina's doing?" Serena looked puzzled. "I don't understand—what beef does she have with me?"

"How do you want to handle it?"

Serena raised an eyebrow. "Georgina works for LUXE Jewelry. It doesn't seem appropriate for me to decide her fate, does it?"

"There's nothing inappropriate about it. Someone like her won't be working for LUXE anymore, I assure you," Ethan said with righteous indignation that seemed entirely genuine.

"In that case, I think she should publicly clarify the truth, and then..."

Serena paused, seemingly weighing her options.

The door to the break room swung open as Ryan Blackwood arrived.

"And then she should withdraw from the competition," he finished her sentence decisively.

Source:

Chapter 158: Chapter 158 The Truth Behind the Rumor

Serena's POV

I watched as Georgina came stumbling back into the break room, her face going completely stiff when she heard Ryan's ice-cold declaration that she should withdraw from the competition.

Ryan glanced at Ethan, his tone clearly displeased. "Since Mr. Quinn has already uncovered the truth, I believe he knows exactly how this should be handled."

Georgina dragged her assistant into the room behind her, desperately trying to defend herself. "Mr. Quinn, this was all her doing! It had nothing to do with me!" She turned sharply to her assistant. "Tell them! Why did you do this?"

The assistant trembled visibly, the color draining from her face as everyone in the break room stared her down. The pressure in the room was suffocating.

"It... it was me," she finally stammered.

I exchanged a knowing glance with Ryan. Neither of us believed this for a second. Why would an assistant have any personal vendetta against me? It made zero sense.

Georgina visibly relaxed when her assistant took the blame. "Mr. Quinn, I'm so sorry for hiring someone so untrustworthy. I'll dismiss her immediately."

She was clearly desperate to move past this, hoping we'd stop suspecting her. She must have been terrified of what Ethan might do if his anger escalated further.

"Wait." Ethan wasn't falling for it either. "You claim she did this on her own? A complete stranger with no connection to Serena just decided to launch a smear campaign? What's her motive?"

Georgina's eyes flickered nervously as she bit her lip.

I could practically see her brain scrambling for an excuse. She shot her assistant a pointed look, clearly hoping the woman would improvise something convincing.

But her assistant was already shaking so badly she could barely stand.

"Mr. Quinn, I... this is all just a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding?" Ethan's voice dropped dangerously low. "If you don't explain yourself clearly right now, I'll make sure you can't find work anywhere in San Francisco. Now talk!"

His sudden bark made the assistant's knees visibly wobble.

"Mr. Quinn, it wasn't me, it was—" She couldn't finish the sentence, but her eyes darted to Georgina.

That glance was all it took for Georgina to panic and incriminate herself. "Why are you looking at me? After all I've done for you, you're going to blame me? You worthless little bitch, don't you dare lie!"

In her panic, Georgina shoved her assistant hard, sending the woman sprawling to the floor. She was about to continue her tirade when Ethan cut her off.

"Enough! Georgina, you won't be participating in this afternoon's finals. Go pack up your belongings—you're no longer employed at LUXE Jewelry."

I watched the scene unfold with cold detachment, satisfied with how Ethan was handling things. I was genuinely curious, though—what beef did this woman have with me? We barely knew each other.

"Ms. Georgina, do we know each other?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

Georgina stood frozen, her face ashen. She didn't answer me—instead, she kept turning toward Ethan, still desperately clinging to the last thread of hope.

"Mr. Quinn, you can't do this to me! I've worked for the company for years! Doesn't that count for something?"

Her voice cracked, her eyes already reddening, clearly unable to comprehend her sudden downfall.

Ethan didn't even spare her a glance, and that seemed to crush her even more.

Only then did she finally respond to my question—but when she did, her words dripped with venom.

"Know you?" Her laugh was cold and cruel. "Why would I waste my time on some knocked-up tramp who can't stop chasing men?"

Ryan's eyes flashed dangerously. "What did you just say?"

Georgina visibly shrank back, clearly regretting her outburst.

Fury surged through me. Before I could stop myself, my hand flew across her face with a sharp crack.

Georgina gasped, one hand flying to her cheek.

"Watch your mouth," I snapped. "If you're going to spit filth, do it somewhere else."

Stunned, she turned to Ethan, as if expecting him to defend her.

Ethan scoffed. "Get out of here. You're embarrassing yourself."

Still unwilling to accept defeat, Georgina grabbed her assistant's arm again. "Mr. Quinn, it really was her! This has nothing to do with me! Why won't you believe me?" She twisted the assistant's arm until it was bright red. "Tell them the truth, you lying bitch!"

The assistant, who had clearly endured this treatment before, suddenly seemed to reach her breaking point.

"Let go of me!" She jerked her arm free. "Georgina, how much more do you expect me to take? Every dirty trick you've pulled—wasn't I always the one forced to do your dirty work?"

She turned to us, her eyes glistening with angry tears. "You want to know why she did this? It's simple—pure jealousy."

She's done this before to other designers at the company. She's sabotaged them, spread rumors, stolen designs, all while forcing me to be her accomplice because she knew I needed the money and wouldn't dare speak up."

Georgina lunged forward, hand raised to slap her. "You lying little—"

Ethan caught her wrist mid-air. "What do you think you're doing? If you're innocent, let her finish."

The assistant wiped her nose and continued. "Mr. Quinn, the designers who entered the company at the same time as Georgina—their designs were stolen, they were falsely accused of plagiarism—all of it was on Georgina's orders."

She turned to me, her head lowered. "I'm not a good person either. I did those things because I needed the money she paid me. But this time... I hesitated for so long before following her instructions. Ms. Serena, I'm truly sorry."

She removed her employee badge and placed it on the table near Ethan.

"Mr. Quinn, someone like me doesn't deserve to work for this company. I'm resigning voluntarily. I deeply apologize for everything."

Georgina could only watch helplessly as her assistant laid everything bare. These were facts, and her assistant undoubtedly had evidence to back them up. Her fate was sealed.

Ethan looked at Georgina with cold disgust. "Well, you're certainly something, Georgina."

I'd been watching this drama play out long enough. Now that justice had been served, I was ready to move on. This was an internal LUXE Jewelry matter, and I had no interest in getting further involved.

"Ryan, let's go," I said quietly.

He nodded, equally eager to leave this mess behind.

Author's POV

As the two of them left the lounge and the door shut behind them with a soft click, Ethan's expression darkened further.

"Whatever mess you've made," he said coldly, his voice dangerously low, "say it all now. I don't want to be blindsided again."

He had been in charge of LUXE Jewelry for quite some time now, and yet someone like this had been stirring up trouble right under his nose. The thought made his blood boil.

Georgina flinched at the disgust in his eyes. It pierced straight through her pride, cutting her deeper than she expected. She let out a bitter laugh, anger flashing in her eyes.

“Ethan, do you really not know how I feel about you?” she said, voice trembling.
“Everything I did—it was all for you.”

Ethan’s patience snapped. His jaw tightened as he turned away.

“I don’t have time for this,” he said flatly. “And I don’t care to hear about your so-called feelings.”

He stood, clearly ready to leave, no longer interested in wasting another second in that room.

Georgina, unwilling to let him go just like that, rushed forward to block his path.

“You’re really going to treat me like this?” she demanded, her voice breaking.

Ethan didn’t hesitate. He shoved her aside with a force that made it clear he was done playing nice.

“Get out of my sight,” he snapped, voice sharp as ice. “If I see you again, you’ll deal with the consequences.”

With that, he strode toward the door and slammed it shut behind him.

The heavy thud echoed through the room like a final verdict.

Georgina stood frozen in place, pale and shaking, her hands clenched at her sides. The rejection stung—but the obsession in her eyes hadn’t faded in the slightest.

Serena. That bitch would pay for this.

Source:

Chapter 159: Chapter 159 Please be okay, my baby

Serena’s POV

I’d barely settled into the aftermath of that whole Georgina drama when the afternoon finals began. True to Ethan’s word, Georgina was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm really sorry about all this, Serena," Ethan said quietly as we watched the competitors prepare their pieces.

I shrugged, barely glancing away from the competition floor. "You don't need to apologize. It's not like you did anything wrong. People like her just need to be dealt with and then forgotten."

I flashed him a small smile. Honestly, I couldn't care less about Georgina or her pathetic schemes. I had way bigger things on my mind - like this potential collaboration that could take Dreamland Studio to new heights.

Ethan nodded, seeming relieved as he turned his attention back to the competition.

After the finals wrapped up, he invited me to dinner to discuss business further. I didn't hesitate to accept - this partnership with LUXE Jewelry could be exactly what my company needed right now.

Ryan had finished his business in San Francisco and planned to spend the next few days with me. He joined us for dinner, though he mostly sat there silently while Ethan and I talked shop. Every now and then, I'd catch Ryan's eyes on me, his expression unreadable.

Ethan and I clicked immediately on the business front. By the time dessert arrived, we'd already hammered out a timeline for our collaboration.

"I guess we'll see each other next week then," I said, gathering my purse. "I need to head back and start preparations."

Ethan nodded, a satisfied smile playing on his lips. "Looking forward to our next meeting."

The moment Ryan and I slipped into the back of the car, I pulled out my phone and called Maya. "Hey, we've got the green light on the LUXE collaboration," I said excitedly. "Start getting everything ready - they want to move fast."

As I ended the call, I felt Ryan's warmth as he leaned against my shoulder, his breath tickling my ear.

"All this talk about work," he murmured. "Don't you want to stay a few more days?"

I turned slightly to look at him. "There's a mountain of stuff waiting for me back in New York. Why? You want to extend our trip?"

Ryan sighed, so softly I almost didn't hear it. "I just want some time alone with you."

I couldn't help but laugh. "We've been together this whole time! What do you call that?"

"Not enough," he replied, his voice suddenly husky and serious.

Something in his tone made my heart skip. God, he could still do that to me after all this time.

"You're the big CEO, remember?" I teased, trying to lighten the mood. "Blackwood Group has ten times more fires waiting for you to put out than I do."

I turned and planted a quick kiss on his cheek, catching a whiff of his expensive cologne. "Don't look so glum. We have all the time in the world, don't we?"

Ryan's lips quirked into what might have been a smile as he mumbled a quiet agreement, but I could tell he wasn't entirely satisfied.

The championship finals were scheduled for tomorrow, and I already had a pretty good idea who would win. At least this competition seemed legit - no rigging or backdoor deals that I could detect. Mr. Brook appeared to be running a clean show, which was refreshing in this industry.

After the finals, Mr. Brook hosted a celebration party and specifically invited Ryan and me. Ryan didn't object to attending, which surprised me a little. He usually avoided these industry parties like the plague.

We stayed close throughout the evening, his hand never straying far from the small of my back. The party was in full swing when Ethan finally arrived, exchanging quick pleasantries with Mr. Brook before making a beeline straight for us.

"I hear you're heading back tomorrow," Ethan said, sounding disappointed. "What's the rush?"

I nodded. "New York's calling. Trust me, I'd love nothing more than to play tourist here for a while, but duty calls."

Ethan whistled low. "You really are a force to be reckoned with in business."

"You're too kind," I replied, feeling Ryan's arm tighten slightly around my waist.

Ryan's jaw tightened visibly. He was trying to keep it cool, but I could feel the tension radiating off him. Even though Ethan was perfectly professional with me, Ryan clearly didn't appreciate how comfortable we'd become with each other.

"Serena, maybe we should head back early and rest," Ryan suggested, his voice carefully neutral.

I glanced at my watch, surprised. "Let's stay a bit longer. Mr. Brook specifically asked us to stick around for a group photo."

The old man had made such a point of mentioning it when we arrived, and I didn't want to disappoint him after he'd been so welcoming to us.

Ethan glanced between Ryan and me, clearing his throat awkwardly. "I should go mingle with the other guests. Excuse me."

As he walked away, I turned to Ryan with a knowing smirk. "Are you seriously jealous again?"

Ryan's expression darkened, but he remained silent.

"You're impossible, you know that?" I said, half-amused, half-exasperated.

When he still didn't respond, I decided to drop it. No point poking the bear. "I need to use the bathroom. Wait for me?"

He nodded, settling into his chair as I set my clutch down and headed toward the restrooms.

Just as I reached the hallway, a familiar figure stepped out from the shadows, blocking my path.

I arched an eyebrow as I took in Georgina's appearance.

She was wearing a black evening gown, looking completely out of place. I hadn't seen her at the party earlier, and I doubted Mr. Brook would have invited her after what happened.

Was she seriously waiting here just to confront me?

"Can I help you with something?" I asked coolly.

Georgina's face was contorted with anger, her eyes glittering with pure hatred. She looked unhinged, honestly.

When she didn't respond, I tried to step around her. I really didn't need this drama tonight.

"You think you're so special, don't you?" she finally hissed.

I paused, turning back to face her with a frown. "Look, I don't know what fantasy you've created in your head, but Ethan and I are just business associates. That's it."

I'd figured out pretty quickly that her hostility stemmed from Ethan's attention toward me. As ridiculous as it was, I wanted to set the record straight.

"If you're looking for some kind of explanation, here it is: I didn't make a big deal about what you did because I didn't want to cause problems for LUXE Jewelry," I said flatly. "You were their employee, after all."

My explanation only seemed to enrage her further. Her face flushed an ugly red.

"Why is he so good to you?" she shrieked. "You slut! You're even pregnant, and you're still shamelessly throwing yourself at him!"

Before I could react, she lunged forward and shoved me hard. I cried out in surprise.

Though I was wearing flats, my pregnancy had affected my balance. I staggered backward, unable to catch myself as I fell to the ground.

"This is all because of you!" Georgina screamed, looming over me with wild eyes. "Everything was fine until you showed up! Just die!"

The pain shot through my lower back as I hit the floor. I instinctively curled my arms around my belly, panic surging through me as I thought of my baby. Oh god, please be okay, please be okay...

Source:

Chapter 160: Chapter 160 The baby's fine

Serena's POV

I froze on the floor as Georgina towered over me, her face twisted into something barely human. My arms wrapped tighter around my belly as pain shot through my lower back. I couldn't move, couldn't even scream—all I could think about was my baby.

"This is all because of you!" Georgina screamed, looming over me with wild eyes. "Everything was fine until you showed up! Just die!"

I saw her raise her hand, ready to strike. In that moment, everything slowed down. I closed my eyes, turning to shield my stomach, when a sharp voice cut through the tension.

"Stop!"

My eyes flew open. Ethan was suddenly there, moving like lightning across the hallway. He shoved Georgina aside with such force that she stumbled backward.

"Georgina, what the hell are you doing?" he snapped, his voice colder than I'd ever heard it.

Instead of backing down, Georgina completely lost it. Her face contorted with rage as she looked from Ethan to me, her eyes bulging.

"This is all your fault, you bitch!" she shrieked, lunging at me again, her manicured nails aimed straight at my face.

I flinched, but Ethan was faster. He stepped between us, blocking her attack with his arm. The sound of her nails scraping against his suit sleeve made my skin crawl.

"Georgina, calm down!" he barked, grabbing her arm and shoving her back.

Her heels—ridiculous six-inch stilettos—betrayed her. She twisted her ankle and went down hard, letting out a pathetic yelp as she hit the floor. Twice she tried to get up, and twice she fell back, whimpering.

Ethan didn't even look at her. He turned to me immediately, kneeling down.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice tight with worry.

I couldn't answer. The pain in my back was getting worse, and I felt a strange pressure low in my abdomen that scared the hell out of me. Cold sweat broke out across my forehead as I tried to focus on his face.

People started gathering at the entrance to the hallway, the buzz of whispers growing louder. And then suddenly, through the crowd, came Ryan. The moment he saw me on the floor, his face went deadly white.

"Serena!" he shouted, pushing past everyone and dropping to his knees beside me. His arms wrapped around me, strong and secure. "Are you hurt?"

I tried to speak but could only manage a whimper. The pain was getting worse.

Ethan's voice came from somewhere above us, shaky but determined. "We need to get her to the hospital. Now."

Ryan didn't hesitate. Without a word, he swept me up into his arms in a bridal carry, as if I weighed nothing at all.

I pressed my face against his chest, breathing in his familiar scent as waves of pain washed over me. Please be okay, baby. Please be okay.

As Ryan carried me through the ballroom, I caught glimpses of shocked faces and heard the rush of whispers. I didn't care.

All I could think about was the little life inside me, and the terrifying possibility that Georgina's violence might have harmed my child.

Ryan's heartbeat pounded against my ear as he strode toward the exit, his arms tightening around me with each step.

"Stay with me, Serena," he whispered fiercely. "Everything's going to be okay."

I wanted to believe him, but the pain was getting worse. Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes as I clutched his shirt, fighting the urge to scream.

Behind us, I heard Ethan's voice turn to ice as he addressed Georgina.

"Don't say my name," he spat. "You disgust me."

The doors closed behind us, cutting off whatever happened next. Ryan was already barking orders at his driver as we reached the car.

"Hospital. Now," he commanded, sliding into the backseat with me still in his arms.

As the car pulled away, another wave of pain hit me, stronger than before. I couldn't hold back the cry this time.

"Ryan," I gasped, clutching his hand so tight my knuckles turned white. "The baby—"

"Shh," he whispered, pressing his lips to my forehead. "Just breathe. We're almost there."

But the fear in his eyes told me everything I needed to know. He was just as terrified as I was.

At the hospital, I endured what felt like endless tests and examinations. The doctor finally returned with results that made me go limp with relief.

"Serena, don't worry. The baby's fine," he reassured me with a kind smile. "You instinctively protected your stomach when you fell. That quick maternal instinct saved the day."

Only then did I feel like I could breathe again. "That's good..."

Ryan sat beside me, his eyes never leaving my face.

"You don't have to worry about her anymore," he said softly. "I'll make sure she never comes near you again."

I didn't argue. I simply nodded, my mind still replaying that terrifying moment. Loving someone didn't give you the right to hurt others. Georgina had completely lost control—driven mad by an obsession she mistook for love.

"The doctor said you can be discharged," Ryan said, helping me up gently. "Just rest for a few days."

I nodded. "Then tomorrow we can—"

"You're not going anywhere tomorrow," Ryan cut me off immediately, his tone leaving no room for argument. "We're staying here for a few days. End of discussion."

I looked up at him, almost amused by his serious expression. I reached out and smoothed the deep crease between his brows with my finger.

"Don't worry so much. I'll be more careful from now on. It was just... an accident."

An accident born of someone else's obsession. Who would have thought Georgina would actually ambush me outside a bathroom?

"Let's not talk about it anymore," I said softly. "It's not worth the stress."

Once discharged, I made a quick call to Maya, explaining I'd delay my return. I didn't tell her the full truth—no need to worry her.

"Ohhh, I see..." she teased. "You two want some alone time, don't you? Got it, got it. Just rest well, I've got everything at the studio covered."

I smiled and hung up.

"Well," Ryan said, raising a brow, "looks like we've officially entered our couple's retreat."

I turned to him, trying to lighten the mood. "So I should be thanking that little 'accident'?"

"Let's not go that far," Ryan said with a rare grin. "But hey—blessings and curses often come hand in hand. You're safe, that's all I care about."

"Then smile for me," I said, reaching out and tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Ryan let me move his face, and the expression I shaped was so awkward it made me laugh out loud.

A manually crafted smile—but one that warmed my heart anyway.

Source:

