

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

#Chapter 161 A bold attempt - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 161 A bold attempt

Chapter 161: Chapter 161 A bold attempt

Ryan's POV

I took Serena to the best spots in San Francisco, determined to make her forget about that nightmare with Georgina. She deserved a break, something light and beautiful after the chaos. Every time she smiled, something in my chest eased—and tightened all at once. How close I'd come to losing her. How easily the universe could've taken everything again.

"Ryan, look!" Serena pointed at the street performers near Fisherman's Wharf, her eyes sparkling with childlike wonder.

She hadn't laughed like that since the hospital. Hearing it again—it was like breathing fresh air for the first time.

I slipped my arm around her waist, shielding her from the ocean wind. "Want to go check it out?"

She nodded, grinning, and I followed her lead. Maybe I was supposed to be showing her around, but it felt like she was the one reminding me what life looked like.

We wandered the pier, tasting clam chowder out of bread bowls, watching sea lions argue like grumpy old men. I mostly watched her—the way she tucked her hair behind her ear, the way her nose wrinkled when she laughed.

"You're staring," she said without looking at me, her voice teasing.

"Yeah," I admitted easily. "Can you blame me?"

Later, in Golden Gate Park, the calm should've settled me—but it didn't. Every brush of her hand against mine, every glance she threw over her shoulder—it was driving me insane.

Three nights of restraint since the hospital. Three nights of sleeping beside her, smelling her, not touching her. I kept telling myself she needed rest.

She caught me watching again and smiled, slow and knowing. "Ryan," she murmured, slipping her fingers through mine. "I need to use the restroom."

"There's one over—"

The look in her eyes stopped me cold. That wasn't what she meant.

"Come with me," she whispered.

My pulse jumped. "Serena, this is— we're in public."

She tilted her head, lips curving in that dangerous little smile. "Guess you'll just have to be quiet too, Mr. Responsible."

The family restroom was empty and surprisingly clean. The second the door locked behind us, Serena was pressed against me, her mouth finding mine hungrily.

"God, I've missed this," she murmured against my lips, her hands already working on my belt. "Missed you."

"We should wait until—" My words died in my throat as her hand slipped inside my pants, wrapping around me.

"I'm tired of waiting," she said, stroking me slowly. "I'm fine. The baby's fine. And I want my husband."

Fuck. When she put it that way...

I growled, spinning her around so her back was against the wall. Her breath hitched as my hands found their way under her dress.

"Someone could hear us," I warned, even as my fingers pushed her underwear aside.

"Then you'll have to keep me quiet," she challenged, her eyes dark with desire.

She was already wet, ready for me. I stroked her slowly, watching her bite her lip to keep from making noise.

"Is this what you want?" I asked, circling her most sensitive spot with my thumb.

She nodded frantically, her hips moving against my hand. "More," she whispered. "Please."

Those soft pleas were my undoing. I turned her around gently, lifting her dress just enough. She braced herself against the wall, looking back at me with such need that I almost lost it right there.

"You sure about this?" I asked one more time, positioning myself.

"Ryan, if you don't fuck me right now, I swear I'll—"

I pushed into her in one smooth thrust, cutting off whatever threat she was about to make. Her gasp echoed in the small room, and I covered her mouth with my hand.

"Quiet, remember?" I whispered in her ear, starting to move slowly.

She nodded, her body trembling as I found my rhythm. Every thrust had her pressing back against me, desperate for more. I kept one hand on her hip, the other moving to where she needed me most.

"That's it," I encouraged as she started to tighten around me. "Let go, baby."

When she came, she bit down on her own hand to keep from crying out. The sight of her trying to stay silent, combined with how she felt pulsing around me, pushed me over the edge right after her.

For a moment, we just stood there, breathing hard, my forehead pressed against her shoulder.

"Well," she finally said, a slight laugh in her voice. "That's one San Francisco attraction not in the guidebooks."

I couldn't help but laugh as I helped her straighten her clothes. "You're going to be the death of me, you know that?"

She turned in my arms, her expression suddenly serious. "No more talk about death. Just life. Our life."

I kissed her softly, reverently. "Our life," I agreed.

As we slipped out of the restroom (thankfully unnoticed), Serena's hand found mine again.

"Where to next?" she asked brightly.

"Anywhere you want," I replied, meaning it with every fiber of my being. With her by my side, I'd go anywhere.

Source:

Chapter 162: Chapter 162 He discovered I was using him

Sophie's POV

In the New York.

I've spent days without seeing Ryan.

Sure, his schedule was always some big mystery, but I've been to the executive floor twice now without even catching a whisper about where he might be. Something's definitely off.

Standing in the break room, sipping coffee with a scowl on my face, I overheard two colleagues gossiping nearby. My fingers tightened around the mug as I tried to look casual while eavesdropping.

"Have you seen that news story? The face is blurred but that's definitely Mr. Blackwood standing there."

"Yeah, I saw it before they took it down. Good thing I saved the photo or I wouldn't have proof now."

My eyebrow arched instinctively. Blurred face? Mr. Blackwood? My pulse quickened immediately.

"What are you ladies talking about?" I asked, slipping into their conversation with my sweetest smile.

Break rooms have always been gossip goldmines, and while I normally wouldn't lower myself to chatting up these entry-level nobodies, I needed allies now that Ryan wasn't watching my back anymore.

"Oh, Sophie! We're just talking about Mr. Blackwood. Aren't you two pretty close? Look at this—is this him in the photo?"

She handed me her phone. The image showed Serena Quinn, perfectly recognizable, standing next to a tall man in a suit.

Even with his face blurred, I instantly recognized Ryan's posture, his build, the way he stood slightly forward as if ready to protect her. My stomach twisted into knots.

My face froze but I maintained my smile, though it felt brittle enough to crack. "Where did you find this?"

"Haven't you seen it? Mr. Blackwood's been in San Francisco with Miss Quinn for her design competition. They're practically inseparable—it's been all over social media. Most of the juicier gossip got taken down already."

I forced a laugh that sounded hollow even to my own ears. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

"Isn't Mr. Blackwood at the office these days?" I asked casually, while my nails dug crescents into my palm.

They shook their heads. "How would we know what the boss does?"

"Right, silly me. I should get back to work," I said, excusing myself quickly before my mask slipped completely.

The moment I turned away, my fake smile vanished. So Ryan wasn't being mysterious—he wasn't even in New York!

He was hiding from me like I was some kind of criminal. Unbelievable! After everything we'd been through, after all I'd sacrificed for him!

Back at my desk, I immediately pulled out my phone and searched online, hands trembling with rage. Most articles had been deleted, but I found enough scraps:

[Mr. Blackwood and Lazuli make such a power couple! Perfect match!]

[He put aside all his Blackwood responsibilities just to accompany her to a design competition. That's true love!]

[I'm shipping this couple so hard!]

"Serena Quinn, you again!" I hissed, squeezing my phone until my knuckles turned white. God, I wanted to smash something. Preferably her face.

I couldn't wait any longer. I needed those files on the suburban project from ten years ago. With Lucian West's support, I could turn everything around.

Then I'd make that bitch Serena pay! She'd regret the day she ever crossed paths with Ryan Blackwood.

Within the hour, I arrived at Kane's private mansion, the security guards eyeing me suspiciously before letting me through.

The housekeeper made me wait in the living room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. The place reeked of old money and fading power.

After sitting on that cold sofa for what felt like forever, I was losing patience. What game was Kane playing? Inviting me in only to make me wait?

I checked my watch three times, my foot tapping against the marble floor.

Just as I was considering leaving, I heard movement upstairs. Finally.

Kane appeared in his wheelchair, looking tired like he'd just woken from a nap. His hair was disheveled, but there was still something dangerous in his eyes.

I immediately plastered on a smile. "Mr. Blackwood, it's been a while. I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

He gave me a disinterested glance and signaled to his assistant, who promptly brought out a bottle of wine with two glasses. The liquid glowed amber in the afternoon light.

After taking a sip, Kane seemed to come alive a bit more. "You're here for the suburban project files, aren't you?"

My eyes brightened instantly. "Yes! Have you found them?"

"I have," he said flatly. "But why should I give them to you?"

My smile faltered. I repeated my previous reasoning: "I want to help you, of course. Taking down Ryan is our shared goal, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Kane raised an eyebrow, sneering. "You want to take him down? Isn't he the man you love? What good would destroying him do for you?"

I snorted, my expression darkening. My mask of pleasantness slipped away. "I love him, but he loves that Serena. If he loses everything, maybe he'll finally see who's truly meant to stand by his side."

"If he can't see me when he's on top, then I'll make sure he falls," I added, my voice venomous. "Sometimes you need to burn everything down to build something better."

Kane actually laughed. "That's quite the interesting logic. Sophie, you're just as vicious as you've always been."

I smiled coldly. I didn't take it as an insult. "Mr. Blackwood, we're cut from the same cloth, you and I. That's why working together makes the most sense."

Kane ran his finger around the rim of his glass, the silence stretching between us. Just when I thought he was about to agree, he suddenly hurled the glass against the wall.

The shattering sound made me jump, my heart slamming against my ribs. Tiny fragments of crystal scattered across the polished floor.

Kane grinned at me, his eyes suddenly ice-cold. "Sophie, you've got some nerve, using me to do someone else's dirty work!"

"Do you think I'm so weakened that you can manipulate me without consequences?" His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper.

My eyes widened in shock. My connection with Lucian had been incredibly discreet. How could Kane know?

I'd underestimated Kane Blackwood, and that might have been my biggest mistake yet.

Source:

Chapter 163: Chapter 163 What's our next move

Sophie's POV

I froze in my seat, heart pounding like a jackhammer as Kane stared me down. The shattered glass still sparkled across the floor, wine dripping down the wall like blood.

"What's wrong? Cat got your tongue? You were so talkative a minute ago," Kane sneered, his wheelchair suddenly seeming less like a sign of weakness and more like a throne. "Sophie Hart, you're quite something."

The tension in the room was suffocating. I swallowed hard, my eyes darting to the other wine glass on the table. My mind raced frantically.

I grabbed the bottle with trembling fingers and poured him a fresh glass, offering it with exaggerated deference.

Kane gave me a calculating look before accepting the glass. He always did appreciate quick thinking and survival instincts.

"Mr. Blackwood, please, you've misunderstood. It's not what you think," I said, forcing my voice to steady while my brain worked overtime looking for an escape route.

Kane waved his hand dismissively, cutting off my pathetic attempt at damage control.

"I know exactly what you've done. You're working with Lucian West, aren't you?"

My body trembled involuntarily. Fuck. My heart plummeted, feeling like it had dropped into an ice bath.

"Don't worry," he continued, swirling his wine lazily. "I won't tell Ryan about this little betrayal. But getting me to do your dirty work while you're actually Lucian's puppet? That seems rather backwards, don't you think?"

I shook my head frantically, forcing my eyes to water as I slipped into victim mode. It had always worked before.

"Mr. Blackwood, you've got it all wrong. I'm actually being coerced. Lucian knows about my history with Ryan and is using that to manipulate me," I sniffled dramatically. "When you think about it, Lucian shares the same goal as you do."

As I spoke, a new strategy began forming in my mind. I looked up suddenly, allowing a spark of inspiration to show in my eyes.

"What if... what if you and Lucian joined forces against Ryan? You'd be unstoppable together."

Kane scoffed, taking a slow, deliberate sip of his wine until the glass was empty.

I immediately leaned forward to refill it, playing the perfect servant.

"Or perhaps you could let them fight each other while you reap the benefits afterward," I suggested, desperation leaking into my voice despite my best efforts.

"Now that," Kane mused, "is slightly more interesting. Continue. What else is going on in that devious mind of yours?"

I finally exhaled, relief flooding through me as I regained my footing.

"From what I understand, Lucian has some interest in Serena Quinn. Why not let him drain Ryan's resources first? Then you can step in when the time is right."

"I've been loyal to you all this time, Mr. Blackwood. With Lucian, it's just a performance—a means to an end," I added with a sickening smile.

After several more minutes of shameless flattery, Kane's expression softened considerably.

"You seem to understand the situation quite well."

"Of course I do. I know your capabilities," I simpered. "This is New York. The Blackwoods have always ruled here. Once Ryan falls, you'll be the rightful leader of the family empire. Lucian is just an outsider who doesn't belong."

Kane chuckled softly, nodding with satisfaction. My obsequious attitude seemed to please him—no need for further discussion.

"Bring me the files," he commanded his assistant, who immediately left to retrieve them from upstairs.

My eyes lit up with undisguised triumph. I'd guessed correctly—Kane really did have information on the suburban project.

Minutes later, the precious documents were placed before me. I flipped through them eagerly but couldn't immediately make sense of what I was seeing.

What I didn't know was that Kane had already altered these files, though the changes were subtle enough that an untrained eye wouldn't notice.

Kane tapped his fingers impatiently against the polished mahogany table.

"Give these to Lucian. You probably can't understand what you're looking at anyway."

"Just remember this—Ryan's parents were responsible for the deaths of Lucian's family. That's what matters."

Shock rippled through me. "So that's why Lucian is so obsessed with this project?"

Kane nodded curtly. "Just deliver the files to him. The rest is no longer your concern."

"I understand completely."

"And one more thing—don't come here unannounced again. If you need something, call first."

"I can't stand being disturbed. It irritates me," he added, his tone dangerous.

I clutched the files to my chest, nodding rapidly. Frankly, I was more than happy not to visit this unpredictable, wheelchair-bound tyrant again.

"Of course, Mr. Blackwood. I'll leave you to your evening."

I walked out of Kane's mansion clutching those documents like they were pure gold. My hand was still trembling slightly, but I'd managed to turn the situation around. Barely.

"Something wrong, Sophie?" Kane's assistant called after me as I rushed down the steps.

"Nothing at all!" I chirped back, my smile so fake it hurt my cheeks.

Jesus Christ. My heart was still pounding like I'd run a marathon. When that glass shattered against the wall, I thought I was done for.

"Get it together, Sophie," I muttered to myself, straightening up and checking my makeup in the rearview mirror. My mascara had smudged slightly from the stress sweat. Great.

I opened the folder sitting on my passenger seat, flipping through documents that meant nothing to me at first glance. Old property records, financial statements, signatures... What was I supposed to do with this jumble?

I closed the folder with a snap and started the car. Whatever was going on, I was in far deeper than I'd anticipated. But I wasn't about to back out now. Kane thought I was just a pretty puppet to be manipulated, and Lucian probably thought the same.

They were both wrong. I'd use them both to get what I wanted.

then my phone rang, I nearly jumped out of my skin. Unknown number. My finger hovered over the screen before I answered.

"Did you get it?" Lucian's smooth voice came through immediately.

"Hello to you too," I said sarcastically, turning onto the highway. "Yes, I got your precious documents. And a whole lot more than I bargained for."

"Good work," Lucian said, his voice calm. "Where are you now?"

"Heading back to my apartment. Why?"

"I'll meet you there in an hour. Don't look at those documents anymore. And Sophie?"

"What?"

"Make sure you weren't followed."

He hung up before I could respond. Great. Now I was in some kind of spy thriller. I checked my rearview mirror obsessively for the rest of the drive, my nerves shot to hell.

Back in my apartment, I poured myself a large glass of wine and kicked off my heels. The documents sat on my coffee table like a ticking bomb. What was in there that was so important?

The knock on my door came precisely an hour later. Lucian stood there in a perfectly tailored black suit, looking more dangerous than usual. His green eyes scanned my apartment the moment I let him in.

"Did anyone see you come here?" I asked, closing the door behind him.

"No one who matters," he said cryptically, heading straight for the documents. "You didn't look through these, did you?"

"I skimmed them, but they're just a bunch of old records. Nothing made sense."

Lucian sat down and began to methodically go through each page. His face gave nothing away, but I noticed his fingers tightening on the edges of the paper.

"Are you going to tell me what this is all about?" I asked, sitting across from him.

His eyes flicked up to meet mine—cold, sharp, and unreadable.

"This doesn't concern you," he said flatly.

I shut my mouth, biting back the retort on my tongue. There was no point. Not with that tone.

Without another word, he pulled out a check and slid it across the table toward me.

"Your compensation."

I stared at it for a moment, then slipped it into my bag without looking at the number.

Lucian gathered the documents and stood up. "These confirm what I've suspected. There's enough evidence here to destroy the Blackwood name completely."

"So what's our next move?" I asked, following him to the door.

He turned to me, his expression unreadable. "I'll be in touch. In the meantime, act normal. Go to work, smile at your colleagues. And Sophie?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful around Kane. He's not as powerless as he appears."

After Lucian left, I refilled my wine glass and stared out at the city lights. Something wasn't adding up. Why would Kane give me those documents if he knew I was working with Lucian? What game was he playing?

One thing was clear - I was now trapped between two powerful men with their own agendas. And somewhere out there, Ryan was with Serena instead of me.

I took a long sip of wine, feeling the burn down my throat. Let them all play their games. In the end, I'd be the one standing beside Ryan.

Even if I had to burn everything to the ground first.

Source:

Chapter 164: Chapter 164 We need some time apart to cool down

Serena's POV

I froze with my fork halfway to my mouth when I heard that familiar voice calling out to us. Shit. Just what I needed on this already tense morning.

"What a coincidence, Serena! You haven't returned to New York yet?"

Before I could even respond, Ethan had already pulled out a chair and plopped himself down at our table like we were old friends meeting for brunch. The nerve of this man! I glanced at Ryan's face and noticed his expression darkening immediately. Great. The jealousy monster was about to make an appearance.

"Yes, it's a rare vacation," I replied, forcing a polite smile. "Just taking some time to rest."

Ethan made an enthusiastic "oh" sound, leaning forward with those sparkling eyes of his. "San Francisco has some beautiful sights. If you want to explore, I'd be happy to be your guide."

"Guide?" I couldn't help but laugh. "Do you even have time? Doesn't LUXE Jewelry have you busy running around?"

We fell into easy conversation, which only made Ryan's face grow stormier by the second. I could practically feel the jealousy radiating off him in waves.

"It's no problem at all," Ethan insisted, completely oblivious to the death glares my boyfriend was sending his way. "I can always make time if you ask."

I froze for a second, finally glancing over at Ryan's face. His jaw was clenched so tight I was surprised his teeth weren't cracking. Oh god, the King of Jealousy was about to explode.

"Um, Mr. Quinn," I said hurriedly, "didn't you come here to meet someone today?"

Ethan checked his watch casually. "I'm meeting a client, but being a few minutes late isn't a problem. Running into you is quite the pleasant surprise."

I laughed awkwardly, but before I could redirect the conversation, Ryan cut in with a voice cold enough to freeze lava.

"If Mr. Quinn has a client meeting, punctuality would be advisable."

Only then did Ethan seem to notice Ryan's presence—really notice it, I mean. He looked between us, realization dawning on his face.

"Mr. Blackwood is right. Am I... interrupting something between you two?"

The atmosphere turned so awkward I wanted to slide under the table and disappear. Instead, I jumped in to smooth things over.

"Of course not! But your work is important, Mr. Quinn. You should go ahead, and we can connect later."

"Alright."

When Ethan finally walked away, I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. The temporary relief lasted exactly three seconds before Ryan's cold voice sliced through the air.

"What a coincidence indeed. Are you planning to meet him later, Serena?"

I rolled my eyes, unable to hide my exasperation. "It was just small talk. Why are you taking everything so seriously?"

"You might think it's just small talk, but he certainly doesn't." Ryan scoffed, stabbing at his eggs with unnecessary force. "I bet he'll be back trying to 'reconnect' with you before we even finish breakfast."

"Don't be ridiculous," I snapped, giving him a look. "We just happen to get along well."

"Is that so?"

His face darkened even further, and I decided this conversation was going nowhere good. Fighting with a jealous boyfriend is like arguing with a brick wall—painful and pointless.

I downed the last of my orange juice and caught Ryan's eye. "Let's go. Weren't you planning to take me sightseeing today?"

"Sure," he replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Don't you need to let Quinn know first?"

I sucked in a sharp breath, feeling my temper rise dangerously. Without another word, I stood up and marched away from the table. I could hear his footsteps following me, but he remained tellingly silent.

We entered the elevator together, the tension slightly easing in the confined space.

"Ryan, I think we should just go back to New York," I said, my voice deliberately calm despite my irritation. "My body has mostly recovered anyway. Once we're back home, there won't be any other men around for you to worry about. Wouldn't that be perfect?"

I couldn't help the sarcastic edge that crept into my voice. A little jealousy could be cute sometimes, but this? Making faces at a business partner in public? Was Ryan seriously this childish?

The elevator dinged, and he strode out without responding. His silence only fueled my anger as we returned to our room.

As soon as I got inside, I started packing my things. There were plenty of flights from San Francisco to New York—I could leave anytime I wanted.

Ryan watched me for a while before finally approaching. "Serena, are you really just going to leave like this?"

I ignored him, continuing to fold my clothes with quick, angry movements.

He stepped closer, grabbing my wrist gently. "Are you angry?"

I let out a bitter laugh, giving him a sideways glance. "How dare I be angry, right?"

"Don't talk to me in that tone."

"Oh? And what tone should I use?" I snapped, yanking my arm away. "Should I apologize and whimper that I'll never speak to another man again? Is that what you want?"

I frowned, my voice rising with emotion. "Ryan, I am my own person. I will never be able to live like that. Your jealousy is your problem—a reflection of your narrow-mindedness. You need to ask yourself why you have so little confidence."

"Is it because you don't trust me, or is it just your own selfishness?"

The room temperature seemed to drop several degrees as we glared at each other, neither willing to back down.

I was the first to look away, snapping my suitcase shut with finality.

"I think we need some time apart to cool down."

As I grabbed the handle of my suitcase, Ryan blocked my path, his expression torn between anger and desperation.

"Is this why you've been avoiding the topic of remarriage?"

I frowned, confused by this sudden change of subject. Where did that come from?

"Serena, have you given up on the idea of remarrying me?"

The disappointment in his eyes made something twist in my chest, but I remained silent. Sometimes silence speaks louder than words, and as I turned to leave, my answer was clear enough.

These past few days in San Francisco had been tense. The friction between us had only grown, mostly because of Ethan.

And now, thanks to Georgina, Ryan's wariness toward him had turned into full-blown resentment.

Honestly, I wasn't surprised we ended up fighting this badly. A part of me had seen it coming.

I stepped into the elevator, wheeled my suitcase out of the hotel, and got into a cab straight to the airport.

Maybe some distance would do us good.

I was never meant to be someone else's possession. And if Ryan kept holding on so tightly, all he would do was push me further away.

Source:

Chapter 165: Chapter 165 The false truth

Author's POV

While Serena and Ryan were both nursing their wounded hearts after their argument, Lucian West instructed his assistant to locate people mentioned in the project files, particularly those who had directly participated in the project years ago.

"I need to meet them personally," Lucian said, his voice heavy with determination.

"Of course, Mr. West," his assistant nodded obediently.

Following the records in the documents, Lucian's assistant quickly located the former project manager. The man had since retired from Blackwood Corporation, his hair now streaked with gray.

When the assistant arrived at his house, the old man was watering plants in his backyard, seemingly enjoying his peaceful retirement.

"Are you Eric?" the assistant called out.

The old man turned around, a flash of shrewdness briefly lighting up his eyes.

"Yes, that's me. And you are?"

"I have some questions I'd like to ask you. Would you mind coming with me?"

The assistant's expression was serious, but Eric didn't seem particularly alarmed.

"I have time, but might I ask what this is about? I'd like to be prepared."

Without hesitation, the assistant pulled out a thick wad of cash from his pocket and placed it on the nearby table.

"You'll find out when we get there."

Eric's eyes brightened immediately at the sight of money, and he quickly pocketed the cash.

"I have time, absolutely! Let me just grab my coat and we'll go."

The assistant nodded, and within minutes, Eric was in the car.

As they drove toward Lucian's studio, the assistant failed to notice a black car parked near Eric's house. Inside that vehicle, someone was watching them leave, immediately placing a phone call.

"Mr. Blackwood, Eric has been taken away."

"Don't worry, everything's been arranged. The old man is just a money-grubber."

"He definitely won't expose our involvement."

After a brief conversation, with just a short acknowledgment from the other end before hanging up, the driver started the engine and drove away from Eric's house.

Everything happened without drawing any attention.

Meanwhile, Eric was examining the interior of the luxury car, running his fingers over the expensive leather seats, his eyes gleaming with appreciation.

The assistant paid no attention to his behavior. After all, this was Lucian West's car—its luxury would naturally impress someone like Eric who had likely never experienced such opulence.

"When you meet Mr. West, just answer his questions honestly," the assistant instructed.

"If everything you tell us is true, there will be additional compensation."

At the mention of more money, Eric nodded eagerly.

"Don't worry, I've lived in New York my whole life. In my younger days, I worked all sorts of construction jobs—did all the dirty, hard work. I've heard plenty of things around here."

Eric chuckled. "My hair might be getting white, but my eyes are sharp, my ears work fine, and my memory is excellent."

The assistant glanced at him and advised in a low voice:

"Just stick to answering Mr. West's questions. Keep any extra chatter to yourself."

Eric nodded repeatedly. "I understand completely."

Upon arriving at the studio, Eric was led directly to Lucian's office.

"Mr. West, this is the former project manager from that year."

Lucian looked up from his desk, setting aside his work.

"Hello, sir. I'm Eric. Which project are you interested in?" Eric asked with a fawning smile, pretending ignorance.

"You may leave us," Lucian gestured to his assistant, who quickly exited the office and closed the door tightly behind him.

"Regarding the suburban development project from ten years ago—how much do you remember?" Lucian asked Eric, his gaze scrutinizing.

Eric furrowed his brow, shaking his head with apparent difficulty.

"Ten years ago? Sir, you're really testing me here. How could I possibly remember something from that long ago?"

"Weren't you the site manager? You truly don't remember anything?" Lucian's body tensed, his tone growing urgent.

Eric waved his hands. "Sir, don't rush me. Let me think—I might remember something soon."

Lucian glared at him, not wanting to waste time. He pulled out the project files and read aloud some details that Eric might recognize.

After a moment, Eric let out an enlightened "ah!"

"That project! Yes, I remember now, I remember."

"Since you remember, tell me about the relationship between Blackwood Corporation and the Thompson family at that time."

Eric hesitated. "Relationship? Well, clients and contractors rarely have smooth relationships, but that wasn't our concern. As long as we got paid on time, we were satisfied."

"Get to the point!" Lucian snapped impatiently. This Eric was unnecessarily verbose.

Eric suddenly slapped his forehead as if remembering something important.

"Actually, sir, the relationship between them really did become strained. There were two months of wages that got delayed until the third month."

"The construction site was in chaos. We nearly had a mass walkout."

Lucian's expression softened slightly as he finally heard something substantial.

"Why weren't the wages paid?"

"Our wages were the client's responsibility—Blackwood Corporation's responsibility. But there were some minor issues with the construction, and Blackwood Corporation's people kept nitpicking."

"The two sides even had a huge argument. It got really heated, and many workers witnessed it."

"After that, Blackwood Corporation simply stopped paying wages. In the end, the Thompson family had to use their own money to cover it, which finally calmed everyone down."

Hearing this, Lucian clenched his fist, biting his lip.

"Their own money? How much would that have cost?"

"It wasn't a small amount. That project was well-known throughout New York ten years ago. The bidding process was fierce, with many companies fighting tooth and nail for it."

"Interestingly, Blackwood Corporation winning the project was expected, but as for the Thompson family..."

Eric's voice trailed off, his eyes shifting, causing Lucian's expression to darken further.

"Speak. Don't hold back."

"I dare not speak about this. There's no evidence—it was just gossip at the time."

Eric shook his head repeatedly, seemingly afraid of offending someone powerful.

"When I tell you to speak, you speak. If you offend anyone, I'll handle it."

Lucian slammed his hand on the desk, his voice deep and threatening. Eric jumped, then resigned himself to telling the story.

"The Thompson family wasn't particularly powerful in New York back then. When I was chosen as the project manager, I was actually surprised."

"The two parties weren't equals in terms of power. One side would have to make all the compromises. That's why people speculated that Blackwood Corporation deliberately chose the Thompson family."

"The later wage issues seemed to confirm certain suspicions."

After speaking, Eric stepped closer.

"Sir, please don't tell anyone I said this. In New York today, who dares speak ill of Blackwood Corporation? That would be suicidal."

Lucian's face grew increasingly dark. After a moment, he suppressed his emotions.

"You may fear Blackwood Corporation, but I don't."

"How did this project end?"

Eric thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"That I truly don't know."

"Sir, I was just the site manager, responsible for day-to-day operations. But I think by the project's end, I hadn't seen anyone from the Thompson family for a while."

Eric sounded uncertain, but Lucian suddenly stood up.

"Are you sure?"

Eric shivered, growing even less confident.

"Think carefully—when was the last time you saw anyone from the Thompson family?"

Eric spread his hands helplessly. "How could I possibly remember the exact date?"

"Approximately?"

"Probably... probably when autumn was beginning. That year had quite a hot summer. Around that time, I think."

Eric's vague answer gradually dispelled some of Lucian's doubts.

The man's responses were ambiguous, but he seemed to have clear impressions of important matters. Everything aligned logically.

Was heaven taking pity on him, making this investigation proceed so smoothly?

Source:

Chapter 166: Chapter 166 Have you thought about working with him

Author's POV

Lucian was pulled from his thoughts by Eric's voice. "Sir, do you have any other questions?"

Lucian closed his eyes briefly before asking his final question.

"Did you have much contact with the Thompson family?"

Eric was surprised, not expecting this line of questioning.

"Not much, but when the two sides were arguing, the Thompson family seemed quite pitiful."

"Being the weaker party, they still didn't withhold our wages. The Thompson couple were good people."

Eric sighed, his tone somewhat mournful.

"Later I heard the Thompson family went bankrupt. I don't know what happened to them afterward. Such a shame."

Each of these statements pierced Lucian like a knife, making his eyes redden.

"Enough. You may go."

Eric was startled but didn't waste words. He turned and left the office.

Once outside, he finally breathed a sigh of relief.

In Lucian's presence, he had truly feared saying something wrong and arousing suspicion.

The assistant was waiting by the door and approached when Eric emerged.

"The boss said I could leave. About the money..."

The assistant pulled out another stack of cash from his pocket and handed it over.

"Keep this matter confidential."

"Of course, of course." Eric nodded eagerly as he took the money.

Kane sat in the study of his villa, listening as his assistant gave the latest report.

"Eric has already been sent back by Lucian's men. Everything went smoothly."

"Well done. Make sure Lin keeps his mouth shut. He knows what will happen if he doesn't."

"Don't worry, Mr. Kane. I had someone spell that out to him from the very beginning."

"Good."

A slow smile crept across Kane's face, but his eyes gleamed cold and sharp.

"The stage is set. Now it's time for Lucian to perform."

He leaned back slightly, fingers tapping against the armrest. "Get in touch with Sophie. Have her persuade Lucian to work with me—so we can bring down Ryan together."

The assistant nodded. "Understood. I'll handle it right away."

"Wait," Kane said, his voice low and deliberate. "Make sure Miss Sophie keeps it subtle. I don't want Lucian sensing anything unusual."

"Lucian's been able to endure humiliation for years. That kind of man doesn't miss much. He's dangerous."

"I'll make sure Miss Sophie understands," the assistant replied quickly.

Sophie's POV

I'd just hung up the phone with Kane's assistant, my mind racing with questions.

Collaboration? Really? Wasn't he planning to just sit back and watch the tigers fight? Why would he suddenly want to get involved personally?

"Miss Sophie, Mr. Blackwood also mentioned that you should subtly encourage Mr. West to approach him directly," his assistant had told me.

My lips curved into a sly smile as I finally understood Ethan's intentions. "I understand completely. Please tell Mr. Blackwood I'll handle it promptly."

After disconnecting, I tossed my hair over my shoulder and grabbed the folder from my desk. I needed to visit headquarters. Word was that Ryan had returned, but without Serena. Even more interesting, according to the executive office gossip, Ryan seemed to be in a terrible mood.

Those two must have had a fight. Perfect timing for me to slip right in.

The elevator doors at Blackwood Enterprises dinged open, and I stepped out with my most charming smile plastered across my face.

"I'm here to deliver project documents," I told Ryan's assistant sweetly.

She gave me a once-over and reached for the folder. "Mr. Blackwood is busy and doesn't want to be disturbed. I can take those for you."

I frowned briefly before recovering my smile. "Is he in a bad mood? I actually came to see Ryan. I haven't seen him for several days now."

When the assistant started to object, I clicked my tongue impatiently. "It's just a quick hello. Has Ryan specifically said he doesn't want to see me? You work for him – you should know better than to micromanage who he speaks with."

The assistant looked flustered. "Please wait a moment, Miss Hart. I'll check with him first."

"Yes, do hurry," I smiled sweetly.

As she disappeared behind Ryan's door, I glanced at my reflection in the polished elevator doors. I looked perfect – my outfit carefully chosen to highlight my best features. Ryan would be reminded of what he was missing.

The assistant emerged a few minutes later with a tight expression. "Mr. Blackwood says he doesn't want to see anyone unless it's Miss Quinn. If you have documents or messages, I can pass them along."

My face fell instantly. That bitch Serena still had him wrapped around her finger even when they were fighting. I handed over the folder roughly and stormed toward the elevator. There was no point staying here now.

I hailed a cab and directed it straight to Lucian West's office. Blackwood's security had stopped monitoring me weeks ago, so I had nothing to worry about.

When I arrived, I marched straight toward Lucian's office. His assistant tried to intercept me.

"Miss Hart, why are you coming here unannounced?"

"Relax, nobody's watching me. No one will know I came here," I assured her. "I need to speak with Mr. West. It's important."

After a brief hesitation, she nodded. "Wait here."

A few minutes later, I was ushered into Lucian's impressive office. I took my time looking around – this was my first visit to his workspace.

Not bad at all. The luxury befitted an overseas tycoon, even for a temporary headquarters in New York.

"Miss Hart, what brings you here?" Lucian asked coolly.

I didn't bother with pleasantries and sat down uninvited. "Ryan and Serena have had a fight. I can't get to Ryan right now, so I came to you to figure out our next move."

Lucian raised an eyebrow. "How do you know they've argued? The news reports from the charity gala showed them looking quite... intimate."

I laughed sharply, tapping my temple. "Woman's intuition, Mr. West. Couples fight all the time, but those two are usually so damn logical. When they fight, it means there's a serious problem."

"And you came all this way just to tell me this?" he asked dismissively.

I forced a laugh. "Of course not." I leaned forward. "You've received the suburban development project files now. We're partners in this, aren't we? I'm curious – what exactly are you planning?"

Something had been bothering me. If Lucian truly desired Serena, his actions didn't match up. But if that wasn't his motivation, what was he really after?

Thinking about what Kane had mentioned when giving me those files, I had formed a bold theory. I was here to confirm it.

Lucian raised his eyes to meet mine, his gaze ice-cold with warning.

I didn't flinch. His reaction only convinced me I was on the right track.

"Mr. West, we're in the same boat now. If you tell me what's really going on, I won't spread it around. I might even be able to help you."

Lucian scoffed, clearly not buying my pitch.

What value could I, a woman Ryan had discarded, possibly offer? I could read that thought clearly on his face.

"Let me guess," I continued boldly. "Your investigation, even getting close to Serena – it's all about Blackwood Enterprises, isn't it?"

His hand paused briefly – a tiny tell that I immediately caught.

"I see I'm on the right track," I smirked. "Do you have some vendetta against Ryan?"

"Miss Hart, you're asking too many questions. These matters don't concern you."

"Don't they?" I countered. "Our goals align perfectly. You want to bring down Blackwood Enterprises, and I want to get Ryan back. Aren't we working toward the same end?"

Lucian lifted his head and gave me a searching look, assessing me.

"What exactly are you trying to say today, Miss Hart?"

"I'm here to offer you some advice," I said, leaning in closer. "Have you heard of Kane Blackwood? He's Ryan's uncle. That man could be very useful to you."

I watched Lucian's expression carefully. The subtle shift in his eyes told me he was interested. I'd found my leverage point.

Ryan might be ignoring me now, but with Kane and Lucian as my allies, I'd soon have everything I wanted.

And Serena Quinn would have nothing.

I offered him a faint smile, letting my voice drop just enough to sound like a suggestion rather than a scheme.

"Have you thought about working with him?"

Source:

Chapter 167: Chapter 167 To cause the partnership to break down

Author's POV

Lucian's gaze flickered at Sophie's words. Of course he knew Kane Blackwood.

But Kane was essentially crippled in the corporate world, thoroughly suppressed by Ryan within the Blackwood family structure. He couldn't stir up much trouble internally anymore.

What use could such a person possibly be?

"What brilliant insight do you have, Miss Hart?" Lucian asked coolly.

"My partnership with you doesn't come with hidden agendas, Mr. West. That's precisely why I'm mentioning Kane Blackwood to you." Sophie leaned forward slightly.

She paused briefly before continuing. "Ryan's uncle may have fallen from grace, but he still controls Grandma Evelyn's shares. He's far from useless."

"That man is ruthlessly cunning. By my estimation, he's simply biding his time. As the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Perhaps you two should consider working together."

Lucian contemplated her words for a moment before letting out a cold laugh.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Mr. West, obviously I want to bring Ryan down quickly! Before coming here, I went specifically to his office and couldn't even get a meeting with him!" Sophie's teeth were practically grinding together, her jealousy clearly genuine.

"He's completely bewitched by that Serena woman. He's forgotten our history together, cutting me like a knife through flesh!"

"I'll make him pay for this!"

Lucian, tired of hearing Sophie's romantic grievances, waved his hand dismissively to cut her off.

"What makes you think Kane Blackwood would be willing to work with me?"

Sophie turned to face him directly, shaking her head.

"I don't know the outcome for certain, but Kane surely needs a partner. After being so thoroughly outmaneuvered by Ryan, how could he not want revenge?"

Having said what she came to say, Sophie stood up, ready to leave.

"Mr. West, you can consider this at your leisure. I should be going now."

Lucian nodded. "Miss Hart, I've heard some information that might be useful to you."

Sophie stopped in her tracks and turned around, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

"What information?"

"When Serena was in San Francisco, she became quite close with the LUXE team and secured a partnership. LUXE's CEO is arriving in New York in a few days."

"If you want to create trouble for Serena, you might start with undermining this partnership."

Sophie's eyes brightened as she displayed a meaningful smile.

"LUXE... what a coincidence. They share the same surname."

"Indeed, quite a coincidence," Lucian replied. "I hear this CEO and Serena stirred up some gossip. Perhaps the argument between Ryan and Serena was because of this man."

Sophie raised an eyebrow with interest. "Fascinating. Mr. West, is this your masculine intuition speaking?"

Lucian ignored her teasing comment and simply advised, "Rather than wasting time here, you should focus on figuring out how to approach LUXE's CEO."

Sophie scoffed. "I have my ways."

"Goodbye, Mr. West."

After Sophie left, Lucian leaned back in his office chair, softly repeating Kane Blackwood's name to himself.

He didn't have much information about this disgraced man. After all, Kane was the family's discarded piece, spending years in overseas rehabilitation facilities following his accident before returning to the States.

Such a person challenging Ryan would be like an egg striking stone—utterly foolish.

But a partnership might not be out of the question. He could use Kane to obtain inside information on Blackwood Enterprises, and then use it against Ryan.

Ryan's parents were already dead. So the son would pay for the father's debts.

Ethan Quinn arrived in New York two days early for the partnership discussions. He checked into the luxurious Sherton Hotel in downtown, and Sophie received this information first thing in the morning.

She changed into a professional outfit, wore black-framed glasses, and applied trendy makeup that completely transformed her appearance.

Sophie directly approached Ethan's assistant, introducing herself as Ryan Blackwood's representative.

Ethan had been planning to rest, but after hearing his assistant's report, he put on his jacket and went downstairs.

The hotel's second-floor restaurant was known for its excellent tea and pastries. Sophie sipped her floral tea while waiting for Ethan to appear.

Lucian had provided her with extensive information about Ethan Quinn. By now, she felt she knew this Quinn family heir's personality and interests intimately.

"You're Mr. Blackwood's assistant? What brings you here?" Ethan asked as he approached.

Sophie stood up, appraising him briefly before extending her hand.

"Mr. Quinn, it's an honor."

She didn't introduce herself by name, and he didn't ask—after all, an assistant's name hardly mattered to someone of his status.

This worked perfectly for her, allowing her to minimize her importance in his memory.

Ethan nodded and shook her hand briefly.

"Hello, please sit."

Sophie smiled politely, and after they were seated, Ethan spoke first.

"My assistant mentioned that Mr. Blackwood sent you to discuss our partnership?"

Sophie nodded. "Yes, partnering with LUXE would be an honor for Blackwood Enterprises."

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Ethan's expression remained impassive.

In his mind, partnership discussions should be conducted with Ryan directly. Sending just an assistant seemed inappropriate.

"So what specifically do you propose for this partnership?"

Sophie shifted slightly, calculating her next words. "Mr. Quinn, Mr. Blackwood understands that your primary purpose for visiting is to collaborate with Dreamland Studio. Blackwood Enterprises simply wanted to see if there's any way we could assist."

Ethan paused, not quite understanding her meaning.

"Assist? When I last met with Serena, we discussed the collaboration quite thoroughly. Is Mr. Blackwood not confident in our arrangement?"

Sophie's eyes flickered momentarily as she let out a dry laugh.

"It's not a matter of confidence. It's just that Serena isn't in the best physical condition right now and might not be able to handle such intense work. This collaboration might end up disappointing you."

Ethan's expression darkened, his tone shifting.

"What exactly are you implying?"

"Mr. Quinn, Serena is a workaholic. If Mr. Blackwood hadn't sent me to inform you, she would never back out of this collaboration."

"And with Dreamland's leadership being so exhausted, the partnership results might not be optimal."

Sophie paused, secretly gauging his reaction.

"What do you think, Mr. Quinn?"

Ethan frowned, his expression growing increasingly displeased.

Sophie subtly curved her lips in satisfaction before sighing.

"Mr. Quinn, I sincerely apologize. Mr. Blackwood actually sent me here without Serena's knowledge. If you require any compensation for this inconvenience, I'd be happy to relay that to Mr. Blackwood."

She deliberately spoke these considerate words while actually probing his reaction.

According to the gossip from San Francisco, Ethan's attitude toward Serena had been unusually intimate.

Ryan would certainly not tolerate such a close relationship between them.

If this partnership collapsed because of her intervention, that would be perfect.

And if Ethan didn't believe her and asked Serena directly, Serena would inevitably blame Ryan.

Their argument would continue, the cold war would persist—either outcome worked in her favor.

While Sophie was still calculating her next move, Ethan stood up, giving her a cold look.

"Please tell Mr. Blackwood that this is a partnership between LUXE and Dreamland Studio. Even if Serena doesn't have the energy to participate fully, I don't mind."

Sophie rose hurriedly, feigning panic, wanting to say more, but he had already turned and walked away.

She didn't follow him, her eyes revealing a glint of cold satisfaction.

Source:

Chapter 168: Chapter 168 When Trust Turns to Ash

Serena's POV

I left work with my mind buzzing. As I walked toward the entrance of Dreamland Studio, I spotted a familiar figure—Ethan Quinn. The moment our eyes met, his expression shifted from business-like to genuinely warm.

"Serena!" He quickened his pace toward me.

I smiled, genuinely happy to see him. "Ethan, you're early! I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow."

He shrugged casually. "Thought I'd come see your brilliant operation ahead of schedule." His eyes narrowed slightly. "Though I just had the strangest meeting."

My stomach tensed. "What meeting?"

"Someone claiming to be Ryan's assistant approached me at my hotel. Oddly enough, she suggested we postpone our collaboration because you're apparently too... exhausted."

I froze, my blood turning to ice. "What? I never—Ryan wouldn't—" The pieces clicked together in my mind. Someone was deliberately trying to sabotage my partnership with LUXE.

"I figured as much," Ethan replied. "The whole thing felt off. She was quite insistent that Mr. Blackwood had your best interests at heart."

"That absolute—" I bit back my words, taking a deep breath instead. "Ethan, whatever she told you was completely false. Our partnership is moving forward exactly as planned."

Ethan studied my face. "I know. That's why I came straight here." His eyes drifted momentarily to my growing belly. "Though I am concerned about your workload. Are you sure you're up for this?"

"As you can see, I'm perfectly fine," I replied, straightening my posture despite the ache in my lower back. Six months pregnant, and I refused to let it slow me down.

He examined my face carefully, seeming satisfied with my healthy complexion. "Even if your energy levels are good, you shouldn't overexert yourself. I'll assign additional LUXE staff to help manage this collaboration—keep things running smoothly."

I nodded appreciatively. "Thank you. I'd be grateful for the support."

"No need for such formality. We're old friends, aren't we?" He smiled. "I just arrived today. Shouldn't you be treating me to a welcome dinner?"

"Of course," I laughed. "I've already made arrangements. Once we finish discussing business, we can head to dinner. How does that sound?"

"Perfect. I'm at your disposal."

After we wrapped up our work discussion, Ethan stepped out to take a call. Left alone on the sofa, I finally let my facade crack. My face fell as the reality of the situation sank in.

I couldn't believe Ryan would go this far—secretly trying to sabotage my partnership with LUXE. It was beyond petty; it was despicable.

I was still lost in thought when Ethan returned, an apologetic smile on his face.

"Serena, I'm sorry, but I'll have to take a rain check on dinner. An important LUXE client is leaving New York tomorrow, so..."

I snapped back to reality and nodded with a forced smile. "I completely understand. We'll have plenty of other opportunities. Go ahead."

"Great. I should get going then. See you soon."

I walked Ethan out of the studio. Just as I was about to turn back, I spotted a familiar car pulling up to the entrance. Ryan stepped out from the back seat, his eyes meeting mine across the distance. He didn't immediately approach—just stood there, watching me.

After days of cold war, he'd finally decided to be the one to make amends. I took a deep breath and stepped forward, a bitter laugh escaping my lips.

"Is the great Mr. Blackwood here to personally check whether Dreamland Studio and LUXE are actually collaborating?" My tone dripped with sarcasm.

He looked momentarily taken aback. Clearly, things weren't going according to whatever script he'd prepared.

"What, cat got your tongue?" I snapped when he didn't immediately respond. "Feeling embarrassed now that I've caught you in the act?"

Ryan's expression shifted from confident to confused. Clearly whatever game he was playing, he hadn't expected me to be three steps ahead.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he finally said, taking a step toward me.

"Don't play dumb with me!" I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling my baby bump press against my forearms. "Sending your little messenger to sabotage my partnership with LUXE? Really, Ryan? That's low even for you."

His brows furrowed. "Serena, I genuinely have no idea—"

"Save it!" I cut him off, my voice trembling slightly with anger. "Dreamland Studio is MY company. MY creation. I don't need Blackwood Enterprises, and I certainly don't need you meddling in my business relationships!"

I took another step toward him, jabbing a finger in his direction. "Let me make this perfectly clear one more time: my business is independent. I don't need to ride on your coattails or the Blackwood name. What I do with my career and who I partner with is entirely MY decision, and you have absolutely no right to interfere."

Ryan's face darkened as he processed my words. Whatever reconciliation he might have come here seeking was clearly off the table now. The cold war between us had just turned scorching hot.

"Is that what Ethan Quinn told you?" he asked, his voice dangerously quiet.

"Does it matter? Your representative made it crystal clear this morning," I fired back, hands now protectively resting on my stomach. "Did you think I wouldn't find out? That I'd just sit back while you tried to control me from the shadows?"

Whatever he had come here for—apology, explanation, maybe even reconciliation—was dead before it could take form.

The cold war between us had just gone nuclear.

Source:

Chapter 169: Chapter 169 Scorched Words

Serena's POV

I looked at Ryan's stiffening expression and let out a bitter laugh. The tension between us was practically crackling in the air now.

"Calm down, Serena," he finally said, his voice tight.

"I am perfectly calm," I fired back, squaring my shoulders despite the heaviness of my baby bump. "If you're here to interrogate me or pull some other manipulative stunt, just leave. I don't have time to entertain you or your games."

I turned to walk away, the anger still bubbling inside me even after my outburst. My chest felt tight, like I couldn't quite catch a full breath.

Lucy, my assistant, stood frozen by the entrance, eyes wide as she watched our confrontation unfold. Maya had appeared beside her too, looking completely bewildered by my uncharacteristic display of fury.

Ryan strode forward, his face hardening into that mask of cold control I knew all too well. "What exactly did you mean by what you just said?"

"Exactly what the words meant. Do I need to spell it out for you?" I crossed my arms defensively.

We stood there, neither willing to back down, the air between us electrified with mutual frustration.

Maya stepped forward, concern etched across her face. "Hey, you two, maybe cool it a bit? We're attracting attention out here." She gestured toward the studio entrance. "Let's take this inside, away from prying eyes?"

I let out a derisive snort. "Not necessary. I have work waiting for me. There's nothing more to discuss."

I yanked my arm away when Ryan tried to reach for me and marched straight back into Dreamland Studio without another glance.

Ryan's expression darkened further, but after hesitating for a moment, he turned and walked back to his waiting car.

Maya hurried after me.

"Serena, what the hell was that about? I've never seen you two go at it this badly," she said as she caught up with me in my office.

I waved my hand dismissively. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Look at you—your face is all pale from getting worked up. Here, drink some water and calm down," Maya insisted, grabbing a bottle from my mini-fridge. She pulled up a chair beside me, fanning me with a design portfolio she'd snatched from my desk. "Come on, tell me what happened."

When I remained stubbornly silent, Maya switched tactics, launching into a story about her disastrous date the previous night, clearly trying to lighten the mood.

After several minutes of her persistent chatter, I finally let out a deep sigh.

"It's not really anything major. I'm just tired of Ryan treating me like I'm his personal property. He thinks he can control everything I do, make all my decisions, and he's so ridiculously jealous about everything."

I ran my fingers through my hair in frustration. "This version of Ryan—I really can't stand it."

Maya raised an eyebrow. "Is this about Ethan Quinn?"

"You saw Ethan today too," I said, clicking my tongue in annoyance. "Our relationship is purely professional and friendly. But Ryan's imagination runs wild, and he even sent someone to interfere with our partnership."

I leaned forward, my hands cradling my baby bump. "Just based on that alone—if you were me, wouldn't you be furious too?"

Maya let out a low whistle, tossing the makeshift fan onto my desk. "That's seriously crossing a line! This collaboration is between two companies, not just about you personally. He's trying to sabotage other people's livelihoods because he's jealous? That's beyond controlling!"

Her indignation fed my own, and I nodded vigorously. "Exactly! Which is why I just gave him a piece of my mind at the entrance. And honestly? It felt pretty damn good."

"You're absolutely right, Serena," Maya said, getting fired up. "You can't let any man—even Ryan Blackwood—think they own you. You're your own person! Think about it—if you hadn't divorced him when you did, would you ever have started Dreamland with me? Would you have any of this?" She gestured around my office.

We continued our venting session, with Maya transforming from would-be peacemaker to my biggest cheerleader in my stand against Ryan's controlling behavior. The conversation was cathartic, releasing all the tension I'd been carrying.

When I finally felt the weight lift from my chest, Maya gave me a sly smile.

"But you know, Serena," she said with a cheeky grin, "to play devil's advocate for a second... Ryan showed up here without saying a word. Maybe—just maybe—he actually came to apologize?"

I snorted, smoothing my dress over my bump. "Even if that's true, I'm not forgiving him that easily. Not this time."

Source:

Chapter 170: Chapter 170 Lines Crossed

Serena's POV

Ryan's expression hardened as he watched me fume. He finally furrowed his brows, looking thoroughly annoyed.

"Serena, calm down for a minute."

"I am perfectly calm, Ryan," I spat back. "If you're here to interrogate me or pull some other manipulative stunt, just leave. I don't have time to entertain your control issues today."

I turned to walk away, some of my anger released but my chest still tight with frustration.

Maya stood at the doorway, her eyes wide as she witnessed our heated exchange. My assistant Lucy behind her looked equally shocked, clearly surprised by my uncharacteristic outburst.

Ryan took two quick strides forward, his face a mask of cold intensity.

"What exactly did you mean by what you just said?"

"Exactly what you heard. Do I need to spell it out for you?"

We stood there, trading verbal blows, neither willing to back down.

Maya grimaced and stepped between us like a referee at a boxing match. "Whoa, battle royale in progress! Can we maybe take this inside where the entire street isn't getting a free show? The sun's blazing out here."

"Not necessary," I huffed, crossing my arms over my baby bump. "I have actual work waiting for me. Work that doesn't involve pointless arguments."

I yanked my arm away from Ryan's attempt to stop me and marched straight into the studio.

Ryan stood there, his expression darkening by the second. After a moment of visible internal debate, he turned and walked back to his waiting car.

Maya glanced between Ryan's retreating figure and the studio entrance before following me inside. Friends before exes—always.

"Okay, what the hell was that about?" She stepped inside, closing the door behind her. "I've never seen you go full scorched earth on someone before—not even that client who wanted thirty revisions in one night."

I collapsed into my chair, hand instinctively finding its way to my baby bump. "He crossed a line, Maya. A big one."

"I gathered that much from the shouting." She perched on the edge of my desk. "Want to tell me what happened, or should I just assume he murdered someone?"

"He sent someone to sabotage my deal with LUXE." My voice trembled with residual anger. "Can you believe that? Trying to convince Ethan that I'm too 'exhausted' for this partnership."

Maya's eyes widened. "Are you serious? That's some next-level controlling bullshit."

"Right?" I threw my hands up. "It's like he still thinks he has ownership over me or something."

"Men like Ryan think marriage is a merger, not a partnership," Maya scoffed, reaching for my water bottle and handing it to me. "Drink. Your tiny human needs hydration even when his dad is being a jackass."

I took a long sip, letting the cool water soothe my parched throat. "I just don't understand what gives him the right. We're divorced. D-I-V-O-R-C-E-D. My business decisions are mine alone."

"And what exactly did Mr. High-and-Mighty say when you confronted him?"

"That's the thing—he acted like he had no clue what I was talking about." I rolled my eyes. "Classic gaslighting technique."

Maya crossed her arms, her brows furrowed. "So he denied sending someone?"

"Of course he did! What else would he do? Admit it?" I pushed a stack of papers aside. "God, Maya, the way he looks at me sometimes—like I'm this fragile little thing that can't possibly survive without the mighty Blackwood name behind me."

"Ooh, I hate that look." Maya grabbed a stress ball from my desk and squeezed it violently. "Julian gives me that sometimes when I mention taking on bigger clients. Like, hello? I've been designing since before I met you, thanks."

"Exactly!" I leaned forward, grateful she understood. "Ryan acts like Dreamland Studio is some cute little hobby I picked up after our divorce, not the thriving business I built from nothing while he was busy playing corporate king."

Maya tossed the stress ball from hand to hand. "Remember when you landed the Henderson account and he had the nerve to ask if you needed 'help with the paperwork'?"

"Oh my God, yes!" I groaned. "Or when he suggested I hire one of his company's financial advisors because I 'shouldn't stress about numbers in my condition.'"

"As if you didn't graduate top of your class in business alongside design!" Maya's indignation matched my own. "The man really doesn't get it, does he? You're not just his ex-wife—you're Serena fucking Quinn, design prodigy and business badass."

I smiled despite myself. "Well, I don't know about badass..."

We continued like this, listing every slight and microaggression Ryan had committed since our divorce, each example fueling our righteous indignation. What started as Maya trying to calm me down had morphed into a full-blown man-bashing session. Our voices grew more animated as we cataloged all the ways Ryan had overstepped.

"And don't even get me started on how he tries to dictate who I can and cannot work with," I added, my voice rising. "Like that time he 'happened to mention' that Julian had dated three women from competing design firms."

"Which wasn't even true!" Maya exclaimed. "Julian dated ONE woman who LATER went to work for a competitor. Talk about twisting facts."

"It's like Ryan thinks my entire life should revolve around what he deems appropriate," I sighed, feeling the tension start to drain from my shoulders. "As if I didn't spend enough years trying to mold myself into the perfect Blackwood wife."

Only after I'd vented everything—my frustration with his possessiveness, my anger at his interference, and my determination to maintain my independence—did Maya give me a sly smile.

"Although," she drawled, twirling a strand of her red-brown hair, "not to play devil's advocate here, but Ryan showed up and didn't even get a word in before you went nuclear on him. Just throwing this out there—is it possible he actually came to apologize?"

I snorted derisively. "Even if he was, I'm not about to forgive him that easily. Some things require more than a simple 'I'm sorry' to fix."

"Fair enough," Maya conceded, standing up and smoothing down her skirt. "But Serena, just so you know—and I say this as someone firmly in your corner—you might want to verify it was actually him behind this LUXE sabotage attempt. The Ryan I've observed lately seems..." she paused, searching for the right word, "different. Less arrogant. Almost human."

"Are we talking about the same Ryan Blackwood?" I asked incredulously.

"All I'm saying is that people can change," she shrugged. "Even entitled billionaire assholes with god complexes."

I threw a crumpled design sketch at her. "Whose side are you on anyway?"

"Yours. Always yours," she grinned, dodging my projectile. "But also on the side of truth, justice, and making sure pregnant women don't have stress-induced aneurysms over potentially misunderstood situations."

"Whatever," I mumbled, though a tiny seed of doubt had been planted. "He still has a lot to answer for."

"No argument there," Maya headed toward the door. "Now, are we still on for that client presentation at four, or do you need me to handle it solo while you plot Ryan's ultimate demise?"

I couldn't help but smile. "I'll be there. This baby and I have a company to run, with or without Ryan Blackwood's approval."

Source: