

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

#Chapter 171 The Hidden Alliance - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 171 The Hidden Alliance

Chapter 171: Chapter 171 The Hidden Alliance

Author's POV

While Serena and Ryan's relationship continued to deteriorate, across town, a different kind of power play was unfolding. Lucian West and Kane Blackwood met in a private dining room at Noir, one of Manhattan's most exclusive restaurants known for its impeccable discretion.

Kane lifted his crystal glass of aged whiskey, studying the man across the table with calculated interest. His smile didn't reach his eyes.

"The famous Lucian West. I've heard so much about you," Kane said, his voice smooth as silk but sharp as a blade. "Your reputation precedes you."

Lucian barely acknowledged the compliment with a slight quirk of his lips, clearly not interested in meaningless pleasantries.

"Let's cut to the chase. I invited you here to discuss a business proposition," Lucian said, swirling the amber liquid in his glass.

Kane's eyebrow arched with interest. "Business? Surely you're aware that I'm not exactly in the driver's seat at Blackwood. My dear nephew has made sure I'm just the family embarrassment. What business could we possibly have?"

"Don't sell yourself short. You may not control Blackwood Enterprises now, but that doesn't mean things will stay that way," Lucian replied, his voice dropping an octave.

Kane let out a dry laugh. "What are you, some kind of fortune teller now?"

"Hardly. But we share a common enemy. Why not consider joining forces?"

A satisfied smirk played at Kane's lips. This was exactly what he'd been waiting for. Still, appearing too eager would be a tactical mistake. He took a slow sip of his whiskey, savoring both the burn and the moment.

"And what exactly would this alliance entail? What could I possibly offer someone like you?" Kane asked, feigning reluctance.

Lucian's fingers drummed methodically against the mahogany table, his gaze intensifying. "Inside information on Blackwood operations. Together, we can bring Ryan Blackwood to his knees."

Kane studied him with barely disguised amusement. "Mr. West, have you forgotten that I'm a Blackwood myself?"

Lucian made an impatient sound, his patience clearly wearing thin.

"Let's not play games, Kane. I may be new to the American market, but everyone in New York's business circles knows about the bad blood between you and your nephew. The boardroom coup wasn't exactly kept quiet."

His eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. "Are you really content to live in Ryan's shadow forever? Watching him run what should have been yours?"

Kane's expression hardened instantly, all pretense dropping away as cold fury flashed across his face.

"Not even a little bit."

"Then this partnership is exactly what we both need."

Lucian nodded toward Kane. "Think about it. When you're ready, contact me—but come prepared with Blackwood's latest internal reports and strategic moves."

He paused for emphasis. "I need to know what we're up against so I can counter Ryan's every move."

Before Kane could respond, Lucian stood abruptly, preparing to leave.

"I've said what I came to say. Enjoy the meal—it would be a shame to waste such an impressive spread."

Lucian walked out with confident strides, leaving Kane alone in the private dining room. As the door clicked shut, Kane's face transformed into a triumphant smile.

Sophie had done well. The fish had taken the bait faster than he'd anticipated.

"Start preparing the files," he instructed his assistant who had been waiting discreetly in the corner. "Get all the information about Blackwood's upcoming bids, our regular suppliers, everything. Have it delivered to West tomorrow afternoon."

"Yes, Mr. Blackwood."

"Make sure it's comprehensive. Our European friend might need help understanding how things work here."

Kane picked up his fork and sampled the expertly prepared beef Wellington. After two bites, he pushed the plate away with disgust.

"This is awful."

He waved dismissively. "Let's go. I'll eat at home. Next time we meet someone, find a restaurant that actually deserves its reputation."

His assistant remained silent, not pointing out that Lucian's team had selected the restaurant, not him.

When Kane didn't receive a response, he glanced at his assistant, suddenly recalling Lucian's parting words about the meal.

"That bastard did this deliberately," he muttered.

Meanwhile, the collaboration between Serena and Ethan Quinn proceeded as planned, much to Sophie's dismay when she received the news.

"Miss Hart, even if their partnership continues, there are other options to consider," Lucian's assistant suggested over the phone.

"Like what?" Sophie snapped.

"Perhaps you could... influence one of the staff members involved in the collaboration. Create some chaos from within."

"You should approach someone from Ethan Quinn's team."

Sophie scoffed. "Easier said than done."

"No need to worry, Miss Hart. We've already established contact with an assistant from LUXE. The rest is in your capable hands."

Sophie's expression softened. "Fine, I'll handle it."

After ending the call, Sophie received the contact information and immediately dialed the number. The call was answered promptly.

After Sophie explained her intentions, the voice on the other end responded with immediate understanding.

"So you're Miss Hart? What would you like me to do?"

Sophie hummed thoughtfully, her mind racing with possibilities.

"The design drafts from Dreamland Studio—find flaws in them. Force them to redo their work."

"Can you manage that?"

"Of course. Consider it done, Miss Hart."

Just one day later, all the materials Lucian had requested were delivered to his office. The files were impressively detailed, and Lucian nodded with satisfaction as he reviewed them.

He personally examined the project documents, discovering that Blackwood was planning to bid on the commercial property along Winchester Boulevard—prime real estate they clearly intended to develop into a business district.

This could be an extremely profitable venture.

Lucian closed the file and gave instructions to his team.

"Begin preparation for the Winchester Boulevard project immediately. I want a complete strategy, from initial planning to execution. We're going to compete aggressively against Blackwood."

He paused, tapping his finger thoughtfully on the desk.

"But keep this quiet for now. No leaks."

"Understood, Mr. West," his director of operations confirmed with a curt nod.

The wheels were in motion, and Lucian West was playing a long game where Ryan Blackwood was just one piece on the board.

Source:

Chapter 172: Chapter 172 Pride and Reconciliation

Ryan's POV

The boardroom hummed with the excited voices of Blackwood Enterprises' top executives as they discussed the Winchester Boulevard project. Though everyone else

seemed fully engaged, my mind kept drifting away from the projected financial charts and architectural renderings.

It had been exactly one week since that senseless argument with Serena. Seven days of silence. Seven days of replaying her words in my head. Seven days of wondering if I should have handled things differently.

I stared at the presentation without really seeing it, my thoughts a thousand miles away in her design studio. Was she thinking about me too? Or was she relieved by the distance between us?

"Mr. Blackwood? Your thoughts on this approach?"

The question jerked me back to reality. Charles Martin, our head of development, was looking at me expectantly, along with everyone else around the massive conference table. I straightened in my chair, forcing my focus back to the screen.

"The commercial density ratio is too aggressive," I said after scanning the proposal for mere seconds. "We need to balance retail and office space more evenly. And these parking allocations won't meet code for a development of this size."

Charles nodded vigorously, scribbling notes. "Excellent point, sir. We'll revise immediately."

I glanced at my watch—almost six. We'd been at this for over two hours.

"The framework looks solid otherwise. Make those adjustments and we'll reconvene tomorrow." I stood abruptly, effectively ending the meeting.

The executives gathered their materials, exchanging hushed comments as they filed out. Simon, my assistant, was waiting just outside the door, his expression carefully neutral but slightly concerned.

"Sir, I've cleared your evening schedule as requested. No dinner appointments or calls."

In the past, nights like these would have meant arranging reservations at Serena's favorite restaurants. Tonight would just be another evening alone in my penthouse, with only work files for company.

I paused in the corridor, turning to face him. "Do you think I'm in the wrong here, Simon?"

The question seemed to catch him off guard. He shifted uncomfortably before offering a diplomatic smile.

"Sir, if I may speak freely... relationships require compromise, even when you believe you're right. Sometimes it's about making the first move, regardless of who started the argument."

"Compromise," I repeated the word slowly, testing how it felt. Throughout my business career, compromise had always seemed like weakness—giving ground when you should be claiming more territory.

Simon cleared his throat gently. "In my experience, sir, letting conflicts simmer too long only makes reconciliation more difficult. Perhaps Miss Quinn is waiting for you to reach out."

I considered his words carefully. Had my pride been keeping me from seeing the obvious? My previous attempts at reconciliation had been halfhearted at best—gestures without genuine understanding.

"Arrange for flowers to be delivered to her studio," I said suddenly. "And make a reservation at La Maison for eight o'clock."

"An excellent choice, sir. The chef's table?"

"No," I decided after a moment's thought. "The private dining room overlooking the garden. It's where we had our first dinner after she agreed to design exclusively for Blackwood."

Simon nodded, already typing the instructions into his tablet. "Would you like me to send a car for Miss Quinn?"

The question gave me pause. "No," I said finally. "I'll pick her up myself."

As I walked toward the elevator, I felt a strange mixture of anticipation and nervousness—emotions I rarely experienced in business negotiations. But this wasn't business. This was Serena, and somehow that made the stakes infinitely higher.

In my office, I loosened my tie and stared out at the Manhattan skyline, the city lights beginning to twinkle as dusk descended. I'd built a corporate empire through strategic thinking and calculated risks, yet I found myself uncertain how to bridge the gap with the one person who had somehow become essential to me.

My phone buzzed with a message from Simon: "Reservation confirmed. Flowers will arrive at Dreamland Studio within the hour."

I nodded to myself, slipping the phone back into my pocket. Then I reached for my desk phone and dialed a number I knew by heart.

After three rings, her voicemail answered. Her voice, professional and distant, instructed me to leave a message.

"Serena," I began, surprised by the unexpected roughness in my voice. I cleared my throat and continued, "I'd like to see you tonight. Dinner at La Maison, eight o'clock. I'll come by the studio."

I paused, the words I really wanted to say catching in my throat.

"We need to talk," I finally added, hanging up before I could say anything more.

I never second-guessed my decisions. Yet here I was, wondering if I'd said too much or too little, if she would accept or decline.

For the first time in years, something more important than Blackwood Enterprises hung in the balance. And I had no strategic playbook to guide me through.

Source:

Chapter 173: Chapter 173 Betrayal Uncovered

Serena's POV

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Nearly half our design submissions rejected? Something felt seriously wrong. Rubbing my temples, I spread the sketches across my desk, trying to make sense of it all.

"These were all rejected?" I asked, glancing up at Maya, who stood with her tablet pressed against her chest, looking equally confused.

"Unfortunately, yes. The liaison at LUXE Jewelry was very specific about the flaws, pointing out issues I couldn't even argue with. I had no choice but to bring them back," Maya sighed, dropping into the chair across from me.

I frowned, examining the detailed sketches more closely. My brother Ethan might be demanding, but he respected my work. These rejections didn't make sense.

"That's strange. Even if London has different aesthetic preferences than New York, these designs were solid. Let's have the team revise them, and I'll personally review everything before we resubmit," I decided, sorting the papers into organized piles.

Maya nodded, rising from her chair. "It's getting late, Serena. Why don't you head home? I can handle the rest."

"I'm fine," I waved her off, already making mental notes about the necessary adjustments. "You go ahead."

The door closed behind Maya, leaving me alone with my thoughts. The silence lasted barely five minutes before I heard a commotion in the reception area. Curious voices drifted through the door, followed by Maya's animated tone. I couldn't make out the words, but something was definitely happening.

I was halfway through an email when a splash of crimson caught my eye. A massive bouquet of roses appeared in my line of vision, momentarily blocking my view of the computer screen. My heart skipped a beat as I looked up to find Ryan standing there, looking uncharacteristically uncertain.

"Ryan? What are you doing here?" The question came out breathier than I intended.

He shifted his weight slightly, those intense gray-blue eyes studying my face. "I came to see you."

I stared at the roses, their velvety petals glistening with droplets of water. After a moment's hesitation, I reached out and accepted them.

"Thank you. They're beautiful," I murmured, inhaling their sweet fragrance.

I studied his face carefully. In all our time together, Ryan had many flaws, but dishonesty wasn't one of them. When he said he hadn't done something, he meant it.

"If it wasn't you, then who? The person specifically claimed to represent you. Ethan confirmed it himself."

Confusion crossed both our faces as the implications sank in. "That's impossible," Ryan muttered.

"So someone's deliberately trying to create problems between us," I said slowly, the realization dawning. "Or between our companies."

Ryan's expression darkened. "Someone with access to both our operations."

I felt suddenly foolish for assuming the worst without confirming the facts. "Why didn't you explain this last week?"

"You didn't exactly give me the chance," Ryan replied with a hint of frustration. "And I didn't even know about these supposed interferences until now."

He reached for my hand, his fingers warm against mine. "Serena, can we agree on something? Whatever happens, whatever we hear—we talk to each other first. No jumping to conclusions."

His touch sent familiar warmth through me. "Alright," I agreed softly. "I'm sorry I didn't give you a chance to explain. I've been more emotional lately—pregnancy hormones don't help with rational thinking."

Ryan's face softened instantly at the mention of the pregnancy. "Then we have a deal. Now, can we please go to dinner? I've been thinking about you all week."

I smiled despite myself, placing the roses on my desk. "Give me a minute to finish this email, and then we'll go."

"Take your time," Ryan replied, settling into the chair across from me.

I was just shutting down my computer when a knock interrupted us. Celeste stood in the doorway, clutching a portfolio with an alarmed expression.

"Ms. Quinn, are you leaving now?" she asked, glancing nervously between Ryan and me.

"Yes, is something wrong?" I asked, immediately concerned by her tone.

Celeste hesitated before stepping forward. "I wasn't sure if I should bother you, but..." She opened the portfolio and laid several sketches in front of me. "These aren't our original submissions. They're similar, but definitely not what we sent to LUXE."

I stared at the designs in front of me, my blood practically boiling under my skin. These weren't our original works—just cheap imitations that someone had deliberately swapped with our authentic designs. No wonder they got rejected!

"This is definitely not what we sent to Quinn Jewelry," I muttered, carefully examining the details. The differences were subtle but unmistakable to a trained eye—missing shading techniques, simplified curves, altered proportions. "Someone switched our designs."

Celeste stood nervously before me, clutching her tablet against her chest. "That's what I thought too. The line work isn't even mine. It's like someone used AI to recreate it, but with deliberate flaws."

Ryan moved closer, his tall frame casting a shadow over the designs. His expression darkened as he studied the papers.

"Who handled the delivery to Quinn Jewelry?" he asked, his voice taking on that dangerous edge I recognized from his boardroom dealings.

"Chen from the courier department," Celeste replied quickly. "But he's been with us for years, completely trustworthy."

I rubbed my temples, feeling a headache building. First the argument with Ryan over something he didn't even do, and now this sabotage? The timing couldn't be coincidental.

"Someone's trying to drive a wedge between Dreamland and Quinn Jewelry," I said, my mind racing through possibilities. "And they nearly succeeded by making it look like you were behind it."

Ryan's jaw tightened. "They wanted us fighting with each other instead of looking for the real culprit."

"Exactly." I gathered the fake designs into a neat pile. "But who would benefit from ruining this partnership?"

"Competitors," Ryan suggested, his business mind already analyzing the situation. "Or someone with a personal vendetta against either of us."

The beautiful roses he'd brought now seemed forgotten as we faced this new crisis. I turned to Celeste. "Don't mention this to anyone else yet. We need to investigate quietly. Check who had access to the designs before delivery."

After she left, I collapsed into my chair, the weight of the situation hitting me fully. My hand instinctively moved to my stomach—the stress couldn't be good for the baby.

Ryan noticed immediately. "You should rest." His voice softened as he knelt beside my chair. "Let me handle this."

"No," I shook my head firmly. "This is my company, my designs. I need to be involved."

Source:

Chapter 174: Chapter 174 The Evidence

Serena's POV

"Give me a moment to handle this. It can't wait," I said, my eyes still fixed on the altered designs.

"Of course," Ryan nodded, his expression grave.

We settled back onto the sofa as I quickly texted Lucy to join us. Within moments, there was a knock at the door.

"You wanted to see me?" Lucy appeared, looking slightly nervous as she glanced between me and Ryan.

I placed the sketches on the desk and asked coldly, "Lucy, were you the one who delivered these designs to LUXE Jewelry?"

Lucy nodded, sensing the tension but answering honestly. "Yes, I delivered them. Maya was busy that day. Is something wrong?"

I tapped the desk impatiently. "Come look at these. Are these the designs you delivered?"

Lucy approached, studying the papers with growing confusion. After a long pause, she frowned.

"Something doesn't seem right... the colors are definitely off," she finally admitted, chewing her lip.

"Who accepted the delivery at LUXE Jewelry?" I pressed.

Lucy squinted, trying to remember. "I think it was an assistant who came with you from London—a woman. Maya asked me to pass along some information about the production timeline too, but she barely seemed to be listening. Just nodded and walked away."

"Her attitude was definitely dismissive," Lucy added, wrinkling her nose in obvious dislike.

"And who picked up the rejected designs?" I continued my interrogation.

"I did that too."

I frowned, disappointment evident in my voice. "And you didn't check them carefully when you received them?"

Lucy's face froze, guilt washing over her features as she lowered her head. "... I did look at them, Ms. Quinn, but honestly, I can't really tell much difference in designers' sketches..."

I took a deep breath, trying to control my frustration. "In the future, when something like this happens, you need to examine everything thoroughly and ask for clear explanations. That way our designers can actually address real issues."

"Just be more careful next time," I added, softening my tone slightly.

Lucy nodded emphatically. "I'm so sorry, Ms. Quinn. I've created problems for the studio."

"Maya's in a meeting, right? Come with me—we're going to LUXE Jewelry," I decided, standing up.

"Yes, I'll grab my bag," Lucy replied quickly.

After she left, Ryan looked at me with obvious displeasure. "Do you really need to go right now?"

"Ryan, first there were obstacles to the collaboration, now our designs are being rejected. This isn't coincidence," I explained, determination hardening my voice. "If I don't sort this out immediately, the partnership between our companies might end before it even begins."

My expression grew more serious. "That's why I have to go."

Ryan nodded in understanding. "Then I'm coming with you. It's the perfect opportunity to clear up the previous misunderstanding too."

The three of us arrived at LUXE Jewelry's temporary workspace shortly after. Though it was a provisional setup, it looked impressively professional. This was my first visit, and I took a moment to observe the environment before approaching the reception desk to introduce myself.

The receptionist's eyes widened in recognition. "Please wait in the meeting room. I'll inform Mr. Quinn right away."

I sat down, and within minutes, Ethan walked through the door. His eyes narrowed slightly when he spotted Ryan, his expression cooling noticeably. The tension from our previous misunderstanding still lingered, and he merely offered a curt greeting.

"Serena, what brings you here in person?" he asked, focusing his attention on me.

Not one to waste time, I pulled out the sketches from my bag. "Have you looked at the designs my team submitted?"

Ethan took them, glancing briefly at the pages. "Not yet. These typically go through preliminary screening before reaching me. Is there a problem?"

I nodded gravely. "There is. These rejected sketches don't match our original submissions. There are discrepancies."

I kept my explanation diplomatic, carefully watching his reaction.

Ethan looked genuinely surprised, clearly unaware of what had happened. He flipped through the rejected designs, noting the substantial quantity.

"All these designs were rejected? That's impossible," he said, his brow furrowing.

Dreamland Studio's reputation in New York was well-established—having most of our designs rejected in one go simply didn't make sense.

Ethan's expression turned serious. "Wait here, Serena. I need to find out what's happening."

He strode out of the meeting room while a secretary entered to serve us tea.

Author's POV

Ethan clutched the designs tightly as he headed straight for his assistant's desk, slamming the sketches down in front of her.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded.

Eliza looked at the designs nervously, her discomfort obvious.

"Mr. Quinn, these are the rejected drafts. I noticed some issues, so I..." her voice trailed off unconvincingly.

"Dreamland Studio claims these aren't their original submissions," Ethan said sharply. "You've worked at LUXE Jewelry long enough—can't you tell these are AI-generated designs?"

His anger was barely contained. He trusted that Serena would never submit such subpar work. Unless, of course, she wanted to sabotage the collaboration deliberately.

But that made no sense. This was a matter of professional reputation—why would she risk it?

"Sir, that's precisely why I rejected them," Eliza blinked rapidly, her face a picture of innocence. "I was wondering if perhaps they made some kind of mistake?"

"A mistake?" Ethan narrowed his eyes. "Are you suggesting these are the actual designs they submitted to us?"

Eliza nodded firmly. "Absolutely."

Growing more suspicious, Ethan continued his questioning. "Did anyone else see these designs besides you?"

"No," Eliza shook her head. "After reviewing them, I noticed the problems and sent them all back. I thought it was a minor issue, not worth bothering you about."

"Is that really the case?" Ethan's voice dripped with skepticism.

"Mr. Quinn, don't you trust me?" Eliza's eyes widened. "What would I possibly gain from doing something like this?"

Ethan had to admit she had a point, yet something felt terribly wrong. He gathered up the sketches and returned to the meeting room.

"Serena, my assistant claims these are exactly what she received," he said, setting the papers down on the table.

Lucy immediately jumped in, her voice rising. "That's impossible! I delivered the originals myself. Maya organized everything perfectly—there's no way there could be a mistake."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room.

Ethan wasn't doubting Serena, but with both sides sticking to their stories and no evidence either way, it was difficult to determine the truth.

Ryan let out a soft, knowing laugh. "Designs don't just vanish into thin air," he said, breaking the tension. "Serena, doesn't Dreamland Studio have any identifying marks on your submissions?"

His question hit the mark perfectly. Lucy's eyes lit up with realization.

"Yes! Every design has the designer's personal signature—each with their unique style," she exclaimed. "Those would be nearly impossible to forge."

Source:

Chapter 175: Chapter 175 Compensation

Serena's POV

"Look at this," I said, taking the designs and examining Celeste's work first. I knew her style intimately—her signature and stroke patterns were distinctive and familiar to me.

After studying the paper for a moment, I spotted the problem immediately.

"This signature... it's been stamped on, not signed by hand." I passed the paper to Ethan. "Mr. Quinn, take a look."

Ethan's expression darkened as he examined it. His jaw tightened visibly.

Lucy leaned in closer, squinting at the paper. "She's right! It's definitely stamped, not handwritten. The technique is good, I'll give them that, but it's definitely not authentic."

"Mr. Quinn, I personally handed the original drafts to your assistant," Lucy insisted, her voice firm with conviction. "After receiving them from Maya, I delivered them directly. No one else touched those documents. There's absolutely no way they could have been switched."

The tension in the room was palpable. Ethan's brow furrowed deeply as he processed this information.

Not wanting to put Ethan in an awkward position, I suggested the most obvious solution. "Why don't we check the security footage? That should settle whether anything was tampered with."

Ethan nodded, seeming relieved at the suggestion. "Good idea. Let's go to my office."

"Lead the way," I said, following him out with Lucy close behind.

Minutes later, we were reviewing the security footage from that day. The high-definition camera captured Lucy entering with the document folder, handing it to Eliza, exchanging a few words, then leaving.

We watched as Eliza returned to her desk with our folder, setting it aside without immediately reviewing it. The three of us stared intently at the screen, not wanting to miss anything.

Suddenly, Eliza stood up, took a sip of water, then turned her back completely to the camera.

A moment later, she grabbed her purse and walked out of frame. The folder remained on the desk, but something about it looked... different.

"Pause it," I said quickly, gesturing for Lucy to look closer. "Is that the same folder you gave her?"

Ethan helpfully maximized the image. Thankfully, the studio's high-quality cameras meant the enlarged image remained relatively clear.

Lucy gasped loudly. "That's not it! The folders look similar, but our Dreamland Studio folders have our logo embossed on them. This one doesn't—it's clearly fake!"

Ethan turned to me, doubt creeping into his eyes. "Is she telling the truth?"

I nodded firmly. "Lucy's right. Those folders were custom-made by Maya specifically to leave a stronger impression with clients."

"Mr. Quinn," I said carefully, "it seems your assistant hasn't been entirely truthful."

Ethan's expression hardened instantly. He picked up his office phone, his voice tight with controlled anger.

"Send Eliza to my office immediately."

"Yes, sir," came the reply from the other end.

Within moments, Eliza appeared at the door, her smile strained and her eyes darting nervously around the room.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Quinn?"

"Where are the original Dreamland Studio designs?" Ethan demanded without preamble. "Hand them over now! What exactly is going on here?"

Eliza's composure cracked. She forced an awkward laugh. "Sir, I don't understand why you're—"

"The security footage shows everything," Ethan cut her off sharply. "You switched the files. That's a fact. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Eliza's face paled as she lowered her head, suddenly unable to meet his eyes.

Sensing this was about to become an internal company matter, I stepped back. "Ethan, I should go. I'll have another set of originals sent over right away. We have copies at the studio, so it won't delay the timeline."

"Thank God Celeste noticed the issue," I added. "Otherwise, we might have wasted days before realizing what happened."

"I'll assign someone else to work with Dreamland Studio from now on," Ethan assured me, his professional demeanor firmly back in place despite his obvious anger. "And Serena, if you encounter any other issues, call me directly."

As he walked me toward the elevator, Ethan's professional mask slipped a bit. "I'm really sorry about this," he said, his voice softening. "I should have been more careful about who I trusted with this project."

"Don't worry about it," I squeezed his arm reassuringly. "These things happen."

Ryan, who had been quiet throughout this exchange, suddenly stepped closer, sliding his arm possessively around my waist.

"I hope this incident won't affect our companies' collaboration," he said smoothly, though his grip tightened slightly around me. His message couldn't have been clearer—he was marking his territory.

Ethan's eyes flickered briefly to Ryan's hand on my waist before he smiled diplomatically. "Of course not. Dreamland Studio's reputation speaks for itself."

As we left the LUXE Jewelry building, Ryan's posture remained rigid. Once we were in the car, he finally spoke. "You and Ethan seem quite... familiar."

"We're just friends who happen to click," I said, keeping my tone even. "There's something familiar about him—our last names are even the same. Maybe we used to know each other before I lost my memory. And Ryan, could you not look at me like that? You're picking a fight."

Ryan's jaw tightened. "You know that's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" I challenged.

After a moment of tense silence, his expression softened slightly. "You know, you owe me compensation."

"Compensation?" I repeated, confused.

"Yes," he nodded seriously, though I could see the playful glint returning to his eyes. "First, for suspecting I had anything to do with the sabotage. And second, for making me miss out on dinner. I'm starving."

I couldn't help but laugh. "And what kind of compensation did you have in mind?"

Source:

Chapter 176: Chapter 176 After the Storm

Serena's POV

Ryan's eyes sparkled with amusement across the dinner table. "Feeling better now?" he asked, watching me finish the last bite of my chocolate dessert.

"Much better," I admitted, licking the spoon clean. The tension from earlier had melted away during our impromptu dinner at this cozy restaurant Ryan had chosen. It was small, private, and somehow exactly what I needed after the stressful confrontation at LUXE Jewelry.

"You know," Ryan said, his voice dropping lower, "you still haven't properly compensated me."

I raised an eyebrow. "The dinner wasn't enough?"

"Not even close." His gaze darkened slightly, sending a familiar warmth spreading through me.

The waiter appeared to clear our plates. "Will there be anything else, Mr. Blackwood?"

"Just the check, thank you." Ryan never took his eyes off me.

The ride home was charged with electricity. Ryan's hand rested on my thigh, his thumb tracing small circles that sent shivers up my spine. I glanced at his profile, illuminated by the passing streetlights. His jaw was set, eyes focused on the road, but I could feel the tension rolling off him.

"You're quiet," I observed.

"Just thinking."

"About?"

He looked at me briefly, his eyes intense. "About getting you home."

When we finally arrived, Ryan helped me out of the car, his hand lingering at the small of my back as we walked to the door. The moment we stepped inside, the atmosphere shifted.

"Ryan, I—" My words were cut short as he turned me around, pressing me gently against the closed door.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?" he whispered, his breath warm against my ear.

His hands cupped my face so tenderly it made my heart ache. The contrast between his restraint and the naked desire in his eyes was intoxicating. He leaned forward, brushing his lips against mine—just barely, a question more than a kiss.

I answered by pulling him closer, my fingers tangling in his hair. The kiss deepened, slow and deliberate at first, then growing more urgent. His hands moved down to my waist, careful, always careful around my growing belly.

"Are you sure?" he murmured against my lips. "With everything today..."

"I've never been more sure," I breathed, taking his hand and leading him toward the bedroom.

The room was bathed in soft moonlight streaming through the windows. Ryan stood behind me, his hands gently sliding my jacket off my shoulders. Each touch was purposeful, reverent. He brushed my hair aside to place his lips against my neck, sending delicious tingles down my spine.

"Tell me if anything feels uncomfortable," he whispered, his hands now working on the buttons of my blouse.

I nodded, unable to form words as his fingertips traced the newly exposed skin. The blouse fell away, followed by my skirt, pooling around my ankles in a whisper of fabric.

Ryan turned me around slowly, his eyes darkening as they traveled over my body. My pregnancy had changed me, curves fuller, skin glowing. The way he looked at me—like I was something precious, something to be worshipped—made me feel beautiful in ways I'd never experienced before.

"You're breathtaking," he said, voice husky with desire.

I reached for him, undoing his tie with trembling fingers. "Your turn."

He stood perfectly still as I unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the toned chest beneath. My fingers traced the contours of his muscles, feeling them tense under my touch. When I reached for his belt, his breath hitched audibly.

Soon, we stood before each other, barriers gone. Ryan's gaze was hungry, yet restrained. I recognized his caution—his fear of hurting me or the baby—and it both touched and frustrated me.

"Ryan," I whispered, guiding him toward the bed. "I'm not made of glass."

He smiled, a mixture of tenderness and desire. "I know, but you're carrying something precious."

He sat on the edge of the bed, drawing me between his legs. His hands caressed my sides, lips pressing gentle kisses along my collarbone, moving lower to the swell of my breasts. Every touch was carefully measured, deliciously controlled.

Too controlled.

The fire building inside me demanded more. I pushed him back gently until he was lying on the bed, surprise flashing in his eyes as I carefully climbed over him.

"Serena—"

"Shh," I placed a finger against his lips. "Let me."

Straddling his hips, I felt powerful, beautiful. The way Ryan looked up at me—with awe, with hunger—fueled something primal within me. His hands came to rest on my thighs, grip tightening as I moved against him.

"God, Serena," he groaned, his composure cracking.

I leaned down to kiss him, my hair creating a curtain around us. His hands traveled up my back, holding me close as our bodies began moving together in an ancient rhythm. The sensation was overwhelming—each touch, each breath, each whispered word building toward something magnificent.

Ryan was everywhere—his scent, his taste, his touch consuming me entirely. The careful restraint he'd shown earlier had transformed into something more desperate, more real. His hands guided my hips, setting a pace that had me gasping his name.

"Look at me," he commanded softly.

I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze. The connection was electric, intimate in a way that transcended the physical. In that moment, I felt truly seen—not as the woman who'd lost her memory, not as the designer fighting for recognition, but simply as Serena.

As we moved together, the world outside ceased to exist. There was only this—only us—bound together in a dance as old as time itself.

When release finally came, it washed over me in waves, Ryan's name a prayer on my lips. He followed shortly after, his body tensing beneath mine as he whispered my name like a sacred vow.

Afterward, we lay tangled together, his hand gently stroking my belly. The baby kicked, as if acknowledging his presence.

"Did you feel that?" I whispered, placing my hand over his.

He nodded, eyes wide with wonder. "It's incredible."

In the quiet that followed, I felt something shift between us—something profound and unnameable. Whatever complications awaited us beyond this room, this moment was ours, perfect in its simplicity.

Ryan pulled me closer, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "Sleep," he murmured. "I've got you."

Source:

Chapter 177: Chapter 177 Quiet Harmony

Serena's POV

The collaboration between Dreamland Studio and LUXE Jewelry finally reached its first milestone. We'd agreed on the initial drafts and designs, both feeling excited about what we'd created together.

"We should host an exhibition here in New York," I suggested during our meeting.

Ethan immediately nodded, but when we got to discussing who would organize it, we hit our first disagreement.

"This should be handled by Dreamland Studio," I insisted. "After all, this is New York—I'm the host here."

"But you might not have enough energy for this," Ethan countered, his voice laced with concern. "Organizing exhibitions is exhausting. I may not have brought many people, but they're more than capable."

He paused briefly before continuing, "If we need more hands, we can always borrow some from your studio. What do you think?"

I couldn't help but feel a little defeated. I knew he wasn't trying to steal the spotlight—he was genuinely worried about my health. It was both touching and frustrating.

"Ethan, you're being far too considerate. I'm almost embarrassed," I said, trying to mask my resignation with humor.

Ethan waved his hand dismissively. "I've told you before—there's no need for formalities between us."

"Then it's settled," I conceded. "And if there's anything you need help with, I won't hesitate to ask."

He nodded, satisfied. "We'll stay in touch."

As Ethan stood to leave, Maya walked in, nearly bumping into him at the door. She waited until he was out of earshot before approaching my desk.

"So, how did the exhibition talks go? What do you need me to handle?" she asked eagerly.

I shook my head. "LUXE Jewelry is taking care of everything. We probably won't need to lift a finger."

Maya's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously?"

"Yep. He's worried about my health, doesn't want me overdoing it," I explained, rolling my eyes slightly.

"Hmm," Maya clicked her tongue twice. "No wonder Ryan gets jealous. If I were him, I'd be suspicious too."

"Oh, stop it!" I protested. "Ethan and I are just friends, nothing more."

"Just kidding! But seriously, you two are so alike in many ways—your personalities, how you handle situations," she said, tapping her chin thoughtfully.

She rolled her eyes dramatically. "To put it bluntly, he's like a male version of you. You're both even surnamed Quinn! If that's not fate, what is?"

Maya nudged my shoulder playfully, grinning from ear to ear. "Maybe you should become honorary siblings. That way Ryan won't get jealous anymore."

"Oh, come on," I laughed, sinking back into the sofa. "There are thousands of people with the surname Quinn. That's hardly fate."

I stretched my neck, rubbing away the stiffness that had been building all day. With my pregnancy advancing, my body was getting heavier, movements more awkward. Organizing such a major event was draining my energy faster than I wanted to admit. Once this collaboration wrapped up, I'd probably need to rest at home until the baby arrived.

Time was flying by so quickly.

"Speaking of Ryan," Maya chimed in, interrupting my thoughts, "I heard Blackwood Industries is swamped right now. There's that Royal Gardens Road project they've been fighting for against other companies. Still no decision on who gets it."

I frowned, realizing how out of touch I'd been. Between my workload and limited mobility, I hadn't contacted Ryan much lately or heard any business gossip.

"Is the situation tense?" I asked.

"Pretty tense from what I've heard." Maya wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "We don't have much going on at the studio right now. Maybe you should pay Blackwood Industries a visit?"

I sat there for a few more minutes before deciding my friend's suggestion wasn't half bad. Before heading over, I swung by my apartment to prepare some home-cooked dishes to bring along.

I arrived just before Ryan had taken his lunch break.

"Serena, what are you doing here?" Ryan stood up immediately, coming over to help me.

"I thought I'd join you for lunch," I said, placing the insulated containers on his desk. The delicious aroma filled the room as soon as I opened the lids.

"You made this yourself?" His brow furrowed with concern despite the pleasant surprise in his voice.

"Try it," I urged, pulling out the chopsticks.

We sat on the sofa, eating and chatting. I could see Ryan gradually unwinding. Between monitoring the Royal Gardens project and investigating the company leak, he'd been running himself ragged.

"You seem exhausted. Anything troubling you?" I asked gently.

"Nothing serious. It'll be resolved soon." He ladled some soup into a bowl for me. "Drink this. You need to take care of yourself now. Don't worry about these matters."

I nodded, accepting the bowl. "I'm just checking in."

"How's your collaboration with Ethan Quinn going? Any more problems?" Ryan asked.

I rolled my eyes playfully. "Can you stop worrying? Ethan's team is handling everything for this event. I'll basically just show up when needed."

Ryan's expression softened at my reassurance. "That's more like it," he said, finally taking another bite of the food I'd prepared.

I couldn't help but smile at his concern. Watching him relax as he ate, I noticed how the tension gradually left his shoulders. Being pregnant had made me more attuned to these little details - the slight furrow between his brows that hadn't fully disappeared, the way his eyes kept drifting to the documents on his desk even during our meal.

Ryan reached over, his palm gently resting on my swollen belly. The warmth of his hand seeped through my dress, comforting and possessive all at once.

"Serena, when are you planning to take your maternity leave?" he asked, his tone carefully measured.

I appreciated his restraint. The old Ryan would have simply demanded I stop working immediately. This was progress - asking rather than commanding.

"I know what you're getting at," I said, covering his hand with mine. "Once this collaboration wraps up, I'm handing everything over to Maya."

His face lit up instantly, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Good. Then you can move back to the Blackwood estate for the remainder of your pregnancy. I'll be able to take better care of you there."

I laughed softly, neither confirming nor denying his assumption. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Ryan opened his mouth, clearly ready to press the issue, but I gently pushed his shoulder.

"Eat your lunch," I urged. "Don't you have a mountain of work waiting? The food's getting cold."

He reluctantly took another bite, but his eyes never left mine, silently communicating what he wasn't saying aloud: he wanted me close, wanted to protect me and our baby.

The afternoon sun streamed through his office windows, casting us in a warm glow. Sitting there, sharing a quiet meal amid his chaotic workday, I felt an unexpected sense of peace. Despite all our history, all our struggles, these simple moments together felt... right.

Source:

Chapter 178: Chapter 178 Dangerous Offers

Serena's POV

"Looks like we have a familiar visitor waiting," I muttered to myself as I approached my office after returning from Blackwood Industries. My assistant hurried over, looking slightly puzzled.

"Ms. Quinn, Mr. West has been waiting in your office for about fifteen minutes now. I offered to call you, but he insisted it wasn't necessary."

We both glanced through the glass partition at the man sitting calmly inside.

"I'll handle it. You can go back to work," I said, dismissing her with a gentle nod.

Pushing open the door, I plastered on my most professional smile. "Mr. West, what a surprise! You could have called ahead. Have you been waiting long?"

Lucian stood up smoothly, returning my smile. "Not at all. I just arrived."

His eyes briefly flickered to my growing belly—just two weeks since our last meeting, and my pregnancy was becoming increasingly obvious. I pretended not to notice his glance and settled myself into my chair.

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

Lucian nodded, getting straight to business. "Our previous collaboration has concluded, but Celestial Gems has decided to establish a presence here in New York. I'll be staying in the city for quite some time."

He leaned forward slightly, eyes intent on mine. "So I was wondering if perhaps we might explore new opportunities to work together?"

My mind immediately flashed to what Ryan had mentioned about competing projects. I must have zoned out briefly because Lucian's brow furrowed.

"Serena?" he prompted.

I snapped back to attention. "I'm sorry, Mr. West. The timing is quite difficult. Dreamland Studio is currently collaborating with LUXE Jewelry on a major project, followed by an exhibition. I'm afraid we simply don't have the bandwidth right now."

Lucian nodded understandingly. "I've heard good things about LUXE Jewelry. They're certainly a worthwhile partner."

"Serena, I'm talking about future collaboration, not immediate," he clarified.

I started grasping for excuses. "I'd love to work together again, Mr. West, I really would. But as you can see..." I gestured at my belly. "I'm running out of time before this little one arrives."

I paused, feigning reluctance. "If I continue prioritizing work, it wouldn't be fair to my baby. Surely you understand?"

Something flashed across Lucian's face—disappointment? Frustration? Whatever it was, he masked it quickly.

"Of course I understand. Your priority should absolutely be your health and your baby," he recovered smoothly. "However, once Celestial Gems secures this new project, Dreamland Studio will be our first choice for collaboration."

"Take some time to consider it, Serena. This partnership could elevate your business to international prominence."

He spoke with such certainty—as if the project was already in his pocket.

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you referring to the Royal Gardens Road project, Mr. West?"

Instead of answering directly, Lucian skillfully changed the subject. "Serena, this is an exceptional opportunity. Dreamland Studio shouldn't limit itself to New York or even just the American market. You should be recognized worldwide."

I frowned slightly. "But Mr. West, why are you being so generous with these opportunities? What's your real motivation?"

Lucian seemed momentarily caught off guard by my directness, but he answered candidly.

"Serena, if you remember, I once mentioned you strongly resemble someone—my first love."

He sighed deeply. "You probably think I'm ridiculous, but there are circumstances I can't explain. Being kind to you... it helps heal an old regret in my heart."

The moment Lucian left, I called Ryan and reported our conversation verbatim. He wasn't pleased to hear that Lucian was still hovering around me.

"It's best if we avoid any future collaborations with Celestial Gems," Ryan said firmly, his voice tense through the phone.

He didn't elaborate further, clearly trying to shield me from whatever business complexities were at play. His priority was clear—me and our baby. Everything else, he'd handle himself.

"Understood," I replied simply.

"When is the exhibition scheduled?" he asked.

"Sometime next week. I haven't received the final notification yet, but Ethan's team seems to have everything under control."

"Good. That's around when the Royal Gardens Road project decision will be announced as well."

The timing was oddly coincidental—both major events happening simultaneously.

"Since you don't have much to handle right now," Ryan continued, his tone softening slightly, "why don't you move back to the Blackwood estate? I'll come pick you up later."

I considered his offer for a moment. With my increasingly unwieldy body, having support around me did seem preferable to living alone. I found myself nodding.

"Alright, I'll go back with you."

Ryan chuckled, clearly pleased with my answer. "Good. I'll see you later then."

After hanging up, I immediately sought out Maya to delegate my responsibilities. I found her reviewing some designs in the conference room.

"Maya, I'm going to need you to take over for a while," I said, lowering myself carefully into a chair beside her.

"Celeste is an excellent assistant for design matters. Let her handle those aspects."

"For anything that isn't a major order, just use your judgment. I trust you both."

Maya listened to my instructions, her eyes growing brighter with each word. She finally burst out, "Serena! You're finally being sensible! Taking time off to focus on your pregnancy?"

I nodded, completely unsurprised by her enthusiastic reaction. She'd been trying to get me to slow down for weeks now.

Source:

Chapter 179: Chapter 179 One Day at a Time

Serena's POV

"Weren't you the one constantly pushing me to go home and rest?" I teased Maya.

"Of course I was! But you never listened to me," Maya replied, then paused midsentence. Her eyes widened with sudden realization. "Ohhh, I get it now."

She dragged out that "oh" with exaggerated inflection, wiggling her eyebrows at me suggestively.

"Seems like Mr. Blackwood's words carry more weight than mine, am I right?"

I laughed softly, feeling heat rise to my ears. No point denying the obvious.

"I've been thinking about it," I admitted. "After this collaboration with LUXE Jewelry wraps up, I'll focus properly on taking care of myself. For now, I'm heading back to the Blackwood estate to rest."

Absentmindedly, I stroked my belly with a gentle touch. "I've been pushing too hard. Time to give myself a break."

Maya studied me with curious eyes, making a clicking sound with her tongue.

"Serena, I swear I can already see this maternal glow radiating from you."

"Really?"

"You probably don't notice it yourself, but trust me, it's incredibly obvious," Maya sighed contentedly, looking genuinely relieved. "This is good. Ryan's treating you so well now. After the baby's born, you could even consider getting back together properly."

She leaned forward, her voice softening. "I'm your best friend, Serena. I know you're still struggling to get past that mental barrier. But with the baby coming soon... it's not such a big deal anymore, is it?"

"Didn't you always say we need to look forward, not back? I just want you to be happy."

I nodded, contemplating her words. "I will be. I'm working on it."

We discussed a few more work matters before I headed back to my office to pack up some things. Even though I was going home to rest, I couldn't imagine myself just eating and sleeping all day. I needed to keep my mind active.

Ryan arrived earlier than expected that afternoon, while I was still having a final handover conversation with Celeste.

Despite her occasional lack of confidence, Celeste seemed determined to step up since I'd placed my trust in her.

"Don't worry, Serena. I'll do my absolute best," she promised earnestly. "I'll take good care of Dreamland Studio until you return after having your baby."

"I know you will," I assured her.

Ryan appeared at the doorway just as we were wrapping up. Celeste immediately straightened when she saw him.

"Ms. Quinn, Mr. Blackwood, I'll get back to work now," she said politely before slipping out.

"You were discussing...?" Ryan questioned, his gaze following Celeste's departure.

"I've handed over most of my responsibilities," I explained, feeling oddly proud of myself. "Apart from attending next week's exhibition, there's really not much else that requires my personal attention."

I shot him a smug look. "Pretty efficient of me, wouldn't you say?"

Ryan's lips curved into a smile, clearly surprised by my compliance. He reached out, gently tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear. Let's go home."

The way he said "home" felt so natural, as if the Blackwood estate had never stopped being our shared space.

Once we got into the car, I suddenly remembered I'd need to stop by my apartment.

"Ryan, I should grab some clothes from—"

"Already taken care of," he interrupted smoothly. "I've had everything prepared for you. You won't be missing anything, I promise."

I blinked in surprise. "You've been spending money unnecessarily again, haven't you?"

"How is preparing things for you ever unnecessary?" he countered, his tone soft but leaving no room for argument.

I decided to let it go. After all, it did save me considerable trouble.

"Fine," I conceded.

"When we get to the estate, you can check if there's anything missing, and I'll have it arranged immediately," he said, then added more seriously, "You're quite far along now. Have you scheduled your next prenatal check-up yet?"

The question caught me off guard. It was these little moments of attentiveness that were slowly chipping away at my resistance. The Ryan who'd ignored me for years would never have bothered with such details.

"Not yet," I admitted. "I was planning to do that tomorrow."

"I've already spoken with Dr. Morrison," Ryan revealed. "She's available tomorrow afternoon if that works for you. I've cleared my schedule to accompany you."

I felt a strange flutter in my chest that had nothing to do with the baby. "You don't have to—"

"I want to," he said firmly. "This is our child, Serena. I want to be involved in every step."

The car fell silent as we continued toward the Blackwood estate. I stared out the window, lost in thought. It was frightening how easily I could slip back into this—into us. Into believing that everything could be different this time.

"What are you thinking about?" Ryan asked quietly, breaking into my thoughts.

I turned to look at him. "Maya thinks I should consider remarrying you after the baby comes."

I hadn't planned to say it so bluntly. Ryan's eyes widened slightly, but he maintained his composure.

"And what do you think?" he asked cautiously.

I shrugged. "I think we have a lot more healing to do before we discuss anything like that."

Ryan nodded slowly. "Fair enough."

He reached across the seat and took my hand, his thumb tracing gentle circles on my skin.

"One day at a time, Serena. That's all I'm asking for."

For now, that was something I could give him. One day at a time.

Source:

Chapter 180: Chapter 180 The Exhibition and the Enemy

Serena's POV

I sank gratefully into the chair Ryan guided me toward. My back had been aching all morning, but I wasn't about to admit that out loud. The exhibition hall buzzed with activity—LUXE Jewelry had certainly gone all out for this event. Ethan had managed to gather practically every influential figure in the city under one roof.

"Here, put this under your back," Ryan murmured, adjusting a small pillow behind me. His attentiveness still caught me off guard sometimes.

I was surveying the glittering crowd when Ethan Quinn himself spotted us and made his way over. His confident stride and warm smile reminded me how much I enjoyed working with him.

"Serena, Mr. Blackwood, I'm delighted you could make it," he greeted us warmly.

"Ethan, you've outdone yourself with this exhibition," I replied honestly, taking in the elaborate displays and perfect lighting that showcased each piece. "It's absolutely breathtaking."

He grinned, clearly pleased with my assessment. "My trip to this city has been incredibly valuable. When I return to England, I'll definitely recommend Dreamland Studio to all my business associates."

"Thank you," I said sincerely. "This collaboration has been a pleasure."

"It's nothing," Ethan waved dismissively. "Once you're back at the studio, we'll continue working together."

"I'd like that."

Throughout our exchange, Ryan remained silent beside me, though his face maintained a polite smile. The possessive hand at the small of my back spoke volumes more than any words could.

Ethan soon excused himself to greet other guests, and I turned to Ryan with a teasing smile.

"Look at you behaving so well today. No jealousy fits."

Ryan chuckled softly. "Didn't we already clear up those misunderstandings?"

"Of course," I laughed. "I'm just teasing."

We were still bantering when Maya approached, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Mr. Blackwood gracing us with his presence! Now that's what I call a dedicated flower guardian," she said playfully.

To my surprise, Ryan responded with genuine courtesy. "Serena needs to be careful with her movements now. I appreciate you managing the studio affairs in her absence."

Maya looked momentarily stunned by his politeness. "Um, no need to thank me, Mr. Blackwood. It's all part of the job."

After recovering, she shot me a wide-eyed look that clearly said "who is this man and what did he do with the real Ryan Blackwood?" I bit back a smile.

"The designers from our studio are all here," Maya continued, composing herself. "They're impressed with the event planning. I've told them to take notes."

I nodded. "LUXE Jewelry is an established brand. This level of execution is what you'd expect."

"Absolutely. And Ethan is surprisingly down-to-earth for someone of his position—no airs at all," Maya added enthusiastically. "He's been quite helpful during your absence."

I raised an eyebrow. "Has he?"

"Yeah, but don't worry," Maya quickly clarified, knowing how I felt about owing favors. "I've handled all the necessary reciprocations. I know you hate being indebted to anyone."

I nodded appreciatively. Maya always understood my boundaries.

She looked around the bustling exhibition hall with a wistful expression. "I never imagined Dreamland would reach these heights. Serena, none of this would have been possible without you."

"Don't be ridiculous," I chided gently. "We're a golden duo. Neither of us could've done this alone."

Maya's face brightened. "You're right. Golden duo it is! Anyway, I should go chat with the design team. Enjoy yourselves."

After she left, Ryan helped me shift to a more comfortable position. My pregnancy was making itself known more each day, and standing for long periods had become increasingly difficult.

We'd barely exchanged a few words when a familiar figure approached and casually took the seat beside me without invitation.

I froze. Lucian West.

The man had an uncanny ability to appear at the most unexpected moments. His hair was perfectly styled as usual, those piercing green eyes scanning the room before settling on me.

"What a pleasant surprise finding you here, Mrs. Blackwood," he drawled, deliberately using my former title.

I felt Ryan tense beside me instantly. The temperature between us seemed to drop ten degrees.

"Mr. West," I acknowledged coolly. "I wasn't aware you were invited."

He smiled that calculating smile that never quite reached his eyes. "The Quinn family and I have... mutual interests. Ethan was kind enough to extend an invitation."

Ryan's hand moved to rest possessively on mine. "West," he said, his voice deceptively calm. "I believe we have some unfinished business discussions."

"Indeed we do, Blackwood," Lucian replied smoothly, not intimidated in the slightest. "Though I find myself more interested in your... reconciliation. The rumor mill has been working overtime."

My stomach twisted uncomfortably, and not from the baby. Lucian always had a way of making me feel like I was being analyzed under a microscope.

"Our personal matters aren't up for discussion," I said firmly.

"Of course not," Lucian conceded with false sincerity. His eyes dropped briefly to my swollen belly before meeting my gaze again. "Congratulations are in order, I see."

Before either of us could respond, he stood up. "I won't intrude any further on your evening. Enjoy the exhibition."

As he walked away, I released a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

"How does he always manage to make simple congratulations sound like a threat?" I muttered.

Ryan's jaw was tight. "He's dangerous, Serena. West Industries has been making aggressive moves in the market lately."

"I know," I sighed, rubbing my temple. "Maya mentioned he's been trying to arrange a meeting with me for weeks now."

"And you didn't tell me?" Ryan's voice sharpened.

"I didn't think it was important," I replied honestly. "I've been declining all his requests."

Ryan's expression darkened. "Anything involving Lucian West is important. Promise me you'll keep your distance from him."

Something in his tone made me pause. This wasn't just jealousy—there was genuine concern there.

"What aren't you telling me about him?" I asked quietly.

Ryan hesitated, then leaned closer. "There are rumors about his business practices. Nothing concrete enough for legal action, but enough to raise serious concerns. Just... be careful."

I nodded slowly. "I will."

The baby chose that moment to deliver a particularly strong kick, making me wince slightly. Ryan immediately noticed.

"Are you alright? Do you need to leave?"

I shook my head, placing my hand over his and guiding it to the spot where our child was making its presence known. "Someone's just excited about the party."

Source: