

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

#Chapter 181 Reflections and Revelations - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 181 Reflections and Revelations

Chapter 181: Chapter 181 Reflections and Revelations

Ryan's POV

I watched the exchange between Ethan Quinn and Serena with measured attention. The exhibition had gone flawlessly—better than expected, actually. Every piece displayed with precision, every detail executed perfectly. I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride watching Serena in her element, even from the sidelines.

"Mr. Blackwood, shall we proceed to the celebration dinner?" Ethan approached me as the exhibition wound down. "I've arranged a private room at the restaurant nearby."

I nodded, glancing toward Serena who was speaking with one of her designers. "Of course."

The restaurant was only a short drive away. I kept my hand at the small of Serena's back as we walked in, hyperaware of her pregnancy and the slight wince that occasionally crossed her face when she thought I wasn't looking. Stubborn woman—she'd never admit when she needed rest.

The private dining room was elegant but understated. I could feel the initial tension hanging in the air—understandable, given my history with Dreamland Studio wasn't exactly friendly. Still, everyone made an effort, and gradually the atmosphere loosened.

Ethan Quinn surprised me. For someone of his status, he carried himself with an unexpected lack of pretension. Throughout dinner, I observed how easily he interacted with Serena's team, showing genuine interest in their work.

"I really must be going soon," he said after about an hour, setting down his glass of wine. "These past few days have been quite demanding."

He raised his glass toward Serena and me. "To successful collaborations."

We reciprocated the toast, though I only pretended to sip mine. I'd been avoiding alcohol entirely since Serena's pregnancy—solidarity, I suppose.

"Serena, you must be exhausted after today," Ethan added with genuine concern. "Mr. Blackwood, perhaps you should take her home soon."

I nodded stiffly. "That was my intention."

His suggestion irritated me irrationally—as if I needed his reminder to take care of my own wife. Ex-wife. Soon-to-be wife again, if I had my way.

"You're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?" I asked, keeping my voice neutral.

"Yes," he confirmed with a slight nod. "I've been away from S City quite long enough. It's time I returned."

"Then I wish you safe travels," I offered diplomatically.

His smile seemed genuine. "Thank you, Mr. Blackwood."

Serena excused herself to the restroom, leaving Ethan and me momentarily alone as we walked out of the private room. Just as he was about to head toward the exit, I called after him.

"Mr. Quinn, a moment."

He turned, mild surprise on his face. "Is there something else?"

The question had been burning in my mind since I first saw them interact. Something didn't add up.

"Actually, I've been curious about something," I began, not bothering with preamble. "Your interest in Serena's career—it seems to extend beyond professional courtesy. Is there a history there I should know about?"

His expression shifted almost imperceptibly before settling into something more guarded. He clearly hadn't expected this direct approach.

After a brief hesitation, he laughed lightly. "Mr. Blackwood, I think you might be misunderstanding something. My feelings toward Serena aren't what you're implying."

"What I feel is admiration and respect. She's more like... a friend."

I nodded slowly. "I can see that. But that doesn't fully explain your level of involvement."

Ethan studied me for a moment, then his expression softened into something like amusement.

"You're quite perceptive, aren't you? Very well, I'll be straight with you." He paused, his voice dropping slightly. "Serena bears a striking resemblance to my mother. The similarity is... remarkable. Eight or nine points out of ten, I'd say."

The revelation hit me like a physical force. Eight or nine points of similarity? That couldn't be mere coincidence. My mind raced back to when I first met Serena, to her mysterious past before the accident. The pieces were starting to form a pattern I couldn't ignore.

Ethan noticed my sudden distraction. "Mr. Blackwood? Did that remind you of something?"

I quickly composed myself. This wasn't the time or place to voice my suspicions.

"No, nothing in particular. Safe travels, Mr. Quinn."

"Thank you. Take care—both of you."

I watched his retreating figure with newfound intensity, not breaking my gaze until he disappeared completely from view. The implications of what he'd just revealed were too significant to dismiss.

If Serena resembled Ethan's mother that closely, and considering the gaps in her past... Could she be connected to the Quinn family? The timing of her appearance in my life, her natural talent for jewelry design, the inexplicable familiarity with high society despite her supposed humble background—it all suddenly pointed toward a possibility I'd never considered.

My thoughts were interrupted by Serena's return. She looked tired, one hand absently rubbing her lower back.

"Where's Ethan?" she asked, looking around.

"He left," I answered simply, offering my arm for support. "Let's get you home. You need rest."

As we walked to the car, my mind continued piecing together this new puzzle. One thing was certain—Serena might have more layers to her identity than either of us had ever realized. And I intended to uncover every one of them.

Source:

Chapter 182: Chapter 182 The Elevator Encounter

Serena's POV

Triton's investigation pulled up the news about the Royal Gardens Road project - it was blowing up across media channels. Lucian West had been disqualified for bribery, and the project ultimately landed with the Blackwood Group.

Everyone saw it coming, honestly.

I decided to celebrate the news by bringing some homemade chicken soup to Ryan's office. His chef had prepared it specially under my instructions - a small gesture after all his hard work lately.

When I arrived at his office, Ryan was in the middle of discussing project follow-up details with several department heads. The moment he heard movement at the door, he stood up instinctively.

"Serena, what are you doing here? Weren't you supposed to be resting at home?" His eyes immediately reflected concern.

I hesitated, suddenly feeling awkward interrupting his meeting. "I just heard the good news and wanted to see you. Am I interrupting?"

Ryan shot a meaningful glance toward his team members, who immediately took the hint and filed out of the room. No words needed - just one look and they understood to give us privacy.

I carefully poured the soup into a bowl, blowing gently to cool it before offering it to him. The steam curled between us as I held it up.

"You've been working so hard on this project lately. This soup was specially made to help you recover some strength."

Ryan nodded, accepting my gesture without protest. After taking a few sips, Simon knocked and entered, bringing in a file of documents about Lucian West.

Ryan's expression darkened as he flipped through the pages. I couldn't help myself and peered over his shoulder, curiosity getting the better of me.

"You're investigating Lucian?"

He nodded, brows furrowed in concentration. "His hostility toward me is too obvious. This project wasn't even Celestial Gems' specialty, yet he used so many underhanded tactics."

"It doesn't make sense," he added, shaking his head.

I raised an eyebrow, having followed the news reports myself. Celestial Gems' reputation in the city was in tatters after this scandal, and Lucian's credibility had hit rock bottom. It seemed like a terrible miscalculation on his part.

"Have you found anything unusual?" I asked, genuinely curious about what could drive someone to such self-destructive behavior.

"Something strange here..."

I glanced down at the documents and immediately noticed something odd in Lucian's background check.

"Wait - Lucian was adopted?"

Ryan nodded. "He was."

"Does that matter?" he asked, watching my reaction carefully.

My frown deepened as I tried connecting invisible dots. Celestial Gems had no previous conflicts with Blackwood Group, nothing that would explain such personal animosity. Maybe his behavior had roots in his life before adoption?

"Perhaps you should look into his background before he was adopted," I suggested, the thought forming as I spoke it.

Ryan seemed to find my suggestion insightful. "Good point. I'll have someone look into it immediately."

We didn't discuss Lucian further after that. Once Ryan finished the soup, I prepared to head home, feeling tired from the day's activities.

Ryan insisted on escorting me to the elevator, clearly wanting to accompany me all the way home. But once inside the elevator, I convinced him to return to his work.

"The driver's waiting downstairs," I said, already feeling the familiar ache in my lower back from standing too long.

"Alright, but call me when you get home," he instructed, concern evident in his voice.

"I will," I promised as the doors began closing.

This was the executive elevator, and I expected it would take me straight down to the parking garage. Instead, it stopped unexpectedly at the fifteenth floor.

"Ding—"

The doors slid open, and there stood Sophie Hart, looking as perfectly put-together as ever.

She stepped into the elevator without hesitation, a practiced smile on her face.

"What a coincidence, Serena." Her voice dripped with false pleasantries as she positioned herself directly across from me.

"Serena," Sophie emphasized my name with exaggerated sweetness that made my stomach turn.

"Don't pretend we're close," I said flatly. "We're not friends."

I glanced pointedly at the executive elevator buttons, then back at her perfectly made-up face. "This is the CEO's private elevator, by the way. You shouldn't be here."

The corners of my mouth lifted in a subtle, knowing smirk. "Focus on your job while you still have one. Having inappropriate thoughts about things—or people—above your station will only get you fired."

Sophie's perfectly manicured hand tightened around her designer handbag. "You think you've won, don't you? The abandoned wife making her triumphant return." She leaned closer, lowering her voice. "But we both know what happens when Ryan gets bored. And he always gets bored, Serena."

A familiar ache throbbed in my lower back, stronger this time. I shifted my weight slightly, refusing to show discomfort.

"Fascinating theory," I replied coolly. "But unlike you, I don't measure my worth by Ryan's attention. I never have."

The elevator finally reached the lobby, doors sliding open with a soft chime. I stepped forward but Sophie blocked my path, her perfume overwhelming in the confined space.

My patience snapped. "Move, Sophie. Unlike you, I have somewhere important to be."

She stepped aside with exaggerated courtesy. "Of course. Carrying the Blackwood heir is a full-time job, isn't it?"

I walked past her, head high, refusing to give her the satisfaction of a response. The driver was waiting at the entrance, concern flashing across his face when he noticed my slightly labored breathing.

"Mrs. Selena, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I assured him, sliding into the back seat with as much grace as my pregnant body allowed. "Just take me home, please."

Source:

Chapter 183: Chapter 183 The Orphan's Revenge

Ryan's POV

The afternoon sun slanted through my office windows as Simon carefully laid out the investigation files on my desk.

"Mr. Blackwood, here's what we've found about Lucian West," Simon reported, his voice pulling me back to the present. "He was placed in an orphanage fifteen years ago in June. However, due to the time that's elapsed, we haven't been able to confirm exactly how he ended up there."

I leafed through the documents, scanning the sparse details of Lucian's early life.

"These are the records from the orphanage," Simon continued. "Most of the staff from that period have retired. We're doing our best to track them down, but it may take a few days to get more concrete information."

Something tugged at my memory as I stared at the date—fifteen years ago, June. Where had I heard that timeframe before? Then it hit me. Sophie had once questioned me about the northeast quadrant venture, which had fallen apart around that same time.

"Get me all the files on The northeast quadrant venture from fifteen years ago," I ordered, standing abruptly. "No, I'll go myself."

The records department manager looked startled when I appeared in person. His eyes widened slightly at my request for the Royal Gardens files.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, noticing his hesitation.

After a moment's pause, he nodded. "Mr. Blackwood, Miss Hart also requested these files recently. But without your authorization, we didn't release them to her."

That confirmed my suspicion. This couldn't be coincidence.

The manager quickly located the files in the database and retrieved them. For fifteen-year-old documents, they looked surprisingly well-preserved—almost as if they'd been accessed regularly.

"These files look remarkably clean for their age," I observed, my suspicion deepening. "Has anyone else been reviewing them?"

The manager shifted uncomfortably under my gaze. "Well, sir... your uncle, Mr. Kane Blackwood, had his assistant check them a while back."

The pieces were starting to align in a disturbing pattern. Both Sophie and Kane had taken interest in this particular project before Lucian began his campaign against me.

"From now on, no one accesses any company project files without my explicit authorization," I instructed firmly. "Absolutely no one."

"Yes, Mr. Blackwood," he replied with a respectful nod. "I understand completely."

Back in my office, I spread the northeast quadrant venture documents across my desk. As I combed through the details, the truth began to emerge—my parents had made a critical error in judgment with this project, resulting in substantial losses for a company called Ansett Industries.

Something about this didn't add up.

"Simon, I need you to investigate what happened to Ansett Industries after this project collapsed. Everything—the company, the owners, their families. Leave no stone unturned."

"Right away, sir."

Hours later, I opened Simon's report on my tablet, what I read made my hands shake with fury.

The Ansett family had lost everything after the northeast quadrant venture collapsed. Unable to cope with financial ruin, the parents took their own lives. Their only son vanished—presumably traumatized by witnessing their deaths.

A son who would be about Lucian West's age now.

The adoption records suddenly made perfect sense. The timeline aligned perfectly—Lucian West was almost certainly the orphaned Ansett heir, adopted by the West family six months after his parents' deaths.

This wasn't just business for him. It was vengeance.

My phone buzzed with a news alert:

【Blackwood CEO accused of crippling uncle in power struggle. Kane Blackwood confined to wheelchair after alleged attack ordered by nephew. Press conference scheduled.】

Author's POV

The barrage of news reports about Ryan's alleged attack on his uncle left Serena pacing anxiously around her room.

"I need to see him," she muttered to herself as she hailed a taxi outside the hospital. "This doesn't add up."

During the ride to Blackwood Enterprises, Serena's thoughts whirled chaotically. These accusations would inevitably connect to the circumstances surrounding Ryan's parents'

deaths. Though she didn't understand all the complexities, she knew Ryan well enough to realize that if he had concrete evidence his uncle was responsible for his parents' accident, Kane would have faced far worse than just being confined to a wheelchair.

The taxi pulled up to the imposing glass building, and Serena made her way directly to the executive elevator. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she ascended to Ryan's floor.

"Knock, knock," she rapped gently on Ryan's office door, but no response came from within.

Ryan's executive assistant approached her with an apologetic expression. "Mrs. Blackwood, Mr. Blackwood isn't in the office right now."

Serena furrowed her brow. "Where did he go?"

"He went to the hospital. I believe Mrs. Evelyn Blackwood has fallen ill," the assistant explained, clearly not privy to all the details.

Serena nodded, not pressing for more information. Instead, she headed straight for Mercy General—the private hospital where Evelyn typically received treatment. As she rode in another taxi, her mind raced with possibilities. Would this revelation further damage the already strained relationship between grandmother and grandson?

After all, this news had completely torn away the veil of family secrecy that had concealed these tensions for years.

Upon arriving at the hospital, Serena quickly inquired at the reception desk and was directed to Evelyn's private suite. Ryan's personal assistant stood vigilantly outside the door, while Ryan and his grandmother were alone inside. The hallway was eerily quiet, giving no indication of what might be transpiring within.

"Mrs. Blackwood, I didn't expect to see you here," the assistant said with evident surprise.

"Is Evelyn seriously ill? Is her condition critical?" Serena asked worriedly, her eyes drifting toward the closed door.

The assistant shook his head. "Mrs. Blackwood's condition isn't life-threatening. She's experiencing some weakness and requires rest, but the doctors aren't concerned."

"How long have they been talking?" Serena asked, glancing at the closed door.

The assistant checked his watch. "About ten minutes now, but..." he lowered his voice, "there hasn't been much conversation that I could hear."

Serena raised an eyebrow. Had they been sitting in silence all this time?

"I see. I'll go in and check on them," she decided.

The assistant hesitated briefly before stepping aside to allow her entry.

Without knocking, Serena plastered on a warm smile and pushed the door open.

"Evelyn, how are you feeling?" she asked gently as she entered.

The elderly woman lifted her gaze, her expression remaining coolly detached. "Serena," she acknowledged flatly.

Serena nodded in greeting and positioned herself behind Ryan, resting her hand supportively on his shoulder. She could feel the tension radiating from his body.

"When I heard you were unwell, I came immediately," Serena said. "I'm relieved to see it's nothing too serious."

Evelyn averted her eyes, refusing to soften at Serena's presence or concern.

"You should both leave," she said tonelessly. "I have nothing to say."

Her voice hardened as she added, "The Blackwood name being dragged through scandal like this—you'll be the death of me yet."

Ryan's expression darkened at the accusation, and Serena's smile faltered. Neither responded to the cutting remark.

Ryan stood abruptly, unwilling to endure further recrimination. "Serena, we're leaving."

Source:

Chapter 184: Chapter 184 Family Shadows

Author's POV

Serena glanced between grandmother and grandson, uncertain if she should attempt to mediate, but decided against inserting herself into their complex dynamic. She nodded and followed Ryan toward the door.

Once outside with the door firmly closed behind them, Serena couldn't contain her questions.

"What happened in there? Did she give you a hard time?" she asked worriedly, her forehead creased with concern. She was anxious about a repeat of their last difficult encounter.

Ryan shook his head. "She didn't say anything."

"Nothing at all?" Serena's confusion was evident. "Then what was the point of..."

She trailed off, struggling to understand Evelyn's motivation for summoning Ryan to her hospital bedside only to maintain a stony silence. Had she misread the situation entirely? Was Evelyn's hospitalization genuinely just a physical response to the stress of the family scandal?

Ryan's hand found hers, his grip firm and reassuring despite the conflict etched across his features.

"Serena," he said, his voice low and controlled despite the storm brewing beneath. "Kane is trying to weaponize my parents' deaths. He's reopening old wounds."

"The only reason he wasn't imprisoned years ago was insufficient evidence. That's why I engineered the accident that left him in that wheelchair." Ryan's jaw tightened as he added, "Not finishing the job then was my mistake. I showed mercy."

Serena frowned, concern etching her features as she studied his face. "Ryan, are you okay?"

She knew losing parents in a car accident was a wound that never truly healed for anyone. Kane was truly despicable to rip open that scar and attempt to twist the narrative, smearing Ryan's reputation with such blatant lies.

"I'm fine," Ryan replied, though his eyes told a different story—dark with barely contained rage. "But I won't let this go. Not this time."

"What about Evelyn?" Serena glanced toward the hospital room they'd just left. The elderly matriarch's decision to check herself into the hospital seemed calculated—her way of expressing disapproval without direct confrontation.

The old woman's silence spoke volumes. It was the kind of invisible pressure that cut deeper than words ever could.

Though Ryan had always respected his grandmother, Serena could see this crossed a line he couldn't ignore. There was only so much disappointment one heart could take before it stopped caring altogether.

"I already gave Kane opportunities out of respect for my grandmother," Ryan said, his voice hardening. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have even made it back to the city."

Serena's heart ached for him. The Blackwood family was a masterclass in dysfunction—maintaining appearances while harboring deep divisions.

She moved closer, reaching up to touch his angular face, her fingers gentle against his skin. "You've been through so much lately. You've lost weight, you're under constant pressure, and now this..."

Her voice softened with genuine concern. "I wish I knew how to help you through this."

Ryan caught her hand and pressed it more firmly against his cheek, his eyes softening momentarily as they met hers. "Having you beside me is enough, Serena. That's all I need."

The media frenzy continued to build despite the Blackwood PR team's best efforts to contain it. Every news outlet in the country seemed fixated on the story.

In his perfectly orchestrated press conference, Kane Blackwood played his role masterfully—the injured uncle, frail in his wheelchair, a picture of suffering dignity.

Ryan watched the broadcast with cold fury as Kane delivered his performance.

"I always believed what happened was an accident," Kane said, his voice trembling with practiced emotion. "But then I discovered evidence that suggested otherwise. I never imagined..."

He paused dramatically, appearing overcome with emotion—a calculated move that sent reporters into a feeding frenzy.

"Mr. Blackwood, why didn't you go to the police when you discovered this?" one reporter called out.

"Do you actually have evidence to support these claims?" asked another.

"Will you be filing legal charges against your nephew?" a third voice demanded.

Kane raised his hands in a placating gesture, the very picture of reluctant forbearance. "He's family—my own nephew. Whatever happened, I believe he must carry some guilt for his actions."

His voice dropped to a tone of regretful resignation. "We both bear the Blackwood name. And now that he controls the company, I..."

The deliberate trailing off was masterful—implying fear of Ryan's power and position without actually saying it. It was a calculated appeal for sympathy, positioning himself as the vulnerable victim afraid to challenge a powerful oppressor.

The press conference ended prematurely, with Kane being wheeled away by his assistant as reporters scrambled after him, shouting follow-up questions.

Kane responded only with silence—the final act in his carefully crafted drama.

Ryan switched off the screen, his expression unreadable. "He's good," he remarked coldly. "Too bad I'm not interested in playing his game."

He turned to his assistant who had just entered the office. "What have you found about Lucian West?"

"Mr. Blackwood, we've confirmed that the Ansett's missing son was placed in the same orphanage. All evidence suggests Lucian West is indeed the Ansett heir."

Ryan's eyes flashed with grim satisfaction. The puzzle pieces were finally fitting together.

This explained everything—why Lucian had targeted him from the moment he returned to the country, why he'd made such efforts to get close to Serena, why he seemed to have a personal vendetta against Blackwood Enterprises.

But something still didn't add up. Would his parents really have deliberately bankrupted another family? It went against everything he knew about them.

"Find any surviving members of the Ansett family or their former associates," Ryan instructed. "We need to uncover the full truth behind their bankruptcy."

"Yes, sir." The assistant nodded, then hesitated. "And regarding the current media situation with your uncle—how would you like to proceed?"

Ryan's expression hardened. "Kane wouldn't make such a bold move without a reason. Beyond damaging my reputation, he's clearly angling for control of the company. Let him make his moves—we'll be ready."

The assistant had barely left the office when Ryan's secretary rushed in, her expression tense. "Mr. Blackwood, there's news about a board meeting."

Ryan frowned. "I didn't call any meeting."

"No, sir. It wasn't called by you." Her voice faltered slightly. "It was called by... Mr. Kane Blackwood."

Understanding dawned in Ryan's eyes. This was what Kane had been planning all along—using the media scandal as leverage to sway the board. "When?"

"Tomorrow morning, sir."

Ryan's lips curved into a cold smile. Kane had finally shown his hand—and walked directly into Ryan's trap.

Source:

Chapter 185: Chapter 185 The Boardroom Trap

Author's POV

The meeting time had arrived, but Ryan was conspicuously absent.

The uncomfortable silence quickly dissolved into whispers that grew bolder by the second.

"Is this meeting even valid without Mr. Blackwood present?"

"What's the point of this board meeting anyway?"

"Haven't you seen the news? It's everywhere!"

"Blackwood stock has dropped significantly. Why hasn't Ryan done anything about it?"

The murmurs swelled into a rising tide of discontent, exactly as Kane had planned. I could see the satisfaction in his smile as he observed the growing unrest.

Finally, the door swung open. Ryan entered with Simon trailing behind him. His commanding presence silenced the room instantly—the whispers dying mid-sentence as he took his seat at the head of the table.

His ice-cold gaze swept across the faces before settling on Kane with undisguised contempt.

"Get to the point," he said flatly, dismissing Kane's importance with his tone alone.

Kane leaned forward with a smirk. "Blackwood's reputation has suffered significant damage because of your personal scandals. Don't you think you owe everyone an explanation?"

"So that's what this is about," Ryan replied with mock surprise.

The board members exchanged uncomfortable glances, clearly dissatisfied with Ryan's casual attitude toward the situation.

"You called this meeting, didn't you?" Ryan continued, his voice hardening. "As a shareholder, you publicly smeared Blackwood Enterprises, and now you're demanding explanations from me?"

He leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "Don't you find that absurd, Kane?"

Kane's smile faltered, his expression suddenly stiff and unnatural after being outmaneuvered so easily.

Ryan tapped the table deliberately. "Regarding Kane's accusations about his condition—if I were responsible, he could have pressed charges. There'd be no need to waste company resources on this matter."

"The irony of you calling this meeting isn't lost on anyone here."

The atmosphere shifted immediately. The board members' expressions changed as they realized they were being used as pawns in Kane's personal vendetta.

"What exactly is the purpose of this meeting anyway?"

"We're not here to witness family disputes, are we?"

"If this is just about your personal grievances, perhaps we should leave you two to sort it out privately."

Ryan surveyed their reactions with quiet satisfaction. Kane might have acquired some shares, but his foundation within the company remained weak. Ryan had long since neutralized Kane's potential allies, leaving only those who posed no threat to his position.

Kane was truly naive, attempting to exploit any small opening he could find. A true gambler, indeed.

"Since that's the case, perhaps everyone should leave," Ryan suggested smoothly. "Family disputes should remain private matters."

Kane's face darkened with anger, clearly unwilling to let the meeting dissolve so easily. He exchanged glances with several board members, and one of them promptly spoke up.

"This may be a family matter, but it's significantly affecting the company's reputation."

"I believe Mr. Blackwood shouldn't be appearing in public at this time."

Ryan fixed the speaker with such an icy stare that the man immediately fell silent and averted his gaze.

Another uncomfortable silence fell over the room. Most hadn't expected anyone to openly challenge Ryan's authority.

Kane grinned, seizing the opportunity. "I agree completely. With these scandals surrounding him, Ryan is unfit to lead right now."

"Perhaps Mr. Blackwood should take a leave of absence until these issues blow over."

The shamelessness of Kane's suggestion—considering he was the one who had manufactured the "scandal" in the first place—was breathtaking. His intention to have Ryan temporarily removed from his position was transparent to everyone present.

The board members exchanged uneasy glances, but no one dared to speak first.

Ryan laughed coldly, unsurprised by Kane's thick-skinned approach. "So you want me to step down?"

Kane raised an eyebrow, his silence confirming the question.

"Blackwood Enterprises has plenty of talented people," Kane continued smoothly. "Your temporary absence wouldn't impact operations. Plus, you'd have time to reflect on your... actions. A win-win, wouldn't you say?"

The tension between uncle and nephew was palpable, like electricity crackling in the air.

Ryan finally broke eye contact, his tone shifting to strictly business. "Since this is a formal board meeting, let's handle this properly. We'll put it to a vote."

"Perfect," Kane agreed confidently.

But the voting results weren't what he expected. The board members he'd thought were in his pocket all abstained!

Kane's eyes flashed with fury as he looked at the people who had betrayed him.

Ryan wasn't surprised by the outcome. Kane was truly a fool to think he could use the board to force him out.

"Anything else to say?" Ryan asked, contempt and disgust evident in his expression.

Kane gritted his teeth, speechless with rage.

Seeing his reaction, Ryan's lips curved into a satisfied smile. Kane had clearly overestimated his influence—still nothing more than a clown performing on a stage too large for him.

"If not, meeting adjourned."

Ryan rose and was the first to leave the room. The other board members quickly followed, noticeably avoiding Kane as they passed. Some even kept their distance, clearly wanting no association with him.

When the room emptied, Kane's face had turned ashen with fury. He slammed his fist against the conference table, the sharp crack echoing in the empty room.

His assistant tensed, not daring to speak.

"What happened to those shareholders? Didn't they agree to support me?" Kane demanded. "They were Ryan's people all along, weren't they?"

He didn't need confirmation—the situation had made everything painfully clear. Ryan's position in the company was too deeply entrenched to be shaken by such trivial maneuvers.

Kane left the building seething with frustration, only to discover breaking news on his phone. The headlines detailed all his past misdeeds—how before his "accident," he had abused the Blackwood name, sabotaging several projects.

Ryan had clearly been holding onto this evidence, waiting for the perfect moment to release it.

"Find someone to suppress this immediately!" Kane barked at his assistant. "We can't let this continue!"

The assistant nodded frantically, but Kane's influence was nothing compared to Ryan's resources. By that evening, these stories dominated every trending topic, with engagement only increasing by the hour.

The comments sections filled with uniform condemnation:

"So this Kane Blackwood was never innocent after all, despite his act."

"I remember these projects—they made news back then. Some companies even went bankrupt because of his actions!"

"That's horrible! So Kane is the real villain here, feeding off others' misfortunes. The company hasn't had any scandals like this since Ryan took over."

"Karma coming back around? Seems like neither of them are saints!"

Kane stared at the coverage, raging in his private villa. The study looked like a battlefield, with broken ornaments scattered across the floor.

But no matter how furious he became, the damage was done, and there was nothing he could do to reverse it.

Source:

Chapter 186: Chapter 186 Double Agent

Ryan's POV

The online storm surrounding Kane was spreading exactly as planned - my team had executed the release of information perfectly, ensuring it would occupy him for quite some time.

Grandmother had called multiple times, no doubt to plead Kane's case. I deliberately ignored every call, cutting off any possibility of her intervention. This time, I was determined to handle Kane properly, to minimize his disruptive presence in the company. The results were already evident - the office atmosphere had noticeably improved without his scheming.

"Please inform Mr. Blackwood that I need to report on recent project developments," I'd overheard her saying to my assistant outside.

Simon had firmly blocked her, as instructed. "Miss Hart, Mr. Blackwood is busy. You can leave the documents with me."

Then came her predictable "sudden" realization. "Oh my! I just remembered something important that I can only discuss with Ryan personally."

I nearly laughed when she added in a conspiratorial whisper, "It's about Kane."

Simon's hesitation was brief but noticeable before he replied, "Please wait here, Miss Hart. I'll inform Mr. Blackwood."

"Sir, Sophie Hart insists on seeing you. Claims to have information about Kane."

"Let her in," I decided, curious to see what kind of tale she'd spin. Perhaps this might reveal which side she was currently playing for.

"Ryan!" Her voice dripped with fake intimacy as she entered, using my first name as though we shared some special connection.

"What do you want to say?" I asked bluntly, watching her try to mask her disappointment at my cold reception.

Sophie flashed one of her practiced smiles, stepping closer to my desk. "Ryan, I've seen all the recent news. I'm sure Kane is deliberately spreading those false rumors. I want you to know I believe in you completely."

I gave her a piercing look, my voice growing colder. "Did you come here just to waste my time with this nonsense?"

She pouted childishly - a manipulation tactic that might work on others but only irritated me further. "Of course not. I have important information to share with you."

When I remained silent, waiting for her to continue, Sophie finally seemed to gather her courage.

"Actually, the reason Kane has been able to cause so much trouble recently is because he's working with Lucian West. They've formed some kind of alliance."

That caught my attention, though I kept my expression controlled. "How would you know this?"

Sophie immediately adopted a victimized expression, her voice taking on a wounded quality. "Ryan, Kane forced me into this. That suburban project issue - he made me retrieve those files. I only mentioned it to you once, then stopped looking into it."

"With everything that's happened lately, something felt wrong, so I secretly followed Kane. You won't believe it, but the person he met was Lucian West!"

She delivered this performance convincingly, but I could see right through it. Sophie was clearly hedging her bets, preparing to switch sides now that the alliance between West and Kane appeared to be crumbling. She hoped to extract information from me that would benefit whichever side ultimately prevailed.

As her smile grew increasingly desperate, I decided to test her. "Then explain why you were accessing files on the suburban project from ten years ago."

Her smile froze momentarily before she scrambled for an excuse. "I just wanted to study it to improve my skills... to better contribute to the company."

I stared at her with growing impatience, drumming my fingers on the desk. "Are you going to tell me the truth or not?"

Sophie recognized my mounting irritation - she'd seen this expression often enough to know what followed. I could practically see her mind racing for a better answer.

Before she could fabricate another lie, I snapped, "Get out! And if you can't behave yourself, leave here altogether."

She jumped at my outburst, stammering incoherently before finally retreating from my office.

As the door closed behind her, I leaned back in my chair, contemplating what had just happened. Sophie was playing both sides, that much was obvious. The question was how to use this to my advantage. Perhaps her dual loyalties could be leveraged against both Kane and West simultaneously.

I picked up my phone and dialed Simon. "Have someone follow Sophie. I want to know everyone she meets with over the next 72 hours."

"Already arranged, sir," came Simon's prompt reply. "And your 2 o'clock appointment has arrived."

"Good. Send them in after fifteen minutes. I need to make one more call first."

I hung up and opened my laptop, reviewing the latest reports on Kane's diminishing reputation. The press coverage was extensive, with public opinion firmly against him. My uncle's downfall was proceeding exactly according to plan.

But Sophie's mention of Lucian West gave me pause. If true, that alliance could complicate matters. West's resources combined with Kane's inside knowledge of Blackwood operations could pose a genuine threat if not handled carefully.

I picked up my phone again. It was time to accelerate our countermeasures against both Kane and West. And if Sophie wanted to play double agent, I would give her exactly the kind of "information" I wanted leaked.

The pieces were moving on the chessboard, and I intended to remain several moves ahead.

Sophia's POV

I stormed out of Ryan's office, my perfectly crafted mask slipping with each step. Damn it! How could things go so terribly wrong? I'd calculated everything so carefully, positioning myself between Kane and Ryan to ensure I'd come out on top regardless of who won their little power struggle.

"Miss Hart, HR has processed your termination papers. You'll be leaving the company this afternoon."

Simon's words hit me like a bucket of ice water. My carefully composed expression shattered instantly.

"What nonsense is this? Ryan ordered this?" I demanded, my voice rising sharply.

Simon nodded coldly. "That's correct."

I should have known. Ryan had instructed him to dismiss me if our meeting went poorly. He must have discovered my connection to Kane. That confrontation just now had been my final chance, and I'd blown it completely by refusing to come clean.

"That's impossible! Ryan wouldn't be so heartless! I need to speak with him right now!" I tried pushing past Simon toward Ryan's office.

Simon blocked the doorway firmly. "Miss Hart, please don't make a scene. These are Mr. Blackwood's direct orders. I suggest you process your paperwork immediately."

My face burned with humiliation as I noticed several executive assistants glancing over, their expressions unsurprised. Had everyone known this was coming except me? I stomped away, unwilling to provide them with more entertainment at my expense.

Back at my department, things only got worse.

"HR has notified me of your termination. Pack your things, Sophie," my manager announced the moment I walked in, his previous respectful tone completely gone.

I bit my lip, rage boiling inside me. "You can't be serious."

"What are you standing around for? Clear out your desk. Your replacement arrives this afternoon, and we need your workspace ready," he snapped impatiently.

"How DARE you speak to me that way!" I exploded, unable to contain my fury any longer. Taking orders from Ryan was one thing, but this nobody manager?

He laughed coldly, slamming his hand on the desk. "Who do you think you are? We only tolerated you because Mr. Blackwood showed you special treatment. Now you've been fired."

He leaned forward, his contempt obvious. "Sophie Hart, you have zero value here anymore. Take your things and get out. Stop wasting everyone's time."

My face burning with humiliation, I slammed his office door hard enough to rattle the glass panels. I didn't care anymore—what was there to lose?

My coworkers stared openly as I stormed to my desk, their whispered comments barely concealed. I heard snickers and remarks about my habitual late arrivals and early departures. One particularly brave woman approached my desk with a smirk.

"Hurry up and pack. The new hire will be here soon. Don't waste everyone's time."

Something snapped inside me. I stood up, slammed my belongings onto the desk, and slapped her across the face with all my strength.

"You worthless bitch! When did trash like you get the courage to speak to me like that?"

Source:

CEO's Regret After I Divorced #Chapter 187 Fall from Grace - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 187 Fall from Grace

Chapter 187: Chapter 187 Fall from Grace

Sophie's POV

The sharp crack of my hand against her cheek silenced the room—but only for a moment. She recovered quickly, grabbing a fistful of my hair and yanking hard. The office erupted into chaos, coworkers rushing to separate us while others took the opportunity to land their own blows when no one was looking.

When it finally ended, I was a complete mess. My carefully styled hair hung in tangled clumps, my designer dress was torn at the side, my cheek throbbed painfully, and blood trickled from my nose. In this humiliating battle, I'd clearly lost on all fronts.

"Enough! Stop this nonsense! Anyone not employed here needs to leave immediately!" someone from management shouted.

I glanced at my ransacked workspace, wiped the blood from my nose with the back of my hand, and headed for the elevator. Perhaps I could use this pathetic state to my advantage—make Ryan feel guilty enough to reconsider.

As I plotted my next move, the elevator doors opened, and I found myself face-to-face with Serena Quinn.

Her cold, calculating eyes took in my disheveled appearance, not even attempting to hide her disgust and contempt.

"What drama are you performing today?" she asked, holding the elevator door open, a mocking curiosity in her voice.

Serena's POV

"Enjoying yourself, are you?" Sophie spat at me, her disheveled appearance doing nothing to diminish the venom in her voice.

The elevator kept beeping, but I deliberately held the door open. I wasn't about to miss this moment.

"I just think you're pathetic," Sophie sneered, shifting her gaze pointedly to my stomach. "Ryan might have abandoned our love, but one day, he'll do the same to you. Maybe once that baby is born, you'll be tossed aside too. "

Her voice dripped with contempt, her eyes burning with hatred. The polished facade she'd maintained for so long had completely crumbled.

"Are you finished?" I asked mildly.

Sophie's expression froze, clearly thrown off by my lack of reaction. She'd expected tears, anger, insecurity—anything but this calm indifference.

"Still using the same tired tactics, Sophie? I expected you might have developed some new material by now."

I finally released the elevator door, letting it slide closed. The last thing Sophie saw was my unbothered smile as the doors shut on her humiliated face.

I didn't mention the encounter to Ryan when I reached his office. Instead, I focused on more important matters.

"Has Kane's recent meddling affected your work?" I asked, genuinely concerned about the company's stability.

Ryan shook his head, pulling me suddenly into his arms. I gasped softly as he wrapped himself around me, my ears burning at the public display.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"I'm just tired, Serena," he murmured against my shoulder, breathing in deeply. "Kane's just a nuisance, not a real threat. Don't worry about him."

I felt Ryan relax against me, drawing strength from our closeness. Strange how things had changed between us.

"I'm glad you can handle it," I said, gently pulling back. "The jewelry season is approaching quickly, and I need to return to the studio. I should oversee preparations personally."

Ryan's head snapped up, his brow immediately furrowing. "Serena, didn't you promise to rest at home during your pregnancy? Why are you suddenly—"

I pressed my hand against his mouth before he could finish. "That's why I'm discussing it with you now."

I softened my voice, letting a hint of playfulness creep in. "It's our biggest season. Maya might be overwhelmed handling everything alone, and I'd hate to miss all the excitement."

Ryan's frown deepened, clearly reluctant to agree. I knew he worried about my tendency to throw myself completely into work, especially with my pregnancy.

Seeing his hesitation, I gently shook his arm, "I won't overexert myself, I promise. I'll just provide guidance from the sidelines, not get directly involved in the preparations."

"Really?" His doubt was evident.

I nodded emphatically. "That's the plan. You're welcome to drop by anytime to check on me."

That finally coaxed a small smile from him. "Does Dreamland need Blackwood's assistance with the jewelry season?"

I waved dismissively. "Not yet, but I'll tell you if we do."

"Alright," he agreed, finally relenting.

Only after leaving his office did I hear the full story about Sophie's termination. Remembering our elevator encounter, I couldn't help feeling a sense of satisfaction. Karma had finally caught up with her.

Back at the studio, I dove into organizing for the upcoming jewelry season. Ethan had reached out about a potential collaboration between our brands for the event. On our call, his enthusiasm was infectious—he'd already arranged most of the details.

"Since you've explained everything so thoroughly, I don't see any reason to hesitate," I told him, genuinely impressed by his preparation. "I'll sign the electronic contract later today. We'll proceed according to LUXE's proposed plan."

"Perfect, Serena. Let's have our teams handle the coordination. You won't need to worry about any complications," he assured me.

After discussing business matters, the conversation turned personal.

"How are you feeling these days? I thought Ryan wanted you to step back from work?" Ethan asked, concern evident in his voice.

I laughed softly. "It's our busiest season. Even if I wanted to completely hand things over, I couldn't possibly do that now."

Ethan's warm laughter filled the line. "Fair point. Unfortunately, things are hectic here in London, otherwise I'd fly over to see you."

"No rush," I replied. "Come after the season ends, and I'll treat you to dinner."

"Deal," he agreed cheerfully.

Before ending the call, he mentioned some industry news. "I've heard Celestial Gems is planning to fully enter the domestic market. They're already securing prime real estate in London's city center."

My interest piqued immediately. "Fully entering? Are they abandoning their international markets after all these years?"

"I'm not entirely sure what's happening," Ethan admitted. "If they're expanding their domestic presence, we'll inevitably cross paths with them. You've collaborated with them twice, haven't you? What are your impressions?"

His question revealed how much he trusted my judgment. I hesitated, unsure how to respond.

While Lucian had been an excellent business partner professionally, other aspects of our relationship were...complicated. Far more complicated than I cared to explain.

Ethan sensed my reluctance and gracefully backed off. "We can discuss this in detail when we meet. I'll let you get back to work."

Source:

Chapter 188: Chapter 188 The Matchmaker's Plan

Serena's POV

I put down my phone, finally ending the call with Ethan, and turned my attention to the jewelry season preparations. Maya had already laid out two comprehensive proposals on my desk, both looking equally promising at first glance.

"Ryan actually let you out of the house for jewelry season? Shocking!" Maya plopped down in the chair across from me, eyeing my slightly rounder figure with a grin. "Look at you, all glowing and stuff. Pregnancy agrees with you."

I flipped through the first proposal, unable to suppress a small laugh. "What was I supposed to do? Sit at home knitting baby booties while you handle our biggest season alone? Not happening."

"You haven't taken a real break in forever," I added, glancing up at her. "That's not fair to you."

Maya made an exaggerated gagging sound. "Fair? Please. I don't have a hot billionaire husband or a tiny human using my bladder as a trampoline. My life consists of work, takeout, and binge-watching crime documentaries. Working is literally all I have."

She spread her hands dramatically. "Single lady problems. One income, one mouth to feed... one bed to sprawl across. It's my sad, sad destiny."

By the end, she was laughing at her own theatrics. I selected one of the proposals and slid it across the desk.

"Your life sounds positively tragic," I said dryly. "Maybe I should introduce you to someone? Put all that sprawling bed space to good use?"

Maya's eyebrows shot up. "You? Miss 'I-Was-Married-To-The-Most-Emotionally-Unavailable-Man-In-America' is now a matchmaker? Besides Ryan, what eligible men do you even know?"

"Ethan Quinn," I replied confidently. "You met him during our last collaboration."

The brief flicker of interest in Maya's eyes died instantly. "Oh please. I'm not into younger guys. He probably still gets carded at bars."

I tapped my fingers on the desk, suddenly serious. "I'm not joking around. Yes, he's a few years younger, but he's incredibly mature. The man runs LUXE Jewelry single-handedly, for heaven's sake."

"And," I added, leaning forward with a conspiratorial smile, "you're always talking about your 'face requirements.' Ethan definitely exceeds those standards, doesn't he?"

Maya bit her lip, clearly wavering. I could practically see her remembering Ethan's chiseled jawline and piercing eyes.

"It wouldn't work anyway," she said finally, waving dismissively. "He's in London, I'm in New York. Long-distance relationships are doomed from the start. Besides, we barely know each other. There's no chance for anything to develop."

She stood up, clutching the proposal to her chest, ready to escape my matchmaking efforts.

"Hold on," I called before she could make her getaway. "I'm not finished yet."

Maya stopped at the door, turning back with suspicious eyes. "What now?"

"LUXE has proposed a joint venture for the jewelry season," I said innocently. "Since I obviously can't travel to London in my condition, someone needs to go coordinate in person..."

I let the sentence hang in the air. Maya's eyes widened as she caught on.

"You sneaky little matchmaker!" she gasped. "You had this planned the whole time!"

"Well?" I grinned, rubbing my growing baby bump. "Didn't you just say there was no chance for anything to develop? Here's your chance. Are you going or not?"

A slow smile spread across Maya's face. "Hell yes, I'm going! My passport's been gathering dust anyway."

"Perfect. I'll send you Ethan's contact info. You two can... coordinate directly." I couldn't help the suggestive tone that crept into my voice.

"You're terrible," Maya laughed, but she was already checking her reflection in her compact mirror. "But I appreciate the effort. At least one of us remembers I'm more than just your workaholic business partner."

"That's me," I sighed dramatically, patting my belly. "Just thinking of everyone's happiness while growing an entire human. I'm practically a saint."

Maya snorted with laughter as she headed out, but not before I caught her fixing her hair. Maybe this matchmaking business wasn't so difficult after all.

Sophie's POV

I stared at my phone after hanging up, feeling absolutely sick of Lucian's constant demands. The man had no concept of boundaries. Who calls someone at this hour, expecting them to jump like a trained poodle?

"Who was that?" Ivy asked, poking her head into my bedroom with her usual nosy expression.

"Kane Blackwood," I muttered, throwing my phone onto the bed. "He wants me to contact Lucian again about targeting Ryan."

Ivy shrank back a little. She was completely dependent on me now that she'd been exposed as a fraud in the design world, and we both knew it. The thought gave me a bitter sense of satisfaction. At least someone was worse off than me.

"And you're going to do it?" she asked quietly.

I shot her a withering look. "Do I have a choice? Kane just threatened to tell Ryan everything I've been doing behind his back." My voice turned mocking as I imitated him. "'How would Ryan feel knowing his precious first love has been plotting against him all this time?'"

I'd been fired from Blackwood Industries, my reputation was in tatters, and now Kane was squeezing me for every last drop of usefulness. Life couldn't get much worse.

"Maybe we should just leave the country," Ivy suggested timidly. "Start over somewhere else?"

"With what money?" I snapped, then took a deep breath. Getting angry at Ivy wouldn't solve anything. "No... I have a better idea."

I went to my closet and pulled out an exclusive designer dress, tossing it to my sister. "Put this on. We're going to Celestial Gems."

Ivy caught the dress with wide eyes. "Lucian West's company? Why?"

"Because if Kane wants me to keep working with Lucian, I need leverage. And what better leverage than getting close to Lucian West?" I said, rummaging through my own clothes. "You'll bring your design portfolio. The jewelry season is coming up, and Celestial Gems is expanding into the domestic market. They'll need designers."

Ivy looked skeptical but excited as she held the dress against her body. "You really think they'll hire me? After everything that happened with Serena?"

"That bitch ruined your career," I said bitterly, the words tasting like poison on my tongue. "But Lucian West doesn't know the full story. He just knows you were once a celebrated designer before Serena Quinn destroyed your reputation."

An hour later, we walked into the gleaming lobby of Celestial Gems, both of us dressed to impress. I'd coached Ivy carefully on what to say and how to act. She wasn't as naturally manipulative as me, but she was learning.

"I'm sorry, Mr. West is unavailable," his assistant informed us with practiced politeness after keeping us waiting for twenty minutes. "Perhaps you'd like to schedule an appointment for another time?"

My perfect smile didn't falter, but inside I was seething. Another door slammed in my face. I handed over Ivy's portfolio with graceful persistence.

"That's perfectly understandable. Mr. West must be incredibly busy. Would you mind passing these designs to him? My sister was once the toast of the design world in London before Serena Quinn sabotaged her career."

I couldn't keep the hatred from my voice when mentioning Serena. That woman had everything I wanted—money, status, Ryan—and she'd thrown it all away like it meant nothing.

The assistant took the portfolio with mild interest, flipping through a few pages. "I see. And you believe Celestial Gems would be interested because...?"

"The jewelry season is approaching, and I heard Celestial Gems is expanding domestically. Surely they need talented designers?" I gave him my most charming smile. "My sister's work speaks for itself."

He nodded noncommittally. "I'll make sure Mr. West sees these. That's all I can promise."

As soon as the office door closed behind us, Ivy's composed façade crumbled.

"That's it? We got all dressed up just to be dismissed by an assistant?" she whined. "He probably threw my portfolio in the trash the minute we left!"

"Shut up!" I hissed, gripping her arm painfully. "This is Celestial Gems. Watch what you say until we're out of here!"

Source:

Chapter 189: Chapter 189 The Return of Ivy Hart

Author's POV

Inside Lucian West's office, the man himself was examining Ivy's designs with mild curiosity.

"They've left?" he asked his assistant without looking up.

"Yes, sir. I've run a background check on Ivy Hart. She was indeed quite successful in London several years ago, backed by Blackwood Industries."

"And then?"

"She had a rivalry with Dreamland Studio, was exposed for plagiarism, and Ryan Blackwood personally fired her. It was... quite the scandal."

Lucian raised an eyebrow, setting the portfolio aside. "Ryan Blackwood certainly is unpredictable."

His assistant nodded. "It seems he initially favored her because of Sophie Hart, but after his divorce from Serena, the relationship with Ivy deteriorated."

"What a mess," Lucian said with a hint of amusement. "Sisters who both failed to secure their positions with the Blackwoods."

"Should I reject their application, sir?"

Lucian drummed his fingers on his desk thoughtfully. "Not yet. Having the Hart sisters cause trouble for Blackwood Industries could be... useful. Contact Sophie Hart and tell her sister can start at our design studio. With jewelry season approaching, we could use the extra hands."

When Sophie received the call fifteen minutes later, she couldn't hide her triumphant smile. Finally, something was going right!

"Of course, sir. I'll make sure Ivy is ready to start tomorrow," she promised, already calculating how I could leverage this new connection.

Maybe things weren't so hopeless after all.

Serena's POV

I don't get a minute's peace at this jewelry season gala. The whole event's buzzing with designers and buyers, everyone trying to outshine each other. With Maya in London, I'm handling this personally, and honestly, I'm already exhausted.

Celeste hovers beside me like a protective shadow. "You sure you're feeling okay?" she whispers, eyes scanning the crowd. I nod, grateful for her concern.

"I'm fine," I say, but then freeze mid-sentence. Across the glittering room stands Ivy Hart, draped in an ill-fitting white gown, practically throwing herself at every industry exec in sight. My blood pressure instantly spikes.

"Is that... Ivy?" Celeste hisses, her face contorting. "What the hell is she doing here? After everything she did?"

I place a steadying hand on her arm. "Let's not make a scene. Watch first, react later."

Celeste's mouth tightens into a thin line, but she nods reluctantly.

We don't have to wait long. Ivy spots us, and I swear her eyes flash with malicious delight. She raises her chin in that infuriating way, then sashays over, champagne flute clutched between her manicured fingers.

"Well, well, fancy seeing you here," she purrs, her voice dripping with fake sweetness.

Celeste snorts. "Nothing fancy about it. Dreamland was specifically invited. What's your excuse? Snuck in through the service entrance? And what's with the costume? Community theater closed tonight?"

Ivy's plastic smile freezes. I can tell Celeste hit a nerve - that dress is clearly Sophie's hand-me-down.

"Watch your mouth!" Ivy snaps, composure cracking. "I'm here as a designer for Celestial Gems. I have an invitation, not that it's any of your business!"

Wait, what? Lucian West hired her? I keep my face neutral, but my mind races. This can't be coincidence.

Celeste laughs, bitter and sharp. "Designer? Please. Your plagiarism scandal is still trending. Having the nerve to show up at Jewelry Season with that reputation... your face must be thicker than concrete!"

"Laugh while you can," Ivy spits back. "When I rise again, you'll both regret treating me this way!"

I've had enough of this circus. "Celeste, we have actual clients to meet," I say, turning away without acknowledging Ivy's threat.

As we walk away, I feel Ivy's eyes boring into my back. She thinks she's won something by landing at Celestial Gems, but this reeks of Sophie's meddling. The Hart sisters never operate independently.

"Can you believe her?" Celeste mutters, still fuming. "How did she even get hired at Celestial? That woman is like a cockroach - impossible to get rid of!"

I squeeze her shoulder. "Focus, Celeste. We have that client meeting, remember? The one who loved your emerald collection."

That finally pulls her attention away from Ivy, who's now flirting shamelessly with a group of middle-aged investors. It's almost sad watching her work so hard, laying on that fake charm and batting those eyelashes. This used to be beneath her when she had Ryan's backing.

We're barely seated at a quiet table when Ivy materializes again, uninvited, sliding into the chair across from us. She fans herself dramatically.

"So lively tonight, isn't it? And absolutely boiling in here."

Celeste opens her mouth - I can practically see the insult forming - but stops when I shoot her a warning look.

Ivy raises her champagne glass toward us. "We used to be rivals, you know. Almost like old friends reuniting! No need for all this hostility. Who knows? Maybe we'll collaborate someday."

I can't help but laugh at her audacity. "Ivy, save your act for someone who might believe it. You were never Dreamland's rival - you're not nearly qualified enough for that title."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes as Ivy started her little performance. The moment the waterworks began, I knew exactly what game she was playing.

"Since Mr. West has given you a second chance, you should hold onto it properly instead of stirring up trouble. You might not get another opportunity like this," I said, hitting her right where it hurt.

Ivy's face turned ashen. She bit her lip, clearly frustrated that I'd cut straight through her act, but she wasn't ready to openly fight with me just yet. After a brief pause, she somehow managed to conjure up tears, her eyes turning red as she began to sob.

"Miss Quinn, I know you've never liked me, but all that happened so long ago. Why can't you just let it go?" she whimpered, her voice growing louder with each word. "That plagiarism scandal—you framed me! I never did any of it! I've finally found another chance, so why won't you leave me alone?"

Her crying grew increasingly dramatic, drawing attention from everyone around us. God, she was good at this—always had been.

Celeste's face darkened beside me. She slammed her hand on the table, unable to contain herself. "Ivy, stop with the act already!"

Ivy's body trembled at the outburst, and she cried even harder, tears streaming down her face in perfect, practiced drops. She looked absolutely pitiful—exactly as she intended.

I felt my face grow cold. This was clearly her plan all along—sitting here waiting for this moment to play victim in public. I tugged at Celeste's sleeve, signaling her not to engage further.

Celeste's face remained tight with anger as curious onlookers stared at our table. I could feel her frustration radiating off her.

This woman hadn't changed one bit. After all this time, she still relied on the same old tricks—act weak, play victim, shed tears.

The worst part? It still fucking worked like a charm.

Source:

Chapter 190: Chapter 190 War of Reputation

Serena's POV

I scrolled through my phone, watching the social media nightmare unfold in real time. Those ridiculous headlines were spreading like wildfire:

【Genius designer Ivy Hart was falsely accused of plagiarism, now makes triumphant comeback after being discovered by Celestial Gems!】

【Serena Quinn publicly humiliates young designer at Jewelry Season due to jealousy.】

【Was the truth about the plagiarism scandal different than we thought?】

The edited videos showed Ivy crying like some helpless victim while I supposedly loomed over her. God, people were eating this shit up. Conveniently missing was the part where she approached our table uninvited or her initial provocations.

"Those fucking Hart sisters!" Celeste slammed her coffee mug down so hard I thought it might crack. "I KNEW Ivy was recording something! Did you see how perfectly framed those shots were? She planned the whole thing!"

I rubbed my temples, feeling a headache forming. My phone wouldn't stop buzzing with notifications as the story gained traction.

"People are so gullible," I muttered, scrolling through the comments. Most were condemning me without knowing a single fact. "Look at this - 'Serena Quinn is just threatened by new talent.' New talent? She was literally CAUGHT stealing designs!"

"Want me to make a statement?" Celeste asked, already typing furiously on her tablet. "I was there. I can tell the whole story."

I shook my head. "That's exactly what they want. We engage, the story grows bigger, and Dreamland gets dragged through another round of drama right before our biggest launch of the year."

Lucy, my assistant, burst into my office without knocking. "Sorry to interrupt, but Mr. West is calling. He's asking about the... situation."

Great. Just what I needed. Lucian West calling to either gloat or pretend concern.

I sighed, taking the phone. "Lucian, what a surprise."

"Serena," his voice was silky smooth. "I'm calling about my designer. The incident last night—"

"Your designer approached my table uninvited and created a scene," I cut in, keeping my voice deadly calm. "If you're suggesting I need to apologize, you're wasting both our time."

There was a pause before he chuckled. "Actually, I was going to offer to help manage the... public relations aspect. For a price, of course."

My blood ran cold. So that was his game.

"Let me guess," I said, leaning back in my chair. "You'll make the story disappear if I agree to some business arrangement that favors Celestial Gems?"

"Smart as always," he purred. "My jewelry collection needs your touch, Serena. A collaboration between Dreamland and Celestial would benefit us both."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then unfortunately, I can't control what my designers say to the press. Ivy seems quite... emotional about her past experiences with you."

I laughed, genuinely amused by his transparency. "Blackmail wrapped in a business proposal. How original, Lucian."

"I prefer to call it mutual opportunity."

"I'll pass," I said firmly. "Dreamland doesn't need your help or your threats. We've survived worse than a manufactured scandal."

I ended the call before he could respond, tossing my phone onto the desk.

Celeste looked worried. "Are you sure that was wise? West isn't someone to mess with."

"Neither am I," I said, standing up. "Lucy, get me WhisperStream on the phone."

Lucy's eyes widened. "James? "

I nodded. "If the Hart sisters want to play dirty, they're about to learn I've mastered the game."

Within an hour, James was in my office, listening intently as I explained the situation.

"So basically, they set you up," he summarized, fingers already flying over his keyboard. "Classic character assassination attempt."

"Can you help?" I asked.

He grinned, revealing a dimple in his left cheek. "Oh honey, I was born for this. Give me 24 hours and I'll have the internet questioning every tear that woman has ever shed."

"Do it clean," I warned. "No lies, no fabrications. Just the truth presented correctly."

"The truth is all I need," James assured me, pulling up Ivy's plagiarism records. "Trust me, by tomorrow morning, everyone will remember exactly why she disappeared from the design world in the first place."

As he left, my phone buzzed with a message from Ryan: "Are you okay? I just saw the news."

I stared at his text, surprised he'd reached out. After a moment's hesitation, I typed back: "Handling it. This isn't my first rodeo with the Hart sisters."

His response came quickly: "Need backup?"

For a brief moment, I considered it. Ryan's influence could shut this down instantly. But no—I'd fought my own battles since our divorce, and I wasn't about to stop now.

"I've got this," I replied, then set my phone aside.

Celeste raised an eyebrow. "Ryan?"

"Just checking in," I said dismissively. "Now, let's get back to what matters. We have a collection to launch, and I'm not letting those two distract us from that."

As night fell, I watched the first of James's counter-narratives begin to appear online. The tide was already turning. By morning, people would remember why trusting a Hart sister was always a mistake.

Let them come for me. I wasn't the same woman they'd managed to hurt before.

Source: