

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

#Chapter 201 The Second Chance - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 201 The Second Chance

Chapter 201: Chapter 201 The Second Chance

Serena's POV

The apartment door closed behind us, sealing away the toxic drama of the Hart sisters. I felt lighter somehow, as if a persistent shadow had finally been banished from our lives. Ryan quickly composed himself, his earlier coldness melting away as he turned his attention to me.

"Are you okay? Did all that upset you?" he asked, his voice low and concerned.

His hand remained firmly wrapped around mine, thumb absently stroking my skin in that way that always sent little sparks up my arm.

I shook my head, studying his face with careful curiosity. For years I'd wondered how he'd react when confronted with Sophie's true nature. Now I was more interested in his emotional state than my own.

"You didn't seem surprised about any of Sophie's secrets," I said quietly. "Did you already know what she'd done?"

Ryan closed his eyes briefly, exhaling slowly. "No, I didn't."

When he opened his eyes again, they held a clarity I hadn't expected. "Three years ago, I probably would have been devastated. But now?" He shrugged. "I feel nothing for Sophie. Nothing at all."

I patted the back of his hand, feeling an unexpected surge of affection. "Well, seeing someone for who they truly are gives closure to your past self, at least."

"I'm actually relieved by how you handled everything in there," I added, my lips curving into a small smile.

Ryan laughed softly, the tension in his shoulders visibly easing. "Wait, did you seriously think I might still have feelings for her?"

"I've explained this before," he continued, his tone gently teasing. "After everything we've been through, do you still doubt me?"

I shook my head, my expression turning serious. "I believe you now, Ryan. Completely."

He nodded, satisfaction clear on his face. Then his eyes darkened with that familiar intensity that always made my heart beat faster.

"Since you believe me," he murmured, stepping closer, "when are you going to agree to remarry me?"

His fingers traced a path along my jawline, sending shivers down my spine. "Our baby will be here soon, Mrs. Blackwood. How much longer are you planning to make me wait?"

I calculated the timeline in my head, smiling enigmatically as I met his gaze. "After the jewelry season is completely over, we can discuss it properly."

Ryan's eyes brightened immediately. "So you're saying yes to remarrying me?"

"I didn't say that," I replied, but my tone lacked conviction.

He stepped even closer, his scent enveloping me - that intoxicating blend of expensive cologne and something uniquely him. My body reacted instantly, pregnancy hormones amplifying my desire to an almost embarrassing degree.

"What are you saying then?" he whispered, his lips barely an inch from mine.

I swallowed hard. "I'm saying... I need more convincing."

His answering smile was downright predatory. "I can be very convincing."

Before I could form a witty response, his mouth was on mine, kissing me with a possessiveness that made my knees weak. His hand cupped the back of my neck, holding me steady as he deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding against mine in a way that made me groan softly.

"Ryan," I gasped when we broke apart for air, "we're still in the hallway."

"So?" he growled, already backing me against the wall. "Nobody comes to this floor without my permission."

His hands found my hips, thumbs pressing into the soft flesh with just enough pressure to make me arch toward him. The pregnancy had made me more sensitive everywhere, and Ryan had quickly learned to use that to his advantage.

"You're playing with fire," I warned, but my hands were already unbuttoning his shirt, eager to feel his skin.

"I've been burning for you for months," he replied, his voice rough with need. "Every night watching you sleep beside me, every morning waking up to your scent on my sheets."

His confession sent heat pooling low in my belly. "Take me to bed," I whispered against his lips. "Now."

I didn't have to ask twice. In one smooth motion, Ryan swept me into his arms, cradling me carefully as he carried me to our bedroom. My growing belly made the position slightly awkward, but his strength never faltered.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he laid me gently on the bed, hovering above me with obvious restraint. "The doctor said—"

"The doctor said it's perfectly safe," I interrupted, pulling him down for another kiss. "Unless you'd rather wait another month..."

His growl of protest made me laugh, the sound quickly turning to a moan as his lips found the sensitive spot below my ear.

"God, I've missed hearing you make that sound," he murmured, his hands reverently sliding under my blouse.

He undressed me with exquisite slowness, his eyes darkening as he revealed each inch of skin. When I was finally naked before him, I fought the urge to cover my changed body. The pregnancy had rounded my hips, swelled my breasts, and of course, there was the unmistakable curve of my stomach.

"You're perfect," Ryan breathed, as if reading my thoughts. "So fucking beautiful."

His hands caressed my belly with awe before moving higher to cup my breasts, which had become almost painfully sensitive. When his thumb grazed my nipple, I nearly came off the bed.

"Easy," he soothed, lowering his head to replace his thumb with his mouth.

The first gentle suck had me crying out, fingers tangling in his hair to hold him closer. Every sensation seemed amplified, pleasure spiraling through me in waves that left me trembling.

"Ryan, please," I begged, not even caring how desperate I sounded. "I need you now."

He stripped quickly, his powerful body revealed in the soft afternoon light streaming through the windows. The sight of him - fully aroused and focused entirely on me - sent another rush of heat through my veins.

"How do you want me?" he asked, his voice strained with the effort of control.

"Like this," I said, shifting to my side and guiding him behind me. "Just go slow at first."

He positioned himself carefully, one arm wrapped protectively around my belly as he pressed against me. The initial pressure made me gasp, my body tight from weeks without this intimate connection.

"Breathe, baby," he murmured into my hair. "I've got you."

With excruciating gentleness, he eased inside, giving me time to adjust to each inch until he was fully seated within me. The feeling of completeness was overwhelming, bringing unexpected tears to my eyes.

"Are you okay?" Ryan asked immediately, freezing in concern when he saw my tears.

I nodded, unable to speak past the emotion clogging my throat. This wasn't just sex - this was reconnection, forgiveness, a new beginning.

He seemed to understand without words, pressing a tender kiss to my shoulder as he began to move in slow, measured thrusts. Each movement sent pleasure cascading through me, building steadily as his pace increased.

"You feel incredible," he groaned, his fingers finding where we were joined, circling in time with his thrusts. "So perfect. So mine."

That possessive declaration pushed me closer to the edge, my body tightening around him as release approached. When it finally broke over me, I cried out his name, clutching the arm he had wrapped around me.

Ryan followed moments later, his forehead pressed against my shoulder as he shuddered and pulsed within me. For several minutes afterward, we remained connected, his hand splayed protectively over our growing child.

"I love you," he whispered against my skin. "Both of you."

I turned my head to meet his gaze, no longer afraid to show the vulnerability in my eyes. "I love you too."

His smile was brighter than I'd ever seen it, full of hope and promise for our future. As he pulled me closer, I felt our baby kick as if in approval, making us both laugh softly.

"Someone's awake," Ryan murmured, caressing the spot where our child had moved.

"Probably complaining about all the commotion," I teased, placing my hand over his.

Source:

Chapter 202: Chapter 202 The Enemy Revealed

Author's POV

The morning light filtered through the massive windows of Ryan's office, casting long shadows across the polished marble floors. Simon stood rigidly before Ryan's desk, his expression grim as he delivered the findings of their investigation.

"We've finally uncovered something about the accident, sir," Simon reported, his voice carefully measured. "The driver wasn't connected to Lucian West's people as we initially suspected. He was working for Kane Blackwood."

Ryan's jaw tightened visibly. He leaned forward in his leather chair, fingers steeped beneath his chin. "You're certain it was Kane who orchestrated this?"

"Yes, sir. The driver's child was critically ill with no money for treatment. Kane paid for everything—the medical bills, the specialists, everything." Simon shifted uncomfortably. "It explains the inconsistencies we found earlier."

Ryan nodded slowly, the pieces falling into place. "So Lucian must have discovered something that made Kane nervous enough to act. He was trying to turn us against each other—create an irreparable rift between two potential allies."

"What would you like us to do with this information, sir?"

Ryan drummed his fingers against the mahogany desk, considering his next move. "Leak it to Lucian. Make it seem casual, not deliberate. Let's see how he reacts."

"Understood, sir." Simon bowed slightly before exiting the office, leaving Ryan alone with his thoughts.

Across town, Lucian West sat in his own office at Celestial Gems headquarters, his expression thunderous as he reviewed the conflicting evidence before him. The stack of papers on his desk told a very different story from what Kane had fed him.

"Mr. West," his assistant approached cautiously, "our surveillance team reports that Mr. Blackwood was involved in a car accident two days ago. He escaped unharmed."

Lucian looked up sharply. "An accident? Or something more deliberate?"

"Definitely deliberate, sir. According to our investigation, it was a planned attack."

"Who's behind it?" Lucian's voice was dangerously soft.

The assistant hesitated, shifting his weight nervously. "The driver claims... he claims it was ordered by you, sir."

"WHAT?" Lucian slammed his hand against the desk, sending papers flying. "That's absurd!"

"I understand, sir. But that's what he's saying."

Lucian's eyes darkened ominously. "This reeks of Kane. He's setting me up." A cold, humorless laugh escaped him. "So that's his game. Frame me to turn Blackwood against Celestial Gems when we're in the middle of our domestic expansion."

He shook his head, disgusted with himself. "And I've been foolish enough to consider him a business partner. Like inviting a viper into my bed!"

"Has there been any response from Blackwood?" Lucian asked, already formulating contingency plans.

The assistant considered for a moment. "None so far. Both Blackwood Enterprises and Dreamland Studio seem focused entirely on the jewelry season preparations."

Lucian exhaled slowly, relieved that Ryan hadn't immediately launched a counterattack. Explaining this mess face-to-face would be beneath his dignity, and Ryan likely wouldn't believe him anyway. Better to find another approach to repair the damage.

"Get the car ready. We're going to Dreamland Studio."

Unfortunately, timing wasn't on Lucian's side. When he arrived at the studio, Maya informed him that Serena was absent.

"She's resting at home," Maya explained as they sat in the sleek conference room overlooking the city. "I've taken over most of the jewelry season preparations since returning from my business trip."

Lucian nodded, quickly adjusting his approach. Maya was also a key decision-maker at Dreamland, after all. "As you may know, Celestial Gems has fully established its presence in the domestic market. The collaboration we previously discussed with Serena could be beneficial for both parties."

Maya hesitated, her expression carefully neutral. She knew Serena had already declined Celestial's cooperation offer, but outright rejecting Lucian again would be unnecessarily harsh.

"Mr. West, we're flattered that Celestial Gems sees Dreamland as a worthy partner," she replied diplomatically. "However, we've just completed the main work for the jewelry

season, and we're still wrapping up several projects. I'll need to discuss this with Serena before making any commitments."

Lucian accepted her response gracefully. "Of course, I understand completely." He reached into his briefcase, extracting a polished portfolio. "Here's our proposal, prepared by my team. Perhaps you could review it before making your decision."

He stood up, recognizing when it was time to make a strategic retreat. "Since you're busy, I won't take up any more of your time."

Maya rose quickly to escort him out. "Thank you for stopping by, Mr. West."

After Lucian's departure, Maya flipped open the portfolio, her eyes widening slightly as she scanned the contents. Celestial Gems controlled a significant portion of the international jewelry market, making them an extremely powerful ally.

The proposal was impressively thorough—complete with marketing plans, revenue projections, and a profit-sharing model that was surprisingly generous. If Dreamland accepted this collaboration, their earnings would skyrocket beyond anything they'd projected for the year.

Only a fool would turn down such an opportunity!

Maya could barely contain her excitement as she called Serena. "Serena, guess who just stopped by?" she asked, her voice bubbling with enthusiasm.

Serena responded calmly. "Who? Did we land another big deal?"

Maya laughed. "My brilliant friend! You guessed it - a massive opportunity, hand-delivered by Lucian West himself."

Serena frowned at the mention of his name. "Lucian? He came to the studio?"

"He did," Maya confirmed. "And he brought a partnership proposal with profit margins at least three points higher than our previous collaborations!"

"Serena, I've reviewed the terms thoroughly. Everything looks solid. Should we accept?"

Hearing the excitement in Maya's voice, Serena hesitated. "Maya, send me the proposal first. I'd like to review it myself."

"Of course, I'll send it right away. Honestly, Lucian being this generous feels strange. Do you think he has ulterior motives?"

Maya couldn't help worrying. Lucian was a businessman after all - offering such favorable terms without reason seemed suspicious.

She wasn't aware of the complicated history between Lucian and Ryan, but any reasonable person would question why Lucian was being so generous. It felt like a fox paying respects to a henhouse.

"Don't overthink it. Let me look at it first," Serena replied.

"You didn't immediately accept, did you?"

"Of course not! This is something we need to discuss thoroughly before making any decisions."

Serena sighed with relief at Maya's words.

"Good. You've been working so hard with all the jewelry season preparations."

"It's no trouble. I'm planning a dinner for the team in a couple days to celebrate our hard work."

"Sounds perfect. I'll leave the arrangements to you."

They discussed a few more work-related matters before ending the call.

Minutes later, Lucian's partnership proposal arrived in Serena's inbox.

Source:

CEO's Regret After I Divorced #Chapter 203 Dangerous Alliance - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 203 Dangerous Alliance

Chapter 203: Chapter 203 Dangerous Alliance

Serena's POV

I stared at the proposal for the third time, my eyes scanning every detail. Everything looked perfect—too perfect. The profit margins were generous, the terms were favorable, and there weren't any hidden clauses I could spot. And that's exactly what worried me.

Why would Lucian West suddenly offer such a generous deal after I'd already turned him down once? It smelled like bait, though I couldn't figure out what the trap might be.

That evening when Ryan returned home, I brought it up while we were relaxing in the living room.

"Ryan, what do you think Lucian's really after?" I asked, curling my legs beneath me on the sofa. "This proposal is suspiciously generous. I can't help wondering if it's another trap."

Ever since learning about the bad blood between Ryan and Lucian, I'd become extra cautious about anything involving Celestial Gems.

Ryan's expression remained neutral as he took a sip of his whiskey. "Don't overthink it. If you believe the partnership makes business sense, trust your instincts."

I frowned, genuinely surprised by his casual response. "Really? But I thought you and Lucian were..."

"Lucian's probably figured out Kane's game," Ryan interrupted. "He's not buying into Kane's manipulation anymore."

My face brightened immediately. "Really? That's wonderful news! Without Kane stirring up trouble, Lucian probably won't target Blackwood Enterprises anymore."

Ryan nodded slightly. "So stop worrying. Even if Lucian had ulterior motives, he wouldn't sacrifice this much profit just to set some elaborate trap."

After thinking it through, I decided to follow Ryan's advice. "Alright, I'll tell Maya to proceed with the contract then."

"Will you be personally overseeing this new project?" Ryan asked, his eyes studying me with that intensity that always made my heart skip.

I laughed nervously, feeling a bit caught. "Don't worry, I won't push myself too hard. I promise I'll take good care of myself."

Ryan sighed. "I was just asking. But even if you wanted to overwork yourself, you wouldn't get the chance."

"I'll be checking in on you. Regularly."

The phrase "checking in" coming from Ryan's serious face made me burst out laughing. That was usually something wives did to their husbands, not the other way around.

"Okay, okay! Check in all you want!" I giggled, enjoying this playful side of him.

After our little banter, I texted Maya: "We can proceed with the partnership. Have the lawyers verify all contract details thoroughly before signing. Thanks for handling this."

Her reply came quickly: "OK! Leave it to me, don't worry!"

With that settled, I went to get ready for bed, feeling a weight lifted from my shoulders.

A few days later, Celestial Gems held a press conference. Lucian West, impeccably dressed in a tailored suit, sat center stage discussing his company's full entry into the domestic market. Though the news had already circulated within the industry, the official announcement still generated significant buzz.

Celestial's performance during the jewelry season had been nothing short of spectacular. Lance Draven, a renowned designer who tends to keep a low profile but remains influential in the domestic jewelry scene, quietly endorsed the news online. He'd been invited to contribute to our collaboration, adding more prestige to the partnership.

After resting at home for several days, I couldn't resist attending the first joint meeting between our companies, despite my promise to take it easy. Both Lucian and Lance were present.

"Mr. West, Mr. Draven, it's good to see you both," I greeted them professionally, extending my hand.

They shook it in turn before we all sat down.

"Serena, seeing you in person has become quite the rare privilege," Lucian remarked with a slight smile.

"You're teasing me, Mr. West," I replied lightly. "As you know, my health requires that I not overexert myself, which is why Maya has been handling most things. But I truly appreciate your generous offer."

Lucian nodded politely. "No need for such formalities. This is Lance Draven, though I suspect you're both familiar with each other's work already?"

I smiled at Lance. "Indeed, your reputation precedes you. Having you on board will certainly make this collaboration even more successful."

After exchanging pleasantries, we dove into the meeting. I'd been wary of Lucian's intentions, but throughout the entire discussion, I detected no underhanded agenda from him. Could he really have recognized Kane's manipulations and changed his approach?

Though questions lingered in my mind, I couldn't ask directly. For now, I'd have to take things one step at a time.

When the meeting concluded, Lucian excused himself first. With Celestial's recent expansion, he was understandably busy.

Lance had no other commitments and seemed interested in continuing our conversation.

"Mrs. Lazuli, will you be personally overseeing this project? Won't that be too strenuous for you?" he asked with what seemed like genuine concern.

I shook my head with a smile. "I won't be monitoring everything personally. I know my limits."

"And please, call me Serena. 'Mrs. Lazuli' feels... strange," I added with a slightly awkward laugh.

Lance chuckled. "I apologize for being presumptuous. I've followed your work for some time. Your unique style and designs are truly refreshing."

"Serena, if you have time, perhaps we could sit and talk design for a while?"

Glancing at my watch, I decided there was no reason to decline. Conversing with a designer of his caliber about creative approaches was an opportunity I rarely got these days.

We settled into a fascinating discussion about design theories, material selections, and creative inspirations. The conversation flowed effortlessly between us, two artists speaking a shared language of creativity and vision.

Time slipped by unnoticed as we exchanged ideas, sketching concepts on napkins and debating the merits of various techniques. I found myself thoroughly enjoying this professional exchange—something I'd been missing in my self-imposed semi-retirement.

Our animated conversation came to an abrupt halt at the sound of knuckles rapping sharply against the conference room door.

Ryan stood in the doorway, his tall frame filling the entrance. His face was a careful mask of neutrality, but I knew him well enough to see the storm brewing behind his eyes. His gaze swept across the room, lingering with unmistakable intensity on Lance, who was leaning forward enthusiastically, showing me a design sketch on his tablet.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees in an instant.

"I see I'm interrupting," Ryan's voice was perfectly controlled, but the muscle twitching in his jaw gave him away.

Looking at his barely contained expression, I suddenly realized with a mixture of amusement and exasperation: Ryan Blackwood was jealous. Again.

Source:

Chapter 204: Chapter 204 Rumors and Rivalries

Serena's POV

I turned around with a smile, standing to greet him. "Ryan, you're here! Let me introduce you—this is Lance Draven, the designer Mr. West brought in for the collaboration. We've been discussing some fascinating design concepts."

"Lance really knows his stuff," I added, trying to keep things professional and light.

Ryan's gaze swept over Lance again, his expression remaining deliberately neutral. The temperature in the room practically dropped another five degrees.

"Hello," he said simply, voice clipped.

Lance, clearly sensing Ryan's intimidating aura, stood up and offered a polite smile. "So you're Mr. Blackwood? It's a pleasure to meet you."

Ryan gave him a curt nod before turning to me. "It's getting late. We should head home for dinner."

I glanced between the two men, trying not to smile at Ryan's transparent attempt to extract me from the situation. "Lance, I didn't realize we'd been talking so long. Would you like to join us for dinner?"

Lance shook his head quickly. "No need, I wouldn't want to intrude. We can stay in touch regarding the collaboration anytime."

"Of course," I nodded, secretly relieved he'd declined. The thought of sitting through dinner with these two was enough to give me anxiety.

Once seated in the car, Ryan immediately brought up the Celestial Gems partnership.

"So you've met with Lucian today?"

I nodded, sharing my impressions. "Lucian seems... different. Others might not notice it, but I can tell."

"His hostility toward me has faded considerably."

Ryan visibly relaxed at this information, though his protective instincts remained intact. "Regardless, be careful with this partnership."

"I will, promise."

There was a brief pause before he asked, "That designer—he's involved in this collaboration too?"

I nodded, watching Ryan's face carefully. "Lance is quite renowned domestically. He's won numerous awards but stays remarkably low-profile. Works independently."

Ryan's brow furrowed slightly. "I was just asking."

I couldn't help smirking. "Lance is simply a talented professional. Heaven forbid you get jealous over nothing again."

Instead of responding verbally, Ryan suddenly pulled me closer, his arm wrapping firmly around my waist.

"You think I'm that petty?" His voice was dangerously close to my ear, sending unwanted shivers down my spine.

I pushed against his chest twice, but he didn't budge. Finally giving up, I sighed dramatically.

"Stop it. I was just making an observation."

"Let's go home for dinner. I'm hungry," I added, trying to find any excuse to avoid getting too affectionate in my office. The last thing I needed was someone walking in on us.

Ryan, however, had other ideas. He leaned in and placed a quick kiss on my cheek.

Just as he opened his mouth to say something, the office door swung open.

Maya let out an exaggerated "Oh!" and dramatically covered her eyes. "I didn't see anything! Please, carry on, don't mind me!" she teased, already backing toward the door.

I cleared my throat, feeling heat rise to my face. "Maya, wait. Did you need something?"

She grinned mischievously. "Should I talk now? Am I interrupting something important?"

"Stop teasing and come in already."

Maya stepped inside, her expression shifting to business mode. "Celestial Gems is hosting an event the day after tomorrow to build buzz for the collaboration."

She handed me an invitation. "The invitation was delivered personally. Will you attend?"

I examined the elegant card. "Looks like Lucian is putting considerable effort into this partnership, which makes sense given their full-scale domestic market entry."

The invitation specifically requested my presence. Declining would be awkward and potentially damaging to our new partnership.

"I'll go," I decided, tucking the invitation into my bag.

Maya glanced nervously at Ryan, apparently relieved when he didn't object.

"Great, I'll get back to work then."

"We're heading home. Thanks for everything, Maya."

Maya spread her hands in mock despair. "Not hard work—just a hard life."

After she left, I picked up my bag, ready to leave with Ryan.

"Do you really need to attend this kind of event?" Ryan asked, his jealousy finally surfacing now that Maya was gone.

"I am the owner of Dreamland Studio, after all," I reasoned. "It's just one event—I'll make a brief appearance and that's it."

I took his hand and gave him my best pleading look. "I've been cooped up in the Blackwood mansion so long I'm starting to grow mold. Let me get some fresh air, please?"

His expression softened immediately, and I mentally congratulated myself on another successful deployment of what Maya called my "secret weapon"—the subtle art of gentle persuasion that even Ryan Blackwood couldn't resist.

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I barely had time to catch my breath as I walked into the event venue. The timing couldn't have been more perfect - right on schedule, as usual. Maya couldn't join me today since she had meetings with some important clients, but a few designers from our studio came along for support.

Celestial Gems had gone all out as the host. The venue buzzed with energy - elegantly dressed guests mingling, champagne flowing freely, and media representatives hovering around like bees to honey. In the center of it all stood Lucian, perfectly poised in his tailored suit, handling a barrage of questions from reporters with practiced ease.

"Mr. West, how confident are you about Celestial Gems' full-scale entry into the domestic market?" a reporter asked, microphone thrust forward eagerly.

Lucian smiled that camera-ready smile of his. "I'm quite confident, though success always depends on mutual cooperation."

"This marks the third collaboration between Celestial Gems and Dreamland Studio. Mrs. Lazuli is an incredibly capable businesswoman, and I'm certain this partnership will be just as successful as our previous ventures."

His response was diplomatic, professional - but there was something different about him tonight. The usual underlying tension I'd come to expect was missing, replaced by an almost genuine warmth. Combined with his undeniably handsome features, he was absolutely magnetic on camera.

The reporter, clearly emboldened by his approachable demeanor, couldn't resist diving into gossip territory. "Mr. West, Celestial Gems has collaborated with Dreamland more than any other company since your New York launch. Would you say you and Mrs. Lazuli have developed a special rapport?"

I nearly choked on my champagne at that question. Really? We were going there?

Lucian nodded thoughtfully. "I wouldn't call it a special rapport exactly, but Dreamland has proven to be a reassuringly reliable partner."

As I navigated through the crowd, exchanging pleasantries with industry contacts, I gradually made my way toward the center of attention. That's when Lucian spotted me and extended his hand in greeting.

"Serena, you made it."

I stopped and smiled politely. "Mr. West."

Like sharks sensing blood, the reporters and cameramen swiveled in my direction, equipment suddenly trained on me.

"Mrs. Lazuli! Would you mind joining Mr. West for a brief interview?" one particularly persistent reporter called out.

I hesitated, about to politely decline, when Lucian smoothly answered, "Of course she can."

Well, that decided that. According to the event schedule, both company heads were supposed to give a joint interview anyway. Refusing now would only create unnecessary awkwardness.

With as much grace as I could muster, I walked over and positioned myself beside Lucian. It was only then that I noticed our matching attire - we'd both coincidentally chosen outfits in the same color palette. Great. Just what the gossip columns needed.

The interview proceeded without incident, both of us fielding questions with practiced professionalism.

When it finally ended, Lucian turned to me with a surprisingly genuine smile. "You've been standing quite a while. Would you like to sit down?"

He gestured toward a nearby seating area with impeccable gentlemanly charm.

I nodded, seeing no reason to decline. Once seated, we actually had a productive discussion about our collaboration plans.

What I didn't anticipate was how quickly the evening would become fodder for online speculation. Within hours, videos of our joint interview were trending across social media.

Source:

Chapter 205: Chapter 205 The Jealous CEO

Serena's POV

I just saw those ridiculous headlines.

"BUSINESS OR PLEASURE? LAZULI AND WEST'S INTIMATE DINNER CONVERSATION RAISES EYEBROWS!"

"POWER COUPLE ALERT: DREAMLAND STUDIO'S LAZULI FALLS UNDER CELESTIAL GEMS CEO'S SPELL!"

"MATCHING OUTFITS AND MEANINGFUL GLANCES: JEWELRY INDUSTRY'S NEW POWER COUPLE?"

"IS DREAMLAND'S LAZULI TRADING MORE THAN JUST BUSINESS DEALS WITH CELESTIAL GEMS' WEST?"

"These entertainment vultures are absolutely shameless! How can they twist something so innocent into this... this tabloid fantasy?" fumed Celeste, one of the designers who had accompanied me to the event. Her normally composed face was flushed with indignation as she scrolled through her own phone.

"Mrs. Lazuli, it's just internet gossip-mongers having their fun. No one with half a brain takes this seriously," another designer tried consoling me while the others were already drafting statements, insisting we should issue an immediate clarification before the story spiraled further.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling a throbbing headache building behind my temples. "Let's just head back to the studio first. We'll figure out our response there."

The driver had already opened the car door, my escape route tantalizingly close, when I heard hurried footsteps behind me.

"Serena, wait!"

Lucian West was rushing across the parking area, his normally impeccable appearance slightly disheveled, tie askew as if he'd bolted from whatever meeting he'd been in.

"I just saw those online reports," he said, slightly breathless.

I turned slowly, narrowing my eyes. I'd thought Lucian had turned over a new leaf, that he wouldn't try using me as publicity fodder again. Was this all just another calculated move in whatever game he was playing?

"Just now, Mr. West?" My voice dripped with sarcasm. "With how quickly that buzz is spreading, I almost suspected you might have orchestrated the whole thing yourself." The words hung in the air between us, creating a palpable tension.

Lucian's expression darkened, jaw tightening visibly. "Serena, I didn't arrange this. Someone's clearly trying to manufacture headlines at our expense. I've already contacted my PR department to issue an immediate clarification."

I studied his face for any hint of deception before offering him a thin smile. "If that's truly the case, then thank you, Mr. West."

"I'm rather exhausted from all this," I added, turning away. "I should go." Without waiting for his response, I climbed into the waiting car, not bothering to look back.

By the time we returned to the studio, my phone buzzed with notifications. Celestial Gems had already published a forceful clarification. The statement unequivocally declared our relationship as strictly professional with perhaps a touch of friendship—nothing more, nothing less. It also included a not-so-subtle legal warning to bloggers who had maliciously edited videos to delete them immediately or face consequences.

Under Celestial Gems' aggressive pushback, the rumors were rapidly collapsing. The comment sections exploded with backlash against the original bloggers:

"Could you maybe VERIFY YOUR FACTS before posting clickbait? You got me invested in a non-existent power couple for NOTHING!"

"You unethical hacks deserve every lawsuit coming your way!"

"When will this online cesspool ever improve? Anyone with a keyboard can spread garbage for clicks!"

"Oh please, stop pretending you all weren't eating this up hours ago!"

The internet had moved on to its next outrage cycle, but more importantly, the rumors linking Lucian and me had effectively been quashed. Watching this swift and decisive response, I felt a weight lift from my shoulders.

Had I misjudged Lucian? If he'd truly orchestrated this media circus, why would he so aggressively shut it down?

Maya peeked over my shoulder at my phone, whistling low. "Well, well... Lucian actually stepped up and acted like a genuine adult this time. Color me impressed."

When I finally arrived at the Blackwood mansion that evening, Ryan had just walked through the door himself, his expression unreadable.

"I saw today's news," he stated flatly, his tone giving nothing away.

I nodded, slipping off my heels with a sigh of relief. "Just irresponsible reporters manufacturing drama out of nothing. It's been thoroughly debunked already."

Ryan made a dismissive sound in his throat. "You shouldn't have attended that event in the first place. That Lucian West clearly still harbors ulterior motives."

"Ryan," I shook my head wearily, "if he truly had sinister intentions, he wouldn't have clarified things so decisively. He could have easily let me twist in the wind under all that pressure and speculation."

"I genuinely don't think today's incident was Lucian's doing."

Ryan's jaw tightened at hearing me defend Lucian. "How can you be so certain? His track record hardly inspires confidence."

"Call it intuition or maybe just... observation." I moved closer, my voice softening. "Ryan, what if the situation between you and Lucian is one massive misunderstanding? Wouldn't it make more strategic sense to turn a potential enemy into an ally?"

Ryan's expression softened as he reached out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "Let me worry about Kane. He's not worth your energy or concern."

"As for Lucian West..." His jaw tightened slightly. "I'll consider what you've said about potential collaboration. But I want you to minimize direct contact with him."

I couldn't help the small smile that crept onto my face. "Are you still jealous? After everything that happened today?"

"I'm not jealous," Ryan replied with a scoff that didn't quite hide the truth. "I'm cautious. There's a difference."

"Sure there is," I teased, nudging his shoulder playfully.

He caught my hand, his expression suddenly serious. "I don't trust his intentions toward you, Serena. Those rumors didn't come from nowhere."

"Ryan—"

"Just humor me on this," he interrupted, his thumb tracing circles on the back of my hand. "Let Maya or someone else handle the direct communications with him when possible."

"Fine," I conceded with an exaggerated sigh. "I'll keep interactions professional and minimal. Happy?"

He nodded, visibly relaxing. "Very."

We sat in comfortable silence for a moment before I broached the subject again. "About Kane though... what's he been up to lately? I haven't heard you mention him."

Ryan waved his hand dismissively. "Nothing worth discussing. His latest pathetic attempt involves trying to sway some minor board members with ridiculous promises. It's laughable, really."

"You seem awfully confident."

"Because I know exactly who I'm dealing with," Ryan replied, his voice carrying that cool certainty that both impressed and sometimes frightened me. "Kane's always been predictable—greedy, short-sighted, desperate for validation. He doesn't have the patience or intellect for long-game strategy."

I nodded slowly, though something still nagged at me. "Just... be careful. Even predictable enemies can be dangerous when cornered."

Ryan's expression softened as he looked at me, something tender replacing the coldness that had been there moments before. "You worry too much." His hand moved to rest gently on my still-flat stomach. "You should be focusing on taking care of yourself and our baby, not concerning yourself with Kane's petty schemes."

The touch sent warmth spreading through me. It still felt surreal sometimes—that we were going to be parents, that this complicated, intense man beside me could show such gentleness.

"How are you feeling today?" he asked, his voice lower now, intimate.

"Tired," I admitted. "The morning sickness isn't as bad, but everything exhausts me lately."

Ryan immediately shifted, pulling me closer against him. "You're doing too much. The doctor said you need to rest more."

"I'm fine, Ryan," I protested, though I couldn't help leaning into his warmth. "Pregnant women work all the time. I'm not made of glass."

"Maybe not," he murmured, his lips brushing against my temple. "But what you're carrying is precious to me. You both are."

My heart squeezed at his words. These moments—when the controlling, jealous businessman melted away to reveal the man who genuinely cared—these were the moments that reminded me why I was here, why I'd chosen this complicated life with him.

"I promise I'll be careful," I whispered, closing my eyes as fatigue washed over me. "Both of us will be fine."

Source:

Chapter 206: Chapter 206 The Truth in the Ashes

Lucian's POV

They were there again—hovering just beyond my reach in that foggy realm between consciousness and sleep. My parents. Not the cold-blooded business tycoons who raised me, but my true parents—their faces always slightly blurred, like looking through rain-streaked glass.

"We trusted them," my mother's voice whispered, as it always did in these recurring dreams. "And they destroyed us."

My father's hand reached toward me, fingers never quite making contact. "The truth is buried in the ashes, son. Find it."

I jerked awake, my silk sheets damp with sweat, heart hammering against my ribcage like it wanted to escape.

"I will make this right," I whispered to the empty penthouse bedroom. "I swear it."

Sleep was pointless now. I threw back the covers and padded to the floor-to-ceiling windows that showcased the city sprawled below. My city. The empire I'd built from nothing after clawing my way up from the ashes of my true family's destruction.

Celestial Gems hadn't become the jewelry industry powerhouse through inheritance or luck. I'd built it through calculated moves, strategic partnerships, and an unrelenting drive fueled by one purpose: positioning myself for revenge.

My phone vibrated on the nightstand. Only one person would dare call at this hour.

"What is it, Victor?" I answered, not bothering with pleasantries.

"Sir, we've verified the financial trail. The offshore accounts we've been tracking... they all lead back to him."

My grip tightened on the phone. "You're certain?"

"Beyond doubt, sir. Kane Blackwood orchestrated the hostile takeover that bankrupted your parents' company twenty-five years ago. He was the architect behind their downfall—not Ryan Blackwood."

I closed my eyes, absorbing this revelation. Kane had carefully fed me information pointing to Ryan as my enemy, positioning me as his unwitting pawn in some elaborate chess game against his nephew.

"Sir? Are you still there?"

"Send me everything," I commanded, my voice cold and steady despite the rage boiling inside me. "Every transaction, every connection, every piece of evidence. I want it all on my desk by morning."

Hours later, I sat behind my desk at Celestial Gems headquarters, reviewing the mountain of evidence Victor had compiled. Each document was another nail in Kane Blackwood's coffin—proof that he'd systematically dismantled my parents' business, stripped them of every asset, and left them to drown in manufactured debt.

The pieces finally fit. My parents hadn't committed suicide out of shame as I'd been led to believe—they'd been murdered, their deaths staged to look self-inflicted after Kane had destroyed everything they'd built.

My intercom buzzed. "Mr. West, your 11 o'clock is here."

"Send them in." I closed the confidential files on my tablet and straightened my tie.

My assistant entered, carrying a tablet of her own. "Sir, I've confirmed what you suspected. Those two informants who approached us last month—the ones who provided those misleading reports about Ryan Blackwood's involvement in your parents' case—they were on Kane's payroll."

"And the money trail?"

"Offshore accounts, just like the others, but we've traced it. Same source, same benefactor—Kane Blackwood." She hesitated. "There's more. We've triangulated multiple information sources, and they all point to Kane being the mastermind behind everything—the false information leaks, the attempts to turn you against Ryan, even the recent efforts to disrupt your collaboration with Dreamland Studio."

The mention of Serena's company made my jaw clench. I'd nearly ruined a potentially valuable business relationship—and whatever fragile trust I'd begun to build with Serena—all because I'd been dancing like a puppet on Kane's strings.

"That manipulative bastard," I slammed my fist against the desk, sending pens scattering. "He's been playing me for years, letting me believe his nephew was responsible while he hid in the shadows. All this time—" My voice cracked with fury. "I've been going after the wrong man while that snake watched from the sidelines, probably laughing at how easily I was misdirected."

I forced myself to take a deep breath, channeling the rage into something colder, more calculated. "Where is he now?"

"Kane Blackwood has been spotted at his lake house retreat. However, sir, he's never without protection—at least four security personnel at all times."

I rose from my desk, walking to the window that overlooked the financial district. From here, I could see the imposing Blackwood Tower in the distance—a dynasty built on blood money. My parents' blood.

"I want eyes on him round the clock. Find me his weak spots—moments when his security is thinnest." My voice had dropped to a dangerous calm. "But keep this operation small and tight. No leaks, no paper trail."

"Sir, with all due respect, we're talking about Kane Blackwood. He's connected to some of the most powerful people in the country. If this goes sideways—"

"It won't," I cut her off, turning to face her. "Because we're going to be smarter than he is. We wait for the perfect moment. One opportunity is all I need."

"Yes, sir. And what about our previous strategy regarding Ryan Blackwood?"

"Adjust accordingly. Ryan Blackwood is no longer our target." I paused, a new strategy already forming. "In fact, I believe it's time we explored potential... alliances."

Source:

Chapter 207: Chapter 207 Death and Inheritance

Serena's POV

I jerked awake to the harsh ring of Ryan's phone, my sleep-addled brain struggling to make sense of the late-night intrusion. Through half-lidded eyes, I watched his face transform as he listened to the caller—his features hardening, jaw tightening, a storm brewing behind those steel-blue eyes.

"What's happened?" I murmured, pushing myself up on my elbows.

Ryan ended the call, his expression grim. "Grandmother's in the hospital. Critical condition. They're trying to save her."

The fog of sleep vanished instantly. "Critical? What happened to her?"

While I'd kept my distance for self-preservation, I still held a complicated affection for the old woman who'd once shown me kindness. Despite her manipulations, Evelyn Blackwood had been the closest thing to a grandmother figure I'd had since losing my own.

"They don't know yet," Ryan said, already throwing off the covers. "I need to get to the hospital. You should stay and rest."

I shook my head decisively. "I'm coming with you." Reading the concern in his eyes, I added, "She was good to me once. If something happens and I didn't at least try to be there... I couldn't forgive myself."

Ryan sighed but didn't argue further.

We arrived at the hospital too late. Death had beaten us by minutes.

Kane Blackwood sat blocking the doorway to Evelyn's room, his wheelchair positioned like a barricade. The sight of him sent warning signals flaring through my system. His presence here, so quickly after her passing, wasn't coincidence.

"Look who finally showed up," Kane sneered. "The dutiful grandson and his pretty little mistake. Too busy to visit when she was alive, but rushing to her deathbed? How touching."

"Stay away from my mother," he hissed. "You've done enough damage."

Ryan's face darkened dangerously. Without hesitation, he shoved the wheelchair aside and guided me past Kane into the room. I felt Kane's eyes boring into my back—calculating, assessing, plotting.

Inside, Evelyn's body lay covered by a white sheet. The doctor explained it had been a sudden cardiac event, that she'd been experiencing symptoms but refused medical attention until it was too late.

"Just like that," Ryan whispered, more to himself than to me.

I watched his face carefully. The grief was genuine, but there was something else—a haunted look I recognized. He was remembering his parents' deaths. I'd seen that expression before when he spoke of them, that same raw, unhealed wound resurfacing.

I took his hand, squeezing it gently. "Ryan, she wouldn't want you drowning in grief. We have to focus on what comes next."

My words were deliberately chosen—'what comes next'—because I knew Ryan needed practical concerns to anchor him when emotions threatened to pull him under. It worked; I felt the subtle shift in his posture as he gathered himself, straightening his shoulders.

As we exited the room, Kane was waiting, a predatory smile playing on his lips.

"Ryan," he called out, voice dripping with false sympathy. "Mother died because of your neglect. All your talk about family duty, yet look how cruelly you've treated your own uncle."

"You'll pay for this eventually," he added, threat barely veiled.

Ryan's control snapped. Before I could react, his fist connected with Kane's face, splitting his lip and drawing blood.

The hallway froze in shocked silence. I stepped between them instantly—not just to protect Ryan from doing something worse, but to shield him from the consequences I could already see forming.

"Ryan, stop!" I grabbed his arm. "This isn't the time or place. Think of your grandmother."

Kane's reaction confirmed my suspicions. Instead of retaliating, he smiled through bloodied teeth, a chilling sound escaping his throat.

"Go ahead, hit me again," he taunted. "It won't change what's coming. Mother's will is already executed. Every share, every property she owned—it's all mine now."

My breath caught. I spun to face Kane. "What did you say?"

"I'm now Blackwood's second-largest shareholder," Kane announced triumphantly. "One more mistake from you, nephew, and that CEO position you're so proud of becomes very, very precarious."

Ryan's muscles tensed beneath my hand. I could feel him preparing to lunge again—exactly what Kane wanted. The pieces clicked together in my mind with crystal clarity: Kane had orchestrated this confrontation, deliberately provoking Ryan to create a scene that would strengthen his position.

I had to act fast.

"Ah!" I cried out suddenly, doubling over and clutching my stomach. "Ryan! Something's wrong!"

Ryan's focus instantly shifted. "Serena! What is it?"

I maintained the pained expression, saying nothing but continuing to grimace. Without hesitation, Ryan scooped me up and rushed me to the nearest examination room, barking orders at the hospital staff.

Only when Kane was far out of earshot did I allow myself to relax as the doctor approached us.

"Where's the pain, Mrs. Blackwood?" the physician asked, concern evident in his voice.

I waved him off with a small smile. "I'm actually feeling much better now. I think it was just the baby moving rather forcefully. The emotional situation probably triggered it."

The doctor frowned. "At your stage of pregnancy, we shouldn't take any risks. Let me examine you properly."

"That won't be necessary," I insisted politely but firmly. "If anything changes, I promise I'll come straight back."

As we left the examination room, Ryan's expression had shifted from panic to dawning comprehension.

"You were faking," he stated simply, no accusation in his voice.

I nodded. "If I hadn't stopped you, you would have given Kane exactly what he wanted—evidence that you're unstable and unfit to lead Blackwood. That second punch would have been corporate suicide."

Ryan's eyes widened slightly as the implications sank in. "You're right. I played directly into his hands."

"We should go home," I suggested, steering us toward the exit. "Kane will handle the arrangements—he'll have to, now that he's claiming Evelyn's legacy. If he wants to be the dutiful son, let him perform the role."

I sighed, my mind racing through the implications of this new development. "What I don't understand is why Evelyn would do this. Making Kane the second-largest shareholder essentially ensures conflict between you two. It's almost like she wanted to reignite the power struggle."

Ryan remained silent, his expression unreadable.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked finally. "The baby—"

I shook my head with a gentle smile. "I'm fine. I wasn't really in pain. Some things are worth a little deception."

Relief washed over his face, though the tension remained in his shoulders. "I shouldn't have brought you here tonight."

"Oh, stop that," I chided, playfully tugging his arm. "We are family, why keep score about things like this? If I'd stayed home, I would have been awake worrying anyway."

Something flickered in Ryan's eyes at the words "family"—a softness I rarely saw anymore.

"I'm lucky to have you, Serena," he said quietly.

The sincerity in his voice caught me off guard, warming something in me I thought had gone cold months ago. I stepped forward, wrapping my arms around him in a gentle embrace. As I felt his body relax against mine, I stroked his back soothingly.

"You're not alone," I whispered. "You have me and our child. We're your family now, and we're not going anywhere."

I pulled back slightly, meeting his eyes. "As for Kane... men like him never stay on top for long. He's shown his hand too early—and that's his first mistake."

Source:

Chapter 208: Chapter 208 Funeral of Power

Serena's POV

I stood in the sprawling garden of the Blackwood estate, watching the parade of black limousines pull into the driveway. Evelyn's funeral was a spectacle that would have made the old woman herself raise an eyebrow—too ostentatious, too performative, too... Kane.

"This is ridiculous," I whispered to Ryan, adjusting my black maternity dress that barely contained my growing belly. "She would have hated this circus."

Ryan's jaw tightened as he surveyed the scene.

Nearly every important business figure in the city had arrived, not to mourn Evelyn but to witness the power shift happening before their eyes. The funeral had morphed into a grotesque networking event, with Kane holding court from his wheelchair like a king on a throne.

The service itself was coldly efficient—expensive flowers, rehearsed eulogies, and not a genuine tear in sight. I found myself blinking back tears, not for the ceremony but for the woman I once knew, who deserved better than this mockery.

When Kane wheeled himself to the podium afterward, I felt Ryan tense beside me.

"My beloved mother," Kane began, his voice dripping with fabricated grief, "left explicit instructions about her final wishes... and about her legacy."

My hand found Ryan's, squeezing tightly as Kane unfurled an official-looking document.

"As her only living son, I am honored to announce that my mother has entrusted me with a significant portion of her Blackwood shares, making me the second-largest shareholder in the company our family built."

A collective gasp rippled through the attendees. I watched their expressions transform—confusion, calculation, opportunity. It was like watching sharks scent blood in the water.

"My nephew Ryan has done an... adequate job as CEO," Kane continued, his smile not reaching his eyes. "But my mother clearly wanted a system of checks and balances. Family oversight, if you will."

Ryan remained stone-faced, but I could feel the fury radiating from him. His hand squeezed mine so tightly it almost hurt.

"This isn't a funeral," I muttered. "It's a coup."

After the announcement, we were forced to endure a reception that felt more like a victory celebration for Kane. Business associates who had practically genuflected before Ryan days earlier now flocked to Kane's side, offering condolences that sounded suspiciously like congratulations.

"Look at them all," I said with disgust as we sat at our isolated table. "Switching allegiances faster than changing underwear."

Ryan didn't respond, his eyes fixed on Kane across the room.

"Ryan?" I nudged him gently. "Are you okay?"

"I should have dealt with him years ago," he finally said, his voice low and dangerous. "This is my fault."

Before I could respond, Lucian West appeared, sliding smoothly into the chair across from us. I stiffened immediately—his presence here was unexpected and concerning.

"Mr. Blackwood, my condolences," he offered with practiced sympathy, before his gaze cut to Kane's wheelchair-bound figure surrounded by sycophants. "Quite the performance, isn't it?"

"What do you want, West?" Ryan's tone was glacial.

Lucian's eyes flickered between us before landing on Kane. "A cripple with delusions of grandeur. No matter how many shares he has, he'll never command true respect."

I narrowed my eyes. "Weren't you working with Kane just last month, Mr. West?"

"The single most idiotic decision of my business career," he replied without hesitation. "But then again, Mr. Blackwood here hasn't been particularly brilliant either, allowing that viper to survive this long."

Ryan's face darkened dangerously. "You're criticizing my business decisions at my grandmother's funeral?"

"I'm pointing out that we share a common problem," Lucian countered smoothly. "One that's currently holding court like he's won the war rather than a single battle."

The tension between the men was palpable as they locked eyes in silent communication. Something unspoken passed between them—an understanding, perhaps even an alliance forming.

Lucian rose to leave after a few moments. "Interesting funeral. I wonder if the old lady would approve of her son using her death as his coronation ceremony."

After he departed, I turned to Ryan. "What was that about?"

"It seems West has discovered something about Kane that's made him reconsider their partnership," Ryan replied, a calculating gleam in his eyes.

"The enemy of my enemy," Ryan murmured, his eyes still tracking Lucian across the room.

The reception had devolved into something resembling a cocktail party by now, with Kane at the center of attention. The sight was sickening—Evelyn's photo watching over a room where her death had become a mere backdrop for business machinations.

"Let's go," Ryan said suddenly, standing up. "This farce has gone on long enough."

I nodded gratefully, more than ready to escape the suffocating atmosphere of false grief and naked ambition.

As we made our way toward the exit, Kane noticed our departure. He raised his champagne glass in a mocking toast, his smile cold and triumphant.

"Leaving so soon, nephew? The party's just getting started," he called out, loud enough to draw attention.

Ryan stopped walking. I tugged his arm urgently. "Ryan, don't. It's what he wants."

But Ryan turned slowly, facing his uncle with deadly calm. "Enjoy your moment, Kane. It won't last."

Kane's smile widened. "On the contrary. This is just the beginning of my restoration. Your grandmother finally recognized who truly deserves to lead the Blackwood legacy."

"My grandmother was manipulated by you in her final days," Ryan replied, his voice carrying across the now-silent room. "But make no mistake—a wheelchair-bound snake with delusions of adequacy will never run my company."

Gasps echoed through the crowd. Kane's face contorted with rage.

"You arrogant little—"

"Remember your blood pressure, Uncle," Ryan cut him off with mock concern. "Wouldn't want another Blackwood funeral so soon."

He turned to me, offering his arm with cool formality that belied the storm in his eyes. "Shall we, Mrs. Blackwood?"

As we walked out, I felt Kane's venomous gaze burning into my back.

"You realize you just declared war," I whispered once we were outside.

"He declared war the moment he manipulated my dying grandmother," Ryan replied grimly. "I'm simply acknowledging the battlefield."

In the car, Ryan's façade finally cracked. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel, his breathing ragged.

"I'm going to destroy him, Serena. Completely and utterly."

"We," I corrected firmly, placing my hand over his. "We are going to destroy him."

Source:

Chapter 209: Chapter 209 Shadows of Obsession

Serena's POV

I rested my hands on my swollen belly as our collaboration meeting with Celestial Gems concluded. The partnership with Lucian's company had progressed incredibly smoothly since Ryan and Lucian reached their unexpected understanding at Evelyn's funeral. The tension that once filled the room whenever the three of us met had dissipated, making my work significantly easier.

"This collaboration is nearly complete, thanks to your tireless personal oversight," Lucian said with a genuine smile once we were alone.

I waved my hand dismissively. "It's just my job. The partnership with Celestial Gems is Dreamland's top priority right now."

"I still haven't properly thanked you for handling that tabloid scandal," I added.

Lucian shook his head. "I was the one who invited those reporters in the first place. The misunderstanding was entirely my responsibility to fix."

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, I gathered my things to leave, only to find Lance Draven waiting by the door, clearly wanting to speak with me alone.

"Mrs. Blackwood," he said, extending an elegantly designed invitation. "I'm hosting an art exhibition next week. Would you do me the honor of attending?"

I hesitated momentarily, surprised by the invitation, but took it politely. "Congratulations, Mr. Draven. I'll definitely be there."

Lance nodded, looking genuinely pleased. "Wonderful. After the exhibition, I'd like to treat you to dinner. Our last conversation actually helped me breakthrough a creative block I've been struggling with. I'm truly grateful."

"Oh!" I was taken aback. "I only shared some random thoughts. You're practically a legend in the art world—there's no need for such modesty."

"I'll be attending your exhibition as a student myself, ready to learn," I added sincerely.

Lance smiled warmly. "Between us, Serena, it's been a very long time since I've met someone who truly connects with my artistic perspective."

"Many of my ideas go misunderstood. It can be quite lonely," he admitted.

I looked at him with surprise. "How is that possible? Your concepts have such depth—I've learned so much from our discussions."

We chatted a bit longer by the entrance before I finally got into my car and left, glancing in my rearview mirror to see Lance watching until I disappeared from view.

Back at the studio, with most projects winding down, I finally had some breathing room. Maya wasted no time seizing the opportunity to announce another trip to London to prepare for our future branch office.

We'd discussed expanding beyond New York several times. With our foothold in the American market now secure, it made sense to look toward international growth. Dreamland had accumulated sufficient funds and talent—we just needed the right timing, which we'd agreed would be after I gave birth. My current pregnancy made it impossible to juggle both New York operations and expansion plans simultaneously.

"When are you planning to leave?" I asked, settling into my office chair with a groan as my baby shifted positions.

"Day after tomorrow," Maya replied, her eyes sparkling. "I've already notified Ethan. He'll be picking me up at the airport."

I blinked in surprise. "He's personally picking you up? Have you two...?"

What exactly had I missed? In just days, Maya and Ethan's relationship seemed to have progressed significantly.

Maya's cheeks flushed adorably. "Don't read too much into it. We're just good friends right now."

"I'm visiting London—Isn't it natural for him to be a good host and pick me up?"

"Hmm," I made a noncommittal sound. The explanation sounded reasonable enough, but something about it felt off.

"Maya, haven't you confessed your feelings yet?"

"Confess? I'm far too dignified to make the first move," she said, her face growing increasingly pink.

I decided to stop teasing her. We were grown women; these matters were best handled at one's own pace.

"Well, I hope you come back having captured your prince charming," I said with a grin.

"Stop it!" Maya groaned, burying her face in her hands. "It's not that simple. Ethan is... complicated."

"Complicated how?" I asked, suddenly curious. "He seems pretty straightforward to me—smart, successful, genuinely kind..."

"And ridiculously handsome," Maya added before catching herself. "I mean, objectively speaking."

I laughed. "Oh, objectively speaking, of course. Is that why you've packed seven different outfits for a three-day trip?"

Maya threw a decorative pillow at me, which I easily caught. "You're impossible!"

"Seriously though," I said, sobering slightly. "What's holding you back? I've seen how he looks at you."

Maya's expression turned thoughtful. "It's just... he's very protective of his family. There's something about the way he talks about his sister—the one who disappeared years ago. Like there's still an open wound there."

A strange chill ran down my spine. "His sister?"

"Yes," Maya nodded. "He doesn't talk about her much, but when he does... I can tell it haunts him."

"It's strange," I murmured. "Whenever I'm around Ethan, I feel this... connection. Like I've known him forever."

Maya studied me carefully. "Serena... have you had any more memory flashes? Anything from before Ryan found you?"

I closed my eyes, trying to conjure something—anything—from that black void that was my past. Fragments sometimes came to me in dreams: laughter echoing in marble hallways, the scent of roses in a garden I couldn't quite picture, a man's voice calling a name I couldn't make out.

"Nothing concrete," I sighed, opening my eyes. "Just feelings, sensations. Sometimes when I'm designing, my hands seem to know movements I don't remember learning."

Maya reached across the desk to squeeze my hand. "Maybe it's better this way. What if your past is painful?"

"Maybe," I agreed, though part of me desperately wanted to know who I had been. "But it feels wrong, walking around with this... emptiness inside me. Like I'm living someone else's life."

"You've built this life, Serena," Maya said firmly. "Dreamland, your designs, your relationship with Ryan—all of that is genuinely you."

I smiled gratefully. "You're right. And speaking of genuinely me—I've gotten distracted from my matchmaking duties! Tell me everything about you and Ethan. Does he make you laugh? Has he shown you his favorite spots in London?"

Maya's blush returned with a vengeance. "He took me to this tiny bookshop last time—the kind with ladders to reach the highest shelves and a cat that roams between the stacks. We talked for hours over tea in the attached café."

"That sounds romantic," I teased.

"It wasn't like that!" she protested weakly. "But... he did remember that I love Earl Grey with honey instead of sugar."

"Oh, he's paying attention," I waggled my eyebrows suggestively.

We dissolved into giggles like schoolgirls rather than successful businesswomen. It felt good to laugh—to focus on something light and hopeful amid the lingering shadow of Kane's threats and my complicated relationship with Ryan.

"Promise me you'll call every day," I said as our laughter subsided. "I want updates on Operation British Gentleman."

"Only if you promise to take it easy while I'm gone," Maya countered. "And let Lucy handle the client meetings. Your doctor said to reduce stress, remember?"

"Yes, mom," I rolled my eyes playfully.

"I mean it," Maya's tone turned serious. "The baby and you are more important than any business deal. And Ryan would kill me if anything happened to you while I was gone."

I placed both hands on my belly, feeling one of the baby kick in response. "We'll be fine. Ryan's been surprisingly attentive lately."

"Good," Maya nodded approvingly. "Maybe Kane's threats have made him realize what really matters."

"Maybe," I agreed softly, though I wasn't entirely convinced. Ryan was still Ryan—focused, driven, complex. His newfound attentiveness could disappear as quickly as it had emerged.

As Maya prepared to leave my office, I called after her. "Bring me back something scandalously British!"

"Like a corgi?" she quipped.

"Exactly like a corgi. Or Prince William. Either works."

We shared one last laugh before she disappeared down the hallway.

Source:

Chapter 210: Chapter 210 The Artist's Secret

Serena's POV

I didn't want to pry too much into Maya's London progress, so I gathered a few designers from the studio and headed to Lance's art exhibition instead. The event was being held at a prestigious downtown art gallery—quite the grand affair.

Lance Draven's name alone was enough to draw a significant crowd. The designers accompanying me were practically vibrating with excitement. To them, Lance was already a master-level designer, someone they deeply admired from afar.

After entering the gallery, my colleagues dispersed in small groups to explore the exhibition. I wandered deeper inside and found myself drawn to the centerpiece sculpture in the main hall.

Many guests were gathered around this particular work—a stone phoenix with incomplete feathers, its body covered in cracks and burn marks. Despite its damaged appearance, the bird was captured in a moment of flight, its wings spread wide, conveying an incredibly powerful sense of vitality.

"A master truly is a master," someone nearby murmured. "Even after staying out of the spotlight for years, he can still produce something this magnificent."

"He's always been so reclusive," another person added. "Never joining any design studios—who knows where he finds his inspiration?"

"That's precisely why he's achieved such greatness," a third voice chimed in. "He's not interested in money or influence. When artists become preoccupied with wealth, their work grows common."

I couldn't help but smile wryly at the conversations around me. Glancing down at the inspiration description, I suddenly froze.

The piece was titled "Lazuli."

The description read: "Facing any adversity with an upward, life-affirming energy."

My brow furrowed involuntarily. The name coincidence made me feel strangely uncomfortable, and I suddenly lost interest in the piece. Just as I turned to leave, I came face-to-face with Lance.

He looked particularly polished today in an impeccable suit, his hair meticulously styled—clearly, he'd put significant effort into his appearance for this exhibition.

"Serena, you came," he said, his voice carrying through the space.

People around us turned to look, their gazes darting between Lance and me with obvious curiosity.

"Mrs. Lazuli and this piece sharing a name... coincidence?" someone whispered not quite quietly enough.

"Obviously not a coincidence—the piece must be designed for her," another replied.

"Wait, is the designer secretly married?"

"Don't you recognize her? That's Serena from Dreamland Jewelry—also Mr. Blackwood's wife."

Though the discussions were hushed, several comments reached our ears. My face stiffened with embarrassment.

I forced a smile, exchanged brief pleasantries, then quickly excused myself to the restroom. After washing my hands, I tried to recover from the awkward moment, wondering if I was reading too much into things.

Lance had always seemed like a decent person, and he knew about my relationship with Ryan. I took a deep breath and pushed away my jumbled thoughts before exiting the bathroom.

To my surprise, Lance was waiting nearby. When he saw me emerge, he hurried over, looking somewhat uncomfortable himself.

"I'm sorry about the sculpture's name," he said. "It might have created some misunderstandings."

I pulled my lips into a tight smile, feeling uneasy.

"It's fine. Just a name similarity, I suppose."

I didn't want to press the issue. Lance and I were merely acquaintances, not close friends, and pursuing the matter seemed pointless.

"Mr. Draven, you should probably go attend to your other guests. I'll just wander around on my own."

Lance shook his head. "My exhibitions have never been about superficial social interactions. I've already greeted all the friends I recognize."

"I'm truly happy you came today, and I'd like to use this opportunity to discuss some of my pieces with you."

I froze, feeling something strange stir inside me. His attitude toward me seemed excessively familiar.

"Serena? Is this a bad time?" he asked when I didn't respond.

With the conversation already at this point, refusing seemed impolite. After all, I had come specifically to appreciate his work.

"Sure, that would be nice," I relented.

Lance's face lit up as he began guiding me through the exhibition. He explained each piece in detail, constantly asking for my opinions and suggestions.

When it came to art pieces, I didn't have many profound insights to offer. Though we worked in related fields, our styles differed significantly, and there wasn't much common ground for meaningful critique.

My responses grew increasingly brief, bordering on perfunctory, yet Lance's enthusiasm never wavered. His conversation remained animated, seemingly unaffected by my diminishing engagement.

After following him around for a while, fatigue began setting in, and I desperately wanted to sit down.

"Mr. Draven, I brought several designers from my studio today who greatly admire your work. They'd be thrilled if you could chat with them for a bit."

I didn't reject him outright, instead attempting to redirect his attention.

Lance's brow furrowed slightly, his expression momentarily rigid.

Before he could respond, I grabbed a passing designer from our group and positioned myself between them.

"Xiao Wan, this is designer Lance Draven. Didn't you say you had questions for him?"

The young designer nodded excitedly, immediately extending her hand for an introduction.

"I'm so happy to attend your exhibition today! Your work is absolutely incredible!"

Lance managed a polite smile and exchanged pleasantries.

I smiled too, placing a hand on my lower back. "I'll let you two chat while I find somewhere to sit for a moment."

"Serena, are you tired? I didn't consider how long I've been keeping you on your feet. Let me help you," Lance said, reaching out toward me.

I instinctively stepped back, the uncomfortable feeling in my chest growing stronger.

"No need, please continue your conversation."

Finding an excuse, I hastily retreated to a corner seat, still feeling a burning gaze following me. When I turned to look, Lance quickly averted his eyes and resumed talking with Xiao Wan.

I sipped some water, thinking about Lance's unusual attentiveness. During our previous project collaboration, our interactions had been completely normal—just colleagues working together professionally. Now, his attitude had shifted noticeably.

His enthusiasm seemed mixed with something else—though certainly not romantic interest, given my very pregnant state.

As I sat pondering, my phone rang with a video call from Maya. The exhibition hall was noisy, so I stepped outside to answer.

The moment the video connected, I was greeted by Maya's tear-streaked face.

My heart tightened immediately. "Maya, what happened?"

Through the phone came sobbing as Maya launched into a tirade against Ethan.

"Ethan actually said he only sees me as a sister!" she wailed. "When I told him I wanted to try being more than friends, he literally ran away without a word!"

Looking at Maya's face—now resembling a weeping kitten—I couldn't help but laugh despite myself. I'd been worried something terrible had happened, but it was just romantic troubles.

"Serena! How can you laugh? This is all your fault! If you hadn't encouraged me, I never would have fallen for him!"

I tried to suppress my amusement, offering gentle consolation instead.

"Maya, don't rush to conclusions. Maybe Ethan just needs time to think things through."

"Perhaps you should come back to New York for now?"

Maya sniffled and wiped her tears, her emotions settling somewhat.

"Needs time? He's clearly just a jerk! We've spent so much time together one-on-one, and he kept accepting my invitations. If he wasn't interested, why would he do that?"

"And now when I finally make a move, he runs away! He was just playing with me!"

Maya grew increasingly agitated, practically radiating murderous intent.

My lip twitched involuntarily. It seemed Ethan had truly angered my best friend.

"Maya, try to calm down. These things take time—give each other some space. You should probably come back soon though. I've encountered a bit of a situation here—"

My voice gradually trailed off as a familiar voice behind me made me jump.

"Serena, I've been looking everywhere for you. Why did you come outside?"

My body tensed instantly, sending a chill down my spine.

When I didn't respond, Lance simply moved in front of me and repeated his question.

"Serena, are you alright? You don't look well. Should I take you somewhere to rest?"

As he spoke, Lance stepped closer, invading my personal space in a way that made me deeply uncomfortable.

Source: