

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

#Chapter 211 Stolen Freedom - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 211 Stolen Freedom

Chapter 211: Chapter 211 Stolen Freedom

Serena's POV

Before I could answer, Maya's voice suddenly erupted from my phone.

"Who the hell is that talking? Tell him to back the fuck off!"

Maya was already fuming about Ethan, and now someone had interrupted our conversation. When my best friend gets angry, she doesn't care who she offends.

I seized the opportunity and flipped my phone camera to show Lance.

"Maya, this is designer Lance Draven. He worked on that collaboration project with Celestial Gems I told you about."

Maya just grunted, clearly uninterested in pleasantries right now.

"Are you at some event? Where are you?" she asked impatiently.

I laughed nervously, stealing quick glances at Lance who was still hovering uncomfortably close.

"Yeah, I'm at Lance's art exhibition actually."

"Is it over yet? Find somewhere private so we can talk properly. I'm not done ranting about that jerk Ethan."

I forced another awkward laugh. "Sure, just give me ten minutes, okay? I need to wrap things up here first."

Maya finally relented and hung up. I tucked my phone away and turned to Lance with what I hoped was a polite smile.

"Mr. Draven, I'm really sorry, but I need to leave now."

Lance's forehead creased with obvious disappointment. "Serena, we were supposed to have dinner together."

Were we? I don't remember agreeing to that. My stomach tightened with discomfort.

"I'm sorry, perhaps another time. Maya needs me right now," I said firmly, turning to leave.

The silence behind me—no footsteps following—brought instant relief. I spotted our studio driver leaning against the car, smoking. When he saw me approaching, he quickly put out his cigarette.

"Mrs. Lazuli, are you leaving already? What about the others?"

I checked my watch. "Just take me home first, then come back for them. The exhibition isn't over yet."

He nodded and opened the door for me. "Of course, please get in."

Once safely inside the car, I immediately called Maya back. She'd calmed down somewhat, though her eyes were still puffy from crying. She was packing her suitcase, clearly planning to return to New York.

"I'm never coming to London again," she grumbled, stuffing clothes haphazardly into her bag.

My anxiety was slowly subsiding just hearing her familiar complaints. I sat back, finally able to breathe normally again.

Maya noticed my distraction. "Serena! Are you even listening to me?"

I startled. "Sorry, I just..." After hesitating for a moment, I told her about Lance's strange behavior and how uncomfortable he made me feel.

Maya initially dismissed my concerns, but after recalling what she'd just witnessed, her expression changed.

"You know, I've heard some artists can be really obsessive. Their minds work differently from normal people," she said thoughtfully. "Do you think this Lance guy might be... I don't know, a creep? Or have some weird fetish?"

Her analysis sent shivers down my spine. "No way. He seems pretty respectable, not like—"

"Do bad people have it written on their faces?" Maya scoffed. "Like how 'I'm a cheating asshole' wasn't tattooed on Ethan's forehead? Just be careful, okay? Don't meet with this Lance guy alone anymore."

I nodded, mentally vowing to keep my distance from him.

"I'm coming back to New York tomorrow," Maya announced dramatically. "I can't stay in this heartbreaking place any longer."

She immediately launched back into her tirade against Ethan. I sighed, settling in to listen to her vent until we reached the studio.

After hanging up, I headed to my office to catch up on some work. I'd barely made a dent in my emails when my phone buzzed again.

Lance's name flashed across my screen.

I stared at it, debating whether to answer. The persistent ringing grated on my nerves. Maybe this was a good chance to firmly establish boundaries and make it clear he needed to back off.

Taking a deep breath, I answered with a deliberately cold tone.

"Mr. Draven. What can I help you with?"

"Serena? The exhibition's over. Are you free now? I have some old friends who'd like to meet you. Good connections for future collaborations."

I frowned, staring at my phone. Lance's voice made my skin crawl. Sure, the designers he knew were well-established names in the industry. Connections that could benefit me professionally.

Maya's warning echoed in my mind.

"Mr. Draven," I said firmly, "I already have plans for tonight. Perhaps another time."

I moved to end the call when he cut in desperately.

"Wait! Serena, have I done something wrong? Is there some misunderstanding between us? If it's about that piece, I sincerely apologize."

I pursed my lips, taking a deep breath to calm myself before responding.

"It's nothing like that. I genuinely have other commitments. I'm considering opening a branch studio, so I don't have time for social engagements right now."

Before he could protest, I rushed on, "Mr. Draven, we'll collaborate another time. I have a meeting to attend. Goodbye."

I hung up abruptly, waiting anxiously to see if he'd call back. When my phone remained silent, I exhaled deeply, shoulders slumping with relief.

This suffocating feeling... I hadn't experienced it in years. Not since...

I shoved my phone into my bag, ready to head back to the house. Just then, several designers returned from the exhibition, still buzzing with excitement as they discussed the displays.

"Mrs. Lazuli! Why did you leave early? Are you feeling unwell?" one of them asked, concern etched across her face.

I'd become the studio's precious asset—everyone treated the slightest change in my routine like a potential crisis. I smiled reassuringly and waved off their concerns.

"I had other matters to attend to. Please, continue your discussion."

"The exhibition was truly magnificent, Mrs. Lazuli. Lance Draven is an absolute genius," another designer gushed.

I forced a tight smile and headed out without further comment.

Once in the car, I instructed the driver to take me home.

"Mrs. Quinn, we need to stop for gas first. It'll take a few minutes."

I nodded. "That's fine. I'll wait here."

"The sun's quite harsh today. Maybe you should wait in your office or grab a coffee nearby?" he suggested thoughtfully.

There were several nice cafés in the area, with delicious pastries too. My stomach growled at the thought.

"Good idea," I replied.

After the car pulled away, I crossed the street to a quaint coffee shop. I ordered a pastry and coffee, then settled into a window seat.

I gazed absently at passersby, my mind drifting to nowhere in particular. The server brought my order, and I murmured a thanks before taking a sip of coffee and nibbling at the pastry.

The air conditioning created a cocoon of comfort. Between the gentle hum of conversation, the comfortable temperature, and my earlier stress, I felt my eyelids growing heavy.

Just as they were about to close completely, someone slipped into the chair across from me.

"Serena? Finished? We should go now."

I blinked hard, forcing my vision to focus on the person opposite me.

As the face became clearer, my heart lurched violently.

Lance Draven was sitting right in front of me.

I tried to stand, to call out, but my body felt like lead. My limbs wouldn't respond. Something was very, very wrong.

Source:

Chapter 212: Chapter 212 Kidnapped by the Artist

Ryan's POV

Something wasn't right. I'd been sitting in this board meeting for over an hour, but couldn't shake this growing uneasiness in my chest. My pen tapped incessantly against the polished table while some executive droned on about quarterly projections.

"Mr. Blackwood? Your thoughts on the proposal?"

I looked up, realizing everyone was staring at me. "We'll revisit this tomorrow. Meeting adjourned."

Ignoring their confused expressions, I checked my phone again. No messages from Serena.

Simon approached as the room cleared. "Sir, is everything alright?"

Before I could answer, my phone rang - Serena's driver. My stomach dropped.

"Mr. Blackwood," his voice trembled, "Mrs. Quinn is missing. I left her at a coffee shop while getting gas, and when I returned, she was gone."

"What coffee shop?" My voice came out razor-sharp.

"The one across from her studio, sir."

I was already moving toward the door. "Send me the exact location. And check if she returned to the studio."

Next came Maya's call. "Ryan, it's Lance Draven. Look into him NOW."

My jaw clenched. "Who is he?"

"An artist. Serena attended his exhibition today. Something's off about how he acted around her. I think he might have... certain obsessions."

My blood went cold. "I'm on it."

Ending the call, I immediately instructed Simon to investigate Draven's background - residences, frequent haunts, everything.

The driver pushed well beyond the speed limit as I sat in the back, knuckles white around my phone. When we reached the coffee shop, I demanded to see the security footage.

There she was - Serena sitting alone by the window, then moments later, Lance Draven joining her. My stomach twisted as I watched Serena's posture change, her movements becoming sluggish.

"It's definitely Draven," I confirmed, storming out.

"Sir, where should we look?" Simon asked, already coordinating with our security team.

"Check his most private, least visited property," I instructed without hesitation. If this man had the twisted obsession Maya suspected, he'd take Serena somewhere isolated, where they wouldn't be disturbed.

We sped out of the city toward the suburbs, reports coming in that Draven hadn't visited any of his usual studios or galleries today.

My jaw ached from clenching my teeth as I barked at the driver, "Faster!"

All I could think about was Serena - her soft smile that morning before leaving, how I'd been too distracted with work to really look at her. What if that was the last time I'd see her? The thought made my chest constrict painfully.

"Find her," I muttered under my breath. "I need to find her."

Serena's POV

I jolted awake on a cold, hard chair, my head pounding as consciousness returned. Foggy memories of leaving the coffee shop flashed through my mind - that strange drowsiness that had overtaken me. Now I was fully alert, but it didn't matter. My wrists and ankles were bound tightly with rope.

Lance stood before me in pristine white clothing, paintbrush in hand, his eyes lighting up when he noticed me stirring.

"Serena, you're awake?" His voice dripped with disturbing enthusiasm.

I struggled against the restraints, feeling them dig deeper into my skin with each movement.

"Lance, what the hell are you doing? Untie me right now!" My voice came out stronger than I felt, while my body betrayed me with a slight tremor.

He didn't even flinch at my harsh tone. Instead, he leaned closer with an unsettling smile. "Don't struggle, Serena. The more you fight, the tighter the ropes become. We wouldn't want marks ruining your skin." His eyes gleamed unnaturally. "My work must be perfect."

A chill ran down my spine. "What work? What are you planning to do?"

Lance flicked on a lamp nearby, illuminating the dim room. My breath caught in my throat as I finally saw what surrounded us - dozens of disturbing paintings hanging on the walls. Each featured nude women bound in various positions, their expressions twisted in unmistakable pain and terror.

These weren't art. They were a monster's fantasies documented on canvas.

I forced myself to stay calm, knowing panic wouldn't help me escape. "Lance, let me go now and I'll keep this quiet. This never happened."

He studied my face with increasing excitement. "You truly are the perfect muse I've been searching for. Absolutely perfect."

His fingers reached out, trailing across my cheek, down my jaw and neck, before finally resting on my pregnant belly. The touch made my skin crawl.

"Look at you," he whispered reverently. "Such a perfect mother-to-be. Those pure, innocent eyes... Serena, you're the muse I've been seeking all these years. My artistic career will reach new heights because of you."

I swallowed back bile, realizing how deeply disturbed he truly was. Still, I needed to buy time.

"Lance, listen to me. You know who my husband is. Ryan Blackwood will tear your life apart if you do this. Everything you've built will be destroyed."

He waved dismissively. "So considerate, always thinking of others. Don't worry - if you cooperate, I'll make sure you forget this ever happened. These beautiful memories will be our little secret."

With a disturbing giggle, he walked to a tripod and switched on a video camera pointed directly at me. My stomach lurched.

"Lance, think about this. If I'm missing too long, Ryan will come looking. Let me go now and we can pretend none of this happened."

He pressed a finger against my lips, silencing me. The contact made me want to vomit.

"Shhh. This is our special time together now. No more talking." His eyes glittered with madness. "My muse, let's start with semi-nude poses. Your body must be absolute perfection."

There was no reasoning with him. His mind was completely gone.

He caressed my face again, smiling that terrible smile. "What a perfect art piece you'll make. If you weren't pregnant, you might be even more beautiful... but I've never featured a pregnant woman before. You'll be my first. Aren't you excited?"

The nausea overwhelmed me then. I retched violently, unable to hold it back.

When his hand reached for my face again, I seized my chance. I lunged forward and bit down on his hand with all my strength, tasting blood.

"AHHH!" He yanked his hand back, now bearing a deep, purpling bite mark.

I spat and glared at him. "You call yourself an artist? You're pathetic."

His face transformed from serene to twisted in an instant. "You have NO RIGHT to judge my work!" he shouted, spittle flying from his lips. "I've dedicated my life to art! A basic designer like you could never understand!"

I laughed bitterly. "I'm not the first woman you've brought here, am I? What did you use? Drugged my coffee?"

"You won't be the first or the last," he smirked, reaching for my clothing.

I fought desperately against the restraints, knowing it was futile but refusing to submit. "GET AWAY FROM ME!"

Suddenly, a thunderous BANG echoed from outside. The door burst open as security guards charged in, taking Lance down with minimal effort. He thrashed beneath them, screaming incoherently.

"Let me go! Who are you people? This is breaking and entering! I'll call the police! I'll sue you all!"

An assistant nodded to one of the guards, who promptly gagged Lance, silencing his ranting.

Through my increasingly blurred vision, I saw Ryan rush in, his eyes immediately finding me. The raw fury and concern on his face was unlike anything I'd ever seen. He quickly removed his suit jacket and draped it over me.

"Serena, are you alright?" He crouched beside me, voice impossibly gentle as his hand caressed my cheek.

I tried to smile, to tell him I was okay, but darkness was creeping in from all sides. The last thing I remembered was Ryan untying my restraints and lifting me into his arms.

As consciousness slipped away, I heard his cold, deadly command to his men:

"Destroy this place. I never want to see this man again."

Source:

Chapter 213: Chapter 213 Vengeance and Rescue

Ryan's POV

I stared at the monitor displaying Lance's holding room, my knuckles white from gripping the edge of the desk. The security footage from last night played in my mind on repeat - Serena bound to that chair, that monster's hands on her.

"Mr. Blackwood, what should we do with him?" Simon asked quietly beside me.

My jaw clenched so tight I could hear my teeth grinding. "Make him disappear."

"Sir?"

"You heard me." I turned to face my most trusted assistant. "Not dead. I want him alive and suffering. Find the most remote facility we own. Somewhere no one would think to look."

Simon nodded, understanding exactly what I meant. "The compound in northern Alaska?"

"Perfect. No phone service, no internet, complete isolation." I glanced back at the monitor where Lance was pacing his temporary cell. "And Simon? Make sure he never creates 'art' again."

Simon's eyes widened slightly before he nodded. We both knew what that meant.

"What about his public profile, sir? He's a well-known artist with exhibitions scheduled."

"Cancel everything. Release a statement that he's having a mental breakdown and has checked himself into an exclusive private treatment center in Europe. Indefinite hiatus." I picked up my phone, scrolling through contacts. "I'll have our PR team handle the details."

I needed to ensure no one would look for him, at least not anywhere near where he'd actually be. The thought of what he'd planned to do to Serena made my blood boil all over again.

"What about the evidence, sir?" Simon gestured toward the bag containing the camera we'd found in that hellhole.

My stomach churned at the thought of what might be on it. "Destroy everything. Every recording device, every painting, every scrap of evidence from that place. I want it wiped from existence."

"Already underway, sir. Our team has secured the building. They're removing everything as we speak."

I nodded, satisfied. "And the woman who drugged Serena's coffee? The cafe worker?"

"She's been dealt with. She claims Lance paid her five thousand dollars to put something in Ms. Quinn's drink. She had no idea what would happen afterward."

"Five thousand for Serena's life," I muttered bitterly. "Make sure she understands the consequences if she ever speaks of this to anyone."

Simon nodded. "Done, sir."

If I had arrived even minutes later...

I shook my head, refusing to follow that thought. "How is the media blackout holding?"

"Completely secure. No leaks. The hospital staff has been compensated generously for their discretion."

"Good." I checked my watch. "I need to see her."

Serena's POV

I woke up in a sunlit hospital room, blinking against the afternoon light. My body felt sore, but I was wearing soft, comfortable clothes instead of the outfit from my nightmare. Fresh flowers brightened the bedside table, their sweet scent a stark contrast to the musty horror of Lance's studio.

After taking a moment to convince myself I was truly safe, I heard the door push open. Maya rushed in, her face pinched with worry.

"Serena! You're finally awake! How do you feel? Are you hurting anywhere?" She grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly.

I could tell she'd come straight from the airport. Her clothes were wrinkled, and travel exhaustion shadowed her eyes.

"Don't worry about that psycho," she continued, dropping her bag onto a chair. "Ryan has taken care of everything. You won't ever have to worry about Lance again."

I nodded slowly, wincing at the movement. My hands drifted protectively to my belly.

"The baby? " My voice came out raspy and scared.

Maya's face softened immediately. "Perfectly fine. The doctors did thorough checks. Everything's normal."

She pulled her chair closer. "But you need proper rest after the shock. This isn't something small, Serena."

Relief washed over me, so powerful I felt tears spring to my eyes. Those terrifying moments with Lance flashed through my mind—his disturbing paintings, his cold fingers on my skin, the way he'd looked at me like I was just another canvas.

Maya continued ranting, blaming herself and the studio staff for not watching me more carefully. Her words blurred together as she went on and on about security measures and changes she'd implement.

"Maya, please," I finally interrupted, my head beginning to throb. "It's over now. Let's not keep talking about it."

I took a deep breath. "I'm just grateful the baby weren't harmed."

Maya nodded, squeezing my hand again. "Ryan has kept everything completely quiet. Nobody knows what happened. You just focus on resting, okay? In a few days, I'll come pick you up when you're discharged."

After the doctors came for another check-up and confirmed I was recovering well, Maya reluctantly left to handle the mounting issues at Dreamland Studio. She'd flown straight from London without even stopping to rest.

Throughout the afternoon, I kept expecting Ryan to appear. Each time the door opened, my heart jumped, but it was always a nurse or doctor. Where was he? The last thing I remembered was being in his arms as consciousness slipped away.

Hours passed. The evening shadows lengthened across my hospital room. I dozed off, only to wake with a start when the door finally opened again.

Ryan stood there, framed in the doorway. His normally impeccable appearance showed subtle signs of strain—his hair slightly disheveled, the shadow of stubble on his jaw, tie loosened at his neck. His eyes locked with mine, and for a moment, neither of us spoke.

"You're awake," he finally said, his voice unusually soft as he approached the bed.

I nodded, suddenly feeling shy despite everything we'd been through. "You found me."

"I'll always find you." His hand reached for mine, his touch gentle but firm. "How do you feel?"

"Better now." I hesitated before adding, "What happened to Lance?"

Ryan's expression darkened momentarily. "You don't need to worry about him. He's being handled."

The cold, deadly tone reminded me of his final words before I'd passed out: "Destroy this place. I never want to see this man again."

"What does that mean exactly?" I pressed.

"It means he'll never hurt you or anyone else again." Ryan's jaw tightened. "The official story is that he's accepted an overseas collaboration and moved into behind-the-scenes work."

I shivered, not wanting to know more details. My imagination filled in enough blanks.

"You saved me," I whispered, squeezing his hand.

Ryan's eyes clouded with something that looked like guilt. "I should have been there sooner. When you didn't answer my calls, I knew something was wrong."

"How did you find me?"

"The tracking device in your phone." His thumb traced circles on my palm. "When we couldn't reach you, Simon activated it."

I remembered the strange drowsiness at the coffee shop, the disorientation afterward. "He drugged my coffee."

Ryan's entire body tensed. For a moment, raw fury flashed across his face before he controlled it. "I know."

Silence stretched between us. I could feel his restraint, how carefully he was holding himself together.

"The camera," I suddenly remembered. "Lance had a video camera set up."

"It's been destroyed," Ryan assured me quickly. "Along with everything else in that place."

"Ryan," I whispered, "I'm okay now. We're okay." I guided his hand to my belly. "All three of us."

His composure cracked then, just slightly. He leaned forward, pressing his forehead against mine.

"When I saw you tied up in that chair..." His voice was barely audible. "I've never been so afraid."

This admission from a man who showed fear at nothing struck me deeply. I reached up, touching his face.

"But you found me in time." I tried to smile. "My hero."

He pulled back slightly, his eyes searching mine. "I won't let you out of my sight again."

"That might make bathroom trips awkward," I joked weakly.

A ghost of a smile touched his lips before fading. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, his fingers lingering against my cheek.

"Rest now," he said, straightening up. "I'll be right here."

Source:

Chapter 214: Chapter 214 Hidden Motives

Ryan's POV

I stared out the hospital window as I waited for the elevator to arrive. The nurse had just checked Serena's vitals and given us the all-clear—both she and our baby were stable. My mind kept replaying last night's events, how close I'd come to losing them both. The rage I'd felt when finding her bound in that studio still simmered beneath my skin.

The door to Serena's room suddenly opened, drawing her attention. I watched through the security camera feed on my phone as a well-dressed man entered her room.

"Mr. Quinn? What are you doing here?" Serena's voice carried a note of surprise.

It was Ethan Quinn, CEO of LUXE, the British jewelry empire. What the hell was he doing here?

I signaled Simon to hold the elevator and strode back toward Serena's room, keeping out of sight. I needed to hear this conversation.

"I heard Maya rushing back last night," Quinn was saying as he sat beside her bed. "When I learned you were hospitalized, I decided to come check on you myself."

"That's very considerate of you, Mr. Quinn, but I'm just feeling a bit unwell. Nothing serious." Her voice was polite but distant.

Quinn nodded, sighing deeply. "Then I'll let you rest. I won't disturb you further."

He stood reluctantly, hesitating before leaving. "Is there anything else, Mr. Quinn?" Serena asked.

"Perhaps we can talk... when you're feeling better," he said cryptically before finally departing.

I waited until he was gone before entering her room, my mind racing with questions. Why was the CEO of LUXE personally checking on my ex-wife?

"You're awake. Has the doctor examined you?" I asked, pushing my suspicions aside for the moment.

Serena's face softened. "I'm fine, and the baby's fine too. Don't worry."

"Ethan Quinn was just here. Did you see him?" she asked.

My jaw tightened involuntarily. "No. He's in New York?"

"Yes, he said he heard about what happened—well, not exactly what happened, but that I was hospitalized. We only spoke briefly before he left."

She frowned, looking troubled. "It feels strange. Why would he be so concerned about me? Our relationship isn't that close. I don't feel any ill intent from him, but..."

"What is it?" I asked, instantly alert.

"It's just... odd. No one shows this kind of concern without reason. Don't you think?"

My mind flashed back to my last conversation with Quinn. He had mentioned Serena resembled his mother. Could there be more to this? Something connected to Serena's background?

"Ryan? Did you think of something?" she pressed when I remained silent.

I decided against sharing my half-formed suspicions. No point giving her false hope or unnecessary concerns.

"You might be overthinking it," I said gently, tucking the blanket around her. "Rest now. I'll speak with Quinn when I get the chance."

She nodded trustingly.

I was about to sit with her longer when Simon burst into the room, looking tense. "Mr. Blackwood, Kane has called an emergency board meeting. The situation looks problematic."

I turned, irritation flooding through me. "What the hell is he playing at?"

"He's using your recent absences against you, sir. Trying to find fault."

"You should go," Serena urged, pushing my arm lightly. "I'm fine now, really. Don't let Kane gain the upper hand—he's already been gathering momentum."

I hesitated, torn between staying with her and dealing with this threat to my position. Finally, I decided to return to Blackwood Enterprises. Kane had been a thorn in my side for too long.

Author's POV

At Blackwood Enterprises, the boardroom was filled with shareholders when Ryan arrived. Kane had brazenly taken his chair at the head of the table, a smug smile playing on his lips as he spotted Ryan.

"Ah, nephew. You're late."

Ryan's ice-cold gaze swept the room before fixing on Kane. With deliberate steps, he approached his uncle.

"Kane, positions you haven't earned will never stay yours."

Without warning, Ryan kicked Kane's wheelchair, nearly toppling it before Kane's assistant steadied it. The boardroom fell silent as Ryan pulled up another chair and took his rightful place.

Kane's smug smile vanished, replaced by naked rage. "You dare lay hands on me during a board meeting!"

"When someone disrespects protocol, they need to be taught," Ryan replied coldly, scanning the faces around the table. "Kane, you alone don't represent this board. Stop making such foolish power plays."

As the confrontation escalated, Ryan remained calculating and calm, even when Kane played his trump card - the alliance with the Vergara family that had strengthened his position.

"You neglect company affairs while chasing women and romance!" Kane spat. "You're unfit to remain CEO!"

When Kane demanded a vote to remove him as CEO, Ryan agreed with unexpected calm. "Fine. But before we vote, I have something to say."

On cue, Simon distributed documents to each board member - a freshly signed contract with Lucian West of Celestial Gems that contained remarkably favorable terms for Blackwood Enterprises.

"What you're looking at," Simon explained to the stunned board, "is the newest joint venture between Blackwood Enterprises and Celestial Gems, just finalized by Mr. Blackwood. As you can see, claims that our CEO neglects company affairs are completely unfounded."

Ryan watched with satisfaction as Kane's face grew increasingly pale while reviewing the contract. His uncle's plans were crumbling before his eyes.

After the meeting, Ryan systematically identified Kane's people within the company and began neutralizing their influence, moving them to positions where they could do no damage.

Back in his office later that afternoon, a knock interrupted his strategic planning.

"Mr. Blackwood," Simon announced, "Mr. Quinn from LUXE Jewelers is here to see you."

Ryan looked up, momentarily surprised before remembering his intention to learn more about this man's interest in Serena. "Send him in."

He set aside his work, determined to uncover exactly what connection this man had to his ex-wife.

Ethan Quinn entered, and they exchanged polite greetings before sitting down.

"What brings you here, Mr. Quinn?" Ryan asked directly.

Quinn smiled slightly. "I heard Blackwood Enterprises was facing some internal challenges. I wanted to offer assistance, but I see you've already resolved the situation."

Ryan nodded. Kane's recent moves had created quite a stir in business circles, so it wasn't surprising Quinn had heard about it.

"Thank you for your concern."

Quinn waved dismissively. "I couldn't have helped much anyway. Actually, I came to New York because I heard about Serena's injury. What exactly happened?"

Seeing Quinn's curious expression, Ryan decided on a direct approach.

"Mr. Quinn, you and Serena have only collaborated a few times professionally. Your relationship hardly seems close enough to warrant this level of concern."

Ryan's scrutinizing gaze made Quinn visibly uncomfortable.

"I was just asking, Mr. Blackwood."

The explanation sounded weak, and Ryan didn't believe it for a second.

"Mr. Quinn, let's be straightforward. Did you know Serena before? Or does she have some connection to your family that I'm unaware of?"

Quinn met Ryan's searching eyes. His expression tensed, and after a long moment, he sighed.

"You already know, Mr. Blackwood?"

Source:

Chapter 215: Chapter 215 Bloodlines and Secrets

Ryan's POV

From Ethan Quinn's expression, I had my answer.

"You think Serena is your long-lost sister, don't you?"

He nodded, his gaze steady. "Mr. Blackwood, how much do you actually know about Serena's past?"

I frowned. "Not much. When we married, she had lost part of her memory. She couldn't remember where she came from or who her parents were."

Quinn shot to his feet, composure crumbling. "Are you saying she's been suffering from amnesia all this time?"

I nodded slowly, eyeing his reaction. "Mr. Quinn, none of this is certain. She has amnesia—there's a real chance you're mistaken."

He shook his head emphatically. "That can't be a coincidence. Serena looks remarkably like my mother, and her memory loss coincides with when my sister disappeared. Doesn't that tell you something? I need to speak with her directly."

Quinn turned to leave, but I stood quickly and stopped him. "Wait! Serena is still recovering in the hospital. You can't question her now."

He paused, then turned back. "I'll wait until she's discharged, then I'll ask her myself."

I motioned for him to sit back down. "This matter requires delicacy. I'll approach Serena first. If she doesn't wish to reconnect with her past family, you should respect that."

"Serena is my family. Even without the Quinn name, whether she remembers or not, she's well taken care of."

My voice turned cold. "Serena is my family now. She may not carry your name, but she's cared for and protected. You'd do well to remember that."

He narrowed his eyes, gauging me. "Mr. Blackwood... what happened back then was an accident. The Quinns spent years trying to find my sister. We never gave up."

He took a step closer. "If Serena really is—"

I cut him off. "That's a big if. Don't jump to conclusions."

I gestured toward the door. "If there's nothing else, you know your way out."

My tone left no room for argument. Quinn hesitated, then left without another word.

Once the door closed behind him, the silence in my office felt oppressive. The implications of what he'd said wouldn't stop spinning in my head.

Could he be right? Could Serena really be someone else's blood? Someone else's sister?

I couldn't shake the unease gnawing at me. Dusk had fallen, and I was still staring blankly at my desk, work completely forgotten.

After sending Simon a quick message with instructions, I grabbed my keys and headed straight for the hospital.

Serena's POV

I swallowed the bitter pill, feeling the medicine slowly ease the throbbing pain. Hospital rooms are strange places—too quiet, too sterile, too... lonely. When Ryan walked in, my heart did that stupid little flutter it always does around him.

"Ryan, you're back," I said, my eyes brightening despite myself. "How did everything go at the company?"

"The company's fine. Kane can't do anything to threaten my position."

I felt my shoulders relax slightly. "That's good."

The walls seemed to close in on me, and I couldn't stand another minute in this suffocating room. "Ryan, I just spoke with the doctor. He said I can recover at home. Would you help me check out?"

Ryan frowned, clearly skeptical. "Did the doctor really say that?"

"Why would I make that up?" I challenged him, raising an eyebrow. "If you don't believe me, go ask him yourself."

And he actually did—walked right out that door to verify my claim. I smiled to myself while slipping on my shoes, feeling strangely victorious over this small moment of trust.

When he returned, I was already sitting on the edge of the bed, ready to leave.

"I wasn't lying, was I?" I couldn't help the smug smile spreading across my face.

"Let's go," he said simply, his arm wrapping around me as we left the room. His touch was warm, secure—something I'd missed during our time apart.

We'd barely settled into the car when my phone rang. Maya's name flashed on the screen, her voice already rambling before I could properly say hello.

"Serena, is Ethan Quinn in New York?" she demanded, sounding annoyed.

I froze, unsure how to respond. Thankfully, Maya didn't wait for my answer.

"He must have heard about me rushing back last night and followed me here," she continued, her tone shifting from irritation to something almost hopeful. "But I don't understand why. He already rejected me, so why show up again?"

She laughed suddenly, embarrassment coloring her voice. "Serena, do you think Ethan is playing hard-to-get with me?"

I struggled not to laugh. Maya could be surprisingly self-centered sometimes. I couldn't exactly tell her Ethan had visited because of me, so I scrambled for an excuse.

"Maybe he's in New York for business, Maya."

She scoffed immediately. "Impossible! I saw his car near the studio. It's the same Maybach he drove during the jewelry collaboration last season."

My brow furrowed. "You're saying Ethan is near Dreamland Studio?"

"Yes! Why else would he be there if not looking for me?"

Ryan, clearly eavesdropping on our conversation, reached over and took my phone.

"Ms. Carter, Serena just checked out of the hospital. She won't be coming to the studio for a few days. You're in charge of work matters," he stated bluntly before adding, "If there's nothing else, I'm hanging up now."

He disconnected before Maya could protest. I glanced at him, slightly annoyed yet somehow touched by his protectiveness.

As we drove in silence, my mind kept circling around Ethan's strange behavior. Why would he be waiting near my studio? It didn't make sense.

Ryan must have noticed my distraction. He returned my phone and squeezed my shoulder gently. "What are you thinking about?"

"Just wondering why Ethan would be hanging around Dreamland. Do you think he really has feelings for Maya?"

The suggestion felt wrong even as I said it. Something about Ethan's intensity when we met in the hospital... it wasn't about Maya.

"Serena, can you remember anything from your past?" Ryan asked suddenly, his question catching me completely off guard.

I blinked rapidly. "Why are you asking about that now?"

Ryan took my hand, his eyes momentarily dropping before meeting mine again with a gentle smile. "You promised to marry me again after our child is born, remember?"

My heart skipped. I hadn't expected him to bring this up now.

"When that time comes," he continued, "I want to give you the perfect wedding. I'd like to meet your family too—your real family."

Something stirred inside me—a mixture of longing and fear. I felt my face fall as reality crashed back.

"But I... I don't remember anything," I admitted, the words painful to say aloud. "I can't remember who my family is or where they might be..."

I swallowed hard, voicing the fear that had haunted me for years. "Maybe they're like me... maybe they didn't survive that accident..."

Ryan turned to face me directly, his hands on my shoulders. "Serena, do you want to find your family? I can help you."

I gave him a sad smile. Did I want to find them? God, yes. During those three miserable years of marriage, through countless tearful nights, I'd imagined how different things would have been if I had a family to turn to—people who cared about me, who would have given me somewhere to escape to when life with Ryan became unbearable.

If I'd had relatives, would I have felt so worthless? So utterly alone?

"Ryan, is it even possible?" I asked, hope and doubt battling inside me. "My memories are gone. There are millions of people out there—how could we possibly find them?"

"Do you want to recover your memories, Serena?" His question was gentle but direct.

I nodded without hesitation. "Of course I do."

"Then I'll take you to see a specialist tomorrow. We'll find your memories together."

Source:

Chapter 216: Chapter 216 Fragments of the Past

Serena's POV

I woke up the next morning to find Ryan already gone. The empty space beside me felt colder than usual, my mind still swimming with fragments from yesterday's conversation. Find my family? After all these years of emptiness, could it really be possible?

After finishing my breakfast, the housekeeper approached me with that perfectly practiced professional smile.

"Mrs. Quinn, Mr. Blackwood has sent a car for you," he announced with a slight bow.

"Thank you. I'll just change into something more comfortable first," I replied, already feeling a flutter of nervousness in my stomach.

"Please take your time, Mrs. Quinn. There's no rush."

I nodded, making my way back to our bedroom. My fingers trembled slightly as I chose a loose-fitting sweater and comfortable pants. What would I discover today? Would I finally learn who I really was before the accident?

The car first took me to Blackwood Tower to pick up Ryan before heading toward the suburbs. During the ride, Ryan held my hand tightly, his thumb brushing over my knuckles in that reassuring way I'd grown to depend on.

"We're going to see a leading specialist in memory recovery," he explained, his voice gentle but firm. "If anyone can help you remember your past, it's him."

I nodded, not trusting my voice. Part of me desperately wanted to remember everything—my childhood, my parents, who I truly was. But another part was terrified. What if my past was filled with pain? What if there was a reason I'd forgotten everything?

The car pulled up to an elegant old house that looked more like someone's home than a medical facility. Ryan guided me inside, his hand steady against the small of my back.

An elderly man with kind eyes and silver hair rose to greet us in the entrance hall. Ryan's assistant handed over some beautifully wrapped gifts, which Ryan acknowledged with practiced courtesy.

"Dr. Shaw, these are just a small token of our appreciation for seeing us today."

The doctor smiled warmly. "No need to be so formal. And you must be Mrs. Blackwood. Your husband already filled me in on everything—I'll do my best to take care of you."

I didn't correct him.

Selfishly, I let the title sit.

The doctor motioned toward the hallway with a nod. "Come on back. Let's see how we can help today."

The room he led me to was filled with medical equipment, transformed into a private clinic. Dr. Shaw motioned for me to sit in a comfortable chair while Ryan reluctantly stayed behind in the waiting area.

"Try to relax," Dr. Shaw said, his voice soothing as he prepared his equipment. "Your amnesia was likely caused by severe head trauma. Recovering memories often requires triggers—specific stimuli connected to your past."

I swallowed hard, nodding as he began to work.

The session felt like hours, with Dr. Shaw guiding me through various memory retrieval techniques. Images flashed through my mind—water, panic, darkness—bringing physical reactions I couldn't control. My heart pounded against my ribs, my breathing becoming shallow and rapid as fragments of memories assaulted me.

When we finally finished, I stumbled out of the room feeling like I'd been hit by a truck. My face must have been white as a sheet, because Ryan immediately rushed to my side, his arm wrapping protectively around my waist.

"Serena, are you alright?" The concern in his voice was palpable.

Dr. Shaw followed behind me, sighing softly. "Mrs. Blackwood's condition is quite severe. Given how much time has passed, she's only able to recall fragmentary images at this point. And considering her pregnancy, we shouldn't push too hard with emotional stimuli. Mr. Blackwood, I suggest you take her home to rest."

Ryan thanked him quietly before guiding me back to the car. I felt numb, disconnected from my body, lost in the shattered pieces of memories that had surfaced.

Once inside the car, the dam finally broke. Tears welled in my eyes as I turned to Ryan.

"I remembered falling into the ocean," I whispered, my voice shaking. "I was at some kind of celebration on a ship... and then I was in the water."

I started breathing rapidly, feeling the phantom sensation of water filling my lungs. "The water was everywhere—I couldn't breathe—it was pulling me down—"

"Serena, try to calm down," Ryan urged, gripping my hand firmly while his other hand rubbed soothing circles on my back. "You're safe now. Just breathe with me."

It took several minutes for my panic to subside. Ryan didn't push me to say more, and I was grateful for that small mercy.

Back at the mansion, he helped me to our bedroom and handed me a warm cup of tea. The familiar routine of his care—something I'd only recently rediscovered—anchored me to the present.

After drinking half the tea, I finally felt steady enough to speak again.

"Ryan, I think I remembered something important," I said, setting the cup down carefully. "That party—it was on a ship. I was celebrating something... I had too much to drink, which is probably why I fell overboard."

He nodded encouragingly, his eyes never leaving my face.

I frowned, trying to catch hold of the fleeting images slipping through my mind.

"I don't think I'm from New York," I murmured. "The city I remember... it was by the sea, but it didn't feel like this. The air was damper, colder. I remember narrow cobblestone streets, old brick buildings, the smell of rain on stone. It felt older... quieter somehow."

Ryan's expression shifted subtly—was that recognition in his eyes?

"Did you remember anything else?" he asked carefully. "Like what your parents looked like, or your surname?"

I bit my lip, a theory forming in my mind that had been nudging at me since our conversation about Ethan.

"Ryan, I know my last name is Quinn. That's the one thing I've always remembered." I looked up at him, searching his face. "Do you think... could Ethan Quinn possibly be connected to me? Is that why he's been hanging around Dreamland?"

Something flashed in Ryan's eyes.

"Ethan Quinn is still in New York," he said carefully. "If you're ready, perhaps you should meet with him."

I hesitated. Would it be too forward to approach someone like Ethan with such personal questions? But this was about my identity—my entire life before Ryan.

Ryan must have sensed my internal debate. "You've already mentally prepared yourself to face your past, Serena. Meeting him could either confirm your connection or eliminate that possibility altogether."

His reasoning made sense, and I felt my resolve strengthen. "I'll go to the studio this afternoon. Maya said his car has been parked nearby. I might as well confront him directly."

Ryan didn't try to stop me, but his concern was evident in the way his brow furrowed slightly.

"Serena," he said softly, "no matter what you discover, remember that I'm your family now. If you learn something about your past that you'd rather not face, don't force yourself."

"Ryan, I'll be fine," I assured him, squeezing his hand. "You should get back to work. I might be home late—there's a mountain of work waiting at Dreamland that Maya needs help with."

He nodded reluctantly, finally letting go of my hand. "Call me if anything happens. Anything at all."

I gave him a reassuring smile as I gathered my things. "Don't worry so much."

The mystery of my past needed to be solved—today, if possible. Whatever I discovered, I'd deal with it. After all, I'd survived everything else life had thrown at me so far.

Source:

Chapter 217: Chapter 217 The Lost Sister

Serena's POV

I made my way to the studio with a mix of anticipation and dread churning in my stomach. The questions about my past refused to leave me alone, and Ethan Quinn seemed to hold some of those answers.

"Ethan, do you have a moment? I'd love to meet at the studio to discuss the London collaboration. There's so much I want to chat about," I said into my phone, trying to keep my voice steady despite my racing heart.

There was a brief pause on the other end before Ethan quickly agreed. "Serena, you're out of the hospital already? How are you feeling?"

I forced a light laugh. "I'm much better now. Do you have time to meet?"

"Of course. See you shortly."

Twenty minutes later, Ethan walked into my office, his eyes immediately scanning me from head to toe with unusual intensity.

"Your color looks much better than when you were hospitalized," he remarked, studying my face.

I smiled politely. "Thank you for your concern, Ethan."

Instead of jumping straight to my questions, I started discussing work matters first. We'd barely gotten into the conversation when Maya burst through the door. Her expression darkened when she saw us chatting comfortably.

"Mr. Quinn, what an unexpected honor," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Had I known you were gracing us with your presence..."

Ethan shifted uncomfortably, rubbing his nose. The tension between them was palpable.

I quickly stood up and pulled Maya aside, whispering urgently, "Maya, please, let me talk to him alone first."

She pouted, looking irritated. "Why should I? I want to ask him why he ran off like that!"

"Don't be impulsive," I pleaded. "Let me test the waters first. If you confront him directly and get rejected, how embarrassing would that be?"

My words finally calmed her down. "Serena, will you ask him for me?"

I nodded firmly, giving her the OK sign. "I've got this covered."

Maya shot Ethan one last cold glare before finally turning to leave.

I sighed with relief as I sat back down. Ethan cleared his throat awkwardly. "Maya seems to have... misunderstood something."

"Misunderstood what exactly?" I raised an eyebrow, determined to stand up for my friend first. If Ethan truly wasn't interested, I needed to help Maya move on sooner rather than later.

When he hesitated, not answering, I decided to change tactics and ask what I'd really come for.

"Ethan, I actually called you here to ask... do you have any other sisters in your family?"

Ethan's eyes sharpened instantly, clearly catching the curiosity in my voice.

Has Ryan already discussed my background with her? His expression suddenly relaxed.

"Serena," he said softly, "do you remember something?"

Then he did something unexpected. "Sis, have you figured something out?"

That single word—"sis"—hit me like a thunderbolt. "What... what did you just call me?"

Ethan studied my shocked expression and apparently decided to stop hiding.

His face turned serious as he spoke deliberately. "To be precise, you might be my third sister. I'm the youngest child of the Quinn family. I was sent abroad when I was little. After you went missing in that accident at sea, our family searched for you for a long time, but there was no trace."

"After meeting you in London, I began to suspect."

"Sis, if you don't believe me, you can come back to London with me to meet our parents and our older sisters."

My face froze, eyes wide with shock. The suspicion I'd harbored had actually turned out to be true.

"Serena? Are you having trouble accepting this?" Ethan asked, looking helpless at my reaction.

"I wasn't certain at first either, but Mr. Blackwood and I have discussed it. The timing of your memory loss coincides exactly with when my third sister disappeared after falling overboard."

"And you look so much like our mother. If there's no connection between you two, I wouldn't believe it."

"That's also why Maya misunderstood my intentions."

I snapped back to reality, catching another crucial detail in his words.

"Your misunderstanding with Maya is related to me?" I asked, my voice rising slightly. "And Ryan knew about all this? You two discussed this privately?"

Ethan nodded. "Actually... I got close to Maya because I wanted to learn more about you from her."

"She's your best friend, so I figured she'd have more information about you."

"As for Mr. Blackwood... he was only looking out for your interests when he talked with me."

I sucked in a sharp breath. Forget what Ryan had done—if Maya ever found out Ethan's real reason for approaching her, she'd be furious with me too.

"How could you..." I started.

"I know I shouldn't have done that. It was presumptuous, but I really, really wanted to know if you were my third sister or not."

Ethan's handsome face crumpled with regret. He clearly knew he'd acted inappropriately.

"Serena, Mr. Blackwood mentioned you've lost many of your memories. Have you remembered anything yet, even a little?"

I sighed, feeling overwhelmed by one revelation after another.

"Serena, are you alright?" he asked, concerned by my pale face. He probably realized he'd shared too much too quickly.

I rubbed my temples as silence fell over the office. After what felt like an eternity, I finally processed everything he'd told me.

"Ethan, I have two questions," I said at last.

Ethan nodded eagerly. "Ask away, sis."

"First, does the rest of the Quinn family know you've found me?"

He shook his head. "I haven't told anyone else yet."

"Second, do you dislike Maya?"

Ethan froze, clearly unprepared for this question.

"I'm asking about romantic feelings, not friendship," I clarified. "You'd better answer honestly."

I was determined to keep my promise to my friend, no matter what else was happening.

Ethan rubbed his nose nervously. "Serena, I haven't known Ms. Carter for very long. That's a difficult question to answer."

"Let me rephrase—do you dislike Maya?"

This time Ethan didn't hesitate. He shook his head. "No, I don't."

I smiled slightly. "If you don't dislike her, why not give it a try?"

"Maya is a wonderful woman. I think you two would make a good match. If you tried being together, it might work out wonderfully."

Ethan thought for a moment but responded with silence.

"It's just a suggestion," I added. "Don't feel pressured."

Ethan nodded. "Alright, I'll consider it."

I felt relieved. "I'll continue with my treatment until my memory fully returns. Until then, I remain skeptical about this connection between me and the Quinn family."

Ethan understood I wouldn't accept everything immediately. "I can wait until you remember, sis."

"Good. I have no other questions. You can go now."

I was essentially dismissing him—my mind was a chaotic mess, and I needed some time alone to process everything.

Ethan didn't push further. He simply nodded and left.

As silence returned to my office, I half-closed my eyes, my thoughts raging like a storm at sea.

Source:

Chapter 218: Chapter 218 Secrets Between Lovers

Serena's POV

The peaceful silence in my office didn't last long before a knock interrupted my thoughts. I opened my eyes to see Maya already walking in, her face full of questions.

"So he's gone?" she asked, trying to sound casual but failing miserably.

I nodded, forcing myself to look more present than I felt. My head was still spinning from everything Ethan had just revealed.

Maya's shoulders slumped as she flopped dramatically onto my office sofa. "He just left like that..." She grabbed a cushion, squeezing it like it was Ethan's face, pinching and twisting it repeatedly.

"Well? Did he say anything about me? What does he think about us?" Her eyes were practically begging for good news.

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. How could I explain the situation without betraying either of them?

"Maya, I think relationships need time to develop naturally," I finally said. "You two haven't known each other very long. Expecting concrete answers so quickly might be rushing things, don't you think?"

Maya turned toward me, confusion written all over her face. She wasn't buying my diplomatic approach.

"Don't sugarcoat it, Serena. Just tell me straight—does Ethan want to be with me or not? If he doesn't like me, why did he keep asking me out in London? Why would he spend so much time alone with me?"

Her voice rose with each question, growing more agitated. I mentally winced for Ethan, knowing he'd dug himself into quite a hole.

"Maya, please calm down," I said soothingly. "Why not give this some time? Take a step back, let him have some space. Maybe after getting to know him better, you might realize he's not even right for you."

Maya's lower lip trembled slightly. "I'd love to spend more time with him and build something real, but how can I when he's clearly avoiding me?" She hugged the cushion tighter. "I bet he thinks I'm too old for him. That's the real reason, isn't it? He's just making excuses!"

I sighed and moved closer, taking her hands in mine. "Maya, you need to trust your own appeal. Stop looking so defeated—it doesn't suit you at all."

That finally cracked a reluctant smile from her.

"You're right," she said, straightening her posture. "He's just one man! I've got guys lining up from here to England! Who does Ethan Quinn think he is anyway?"

Maya stood up, dramatically flipping her hair and letting out a cold snort. "I don't need him!" she declared before storming out of my office.

I watched her leave, shaking my head. This situation was getting messier by the minute.

After gathering my things, I headed straight for Ryan's office. I needed answers. If he'd already spoken with Ethan about my potential identity, why hadn't he told me directly? Why make me figure it out on my own?

When I arrived, Ryan was deep in conversation with Simon about personnel changes. From the snippets I overheard, they were discussing removing executives who'd been loyal to Kane.

"With these people gone, Kane won't be able to interfere with company operations anymore. Brilliant strategy, Mr. Blackwood," Simon was saying with an approving smile.

I didn't wait for an invitation, barging in with determination written all over my face. Simon, ever perceptive, quickly excused himself and slipped out.

Ryan's brow furrowed as he took in my expression. He knew immediately something was wrong.

"Serena, what—" he began, but I cut him off.

"You already talked to Ethan Quinn about me. Why didn't you tell me directly?" My voice was steady but sharp.

Ryan sighed. "I was worried you wouldn't be ready to handle it all at once," he explained. "I thought it would be better if you discovered the truth yourself, at your own pace."

"Are you angry with me?" he added, studying my face carefully.

I turned away with a huff. Ryan let out a soft chuckle and stepped toward me, gently turning me back to face him.

"Serena, I was wrong. I should have told you," he admitted, his voice sincere.

"What did you and Ethan discuss? Do you believe what he's saying is true?" His hands rested on my shoulders, warm and steady.

I pouted slightly. "I can't judge if it's true yet. I need to remember first."

"Even if remembering is painful, I don't want to give up. I need those memories to be whole again, to be the complete Serena. Can you understand that?" I searched his eyes, needing him to get it.

Ryan nodded, pulling me into his embrace. I could feel his heartbeat against my cheek.

"I understand. Do whatever you need to do," he said softly. "Actually, there's another option we could consider."

"You mean going to London to meet the Quinn family?" I asked, anticipating his suggestion.

"Exactly. I could go with you, if you'd like."

I pulled away from him and sat down on the nearby sofa, suddenly feeling the weight of everything.

"I want to go to London too, but now isn't the right time," I explained. "Kane is still watching your every move, ready to pounce. Plus, I'm due to give birth soon. What if the baby comes while we're in London? It would be too complicated."

Ryan sat beside me, taking my hand in his. His touch instantly calmed my racing thoughts.

"Serena, don't worry so much. Even if you did give birth in London, their medical facilities are excellent," he reassured me. "As for the company, I've already removed most of Kane's allies. He can't interfere with business operations anymore."

My eyes lit up. "Really? Then why not take this opportunity to deal with him once and for all?"

Ryan shook his head, a knowing smile playing on his lips. "There's no rush."

I looked at him in surprise. After everything Kane had done, Ryan wasn't in a hurry to retaliate?

"Why not?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"If I don't make a move, Lucian will. Don't forget, he and Kane have their own unfinished business."

I couldn't help but smile at that. Kane would get what was coming to him one way or another.

"That works too," I agreed, then jabbed my finger into Ryan's chest twice. "But Ryan, no more keeping important things from me. Promise?"

"I promise," he said, catching my hand and bringing it to his lips. "I was wrong to hide anything from you."

His eyes held mine as he kissed my fingers gently. "Serena, I'd do anything to make you happy. Anything at all."

Source:

Chapter 219: Chapter 219 Claim Me Again

Serena's POV

I gazed into Ryan's intense eyes as his lips pressed against my fingers. My heart raced faster when he said those words—"I'd do anything to make you happy. Anything at all."

"Ryan..." I whispered, feeling the tension shift between us.

He pulled me closer, his hand sliding to the small of my back. "You know what terrifies me most, Serena?" His voice was barely audible, vulnerable in a way I rarely heard from him.

"What?" I asked, noticing how his eyes darkened with emotion.

"That if you really are who Ethan says you are—a Quinn—you might choose to leave all this behind. Leave America. Leave..." He swallowed hard. "Leave me."

The admission hung in the air between us. Ryan Blackwood, the powerful, confident CEO who commanded respect everywhere he went, was afraid of losing me.

"Is that why you didn't tell me about your conversation with Ethan?" I asked softly, touching his face.

He nodded slightly. "Selfish, I know."

Without another thought, I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my lips against his. The kiss started gentle but quickly deepened as his arms tightened around me.

When we finally broke apart, breathless, I rested my forehead against his. "Ryan, listen to me. No matter who I was before—Quinn or anyone else—you're my family now." I guided his hand to my swollen belly. "We're your family."

His eyes blazed with something primal. "Then stay. Give me a reason to keep you here."

I raised an eyebrow, a smile playing on my lips. "You'll have to work for it, Mr. Blackwood."

Ryan growled low in his throat, lifting me effortlessly into his arms. "Challenge accepted."

He carried me to the private bathroom connected to his office, kicking the door closed behind us. My back pressed against the cool marble wall as his mouth claimed mine again, hungrier this time.

"Ryan," I gasped as his lips trailed down my neck. "The door—"

"Already locked when Simon left," he murmured against my skin. "No interruptions."

His hands slipped under my blouse, fingers tracing patterns on my sensitive skin. I shivered despite the heat building between us.

"You're mine, Serena," he whispered, helping me out of my top. "Not Quinn's, not anyone else's."

I moaned softly as his hands caressed my swollen breasts, now much more sensitive with pregnancy. "Yours," I agreed, working on his shirt buttons.

Ryan's eyes darkened with desire as he looked at me. "I can't wait until after the baby is born to marry you," he confessed, his voice rough with emotion. "I need everyone to know you're my wife. Not my ex-wife, not just the mother of my child—my wife."

The intensity in his voice made me tremble. "Then don't wait," I challenged, unbuckling his belt.

He lifted me carefully, mindful of my pregnant state, setting me on the marble countertop. His hands roamed up my thighs, pushing my skirt higher.

"Ryan," I breathed, my head falling back as his fingers found their target.

"Look at me," he commanded softly. When I met his gaze, he continued, "I want to see your face when you fall apart for me."

My fingers clutched his shoulders as he worked magic with his hands, bringing me closer to the edge. The pressure built quickly—everything was more intense during pregnancy.

"That's it," he encouraged, his voice tight with restraint. "Let go, Serena."

I came undone with his name on my lips, clinging to him as waves of pleasure washed over me. Before I could recover, Ryan had positioned himself between my legs.

"Tell me if I need to stop," he said, his control visibly strained.

"Don't you dare," I warned, pulling him closer.

We moved together in perfect rhythm, the bathroom filling with our mingled breaths and soft moans. Ryan whispered promises against my skin—promises of protection, devotion, and a lifetime together.

"Mine," he growled as he approached his release. "Say it again."

"I'm yours," I gasped, feeling another climax building. "And you're mine."

Those words pushed him over the edge, and I followed right after, clinging to him as we rode out the pleasure together.

Afterward, he held me close, one hand protectively cradling my belly where our daughter was growing.

"I meant what I said," Ryan murmured, pressing a kiss to my temple. "I want to marry you before she's born. I want our daughter to have my name from her first breath."

I smiled against his chest. "Then we'd better start planning, Mr. Blackwood."

His lips found mine again, gentle this time. "Already have. Simon's arranged for the best wedding planner in the city to meet us tomorrow."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Of course he has."

Ryan's expression turned serious. "I lost you once through my own stupidity, Serena. I won't risk losing you again."

I looked up at him, seeing all the emotions he usually kept hidden—fear, hope, and something that looked a lot like love.

"You won't lose me," I promised, sealing it with a kiss. "You're stuck with me now, Ryan Blackwood. For better or worse."

His answering smile was brighter than I'd ever seen. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Source:

Chapter 220: Chapter 220 The Viper in Silk

Serena's POV

The doctor declared my baby girl perfectly healthy at today's checkup, sending waves of relief through me. I couldn't stop smiling as the driver took me to the International Tower where Ryan had arranged for a fitting of the custom gown he'd ordered for me.

"He's so protective these days," I murmured to myself, feeling the gentle movements of our daughter inside me. Two security guards followed closely behind as I stepped out of the car, one carrying my purse while the other scanned the surroundings.

Inside the boutique, a sales associate rushed toward me with an overly bright smile. "Mrs. Blackwood! Please follow me. Mr. Blackwood has everything prepared."

The dressing room was spacious and elegant—typical Ryan, sparing no expense. The attendant helped me slip into a stunning midnight blue gown with intricate crystal embellishments that caught the light with every movement.

I stepped out and examined my reflection in the full-length mirror, turning sideways to see how my pregnant belly looked in the design. My hands automatically went to the waistline.

"The waist needs to be looser," I said, feeling the fabric pull slightly. "I'm not interested in squeezing my baby for fashion."

The attendant nodded eagerly. "Of course, Mrs. Blackwood. Any other adjustments needed?"

I shook my head, admiring how the color complemented my skin. "Everything else is perfect."

"Wonderful! We'll deliver it to your residence in a few days."

Just as I was about to return to the dressing room, I noticed a woman approach in my peripheral vision. She wore a gown in a similar shade of blue with design elements that eerily resembled mine. Despite the awkward moment, I offered a genuine smile.

"That gown suits you beautifully," I said, truly meaning the compliment.

Her eyes narrowed as she gave me a cold once-over, her lip curling slightly. "Yours, however, doesn't quite work... especially in your condition."

I felt my eyebrow twitch at her tone. Who the hell does she think she is?

She turned sharply to the designer behind her, her voice rising with each word. "You've given us identical designs? Do you have any idea how much I paid for exclusivity?"

The designer paled. "Miss Vergara, I deeply apologize—"

Vergara? My mind connected the dots instantly. Tiffany Vergara—Kane's fiancée and daughter of the Vergara family patriarch. The woman Ryan had warned me about just yesterday.

Tiffany's gaze returned to me, contempt dripping from every syllable. "If I were pregnant, I'd stick to maternity clothes. Evening gowns really don't flatter women with..." her eyes lingered on my belly, "...your proportions."

I felt my cheeks flush with anger, but kept my voice steady. "Miss Vergara, I don't recall asking for your fashion advice."

"Freedom of choice only applies when you have the figure to pull it off," she shot back with a smirk. "You know what they say—when outfits match, it's who wears it better that matters. And honey, that's definitely not you."

The boutique staff looked horrified, frozen in place as they watched our exchange.

I took a deliberate breath, squaring my shoulders. "Miss Vergara, I've found that true class includes kindness. Your family name is impressive, but your manners certainly aren't. What a disappointment."

Her eyes widened fractionally before narrowing again. "A little jewelry designer thinks she can speak to me this way? You really have forgotten your place."

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me. "At least my 'little jewelry designs' are my own achievement. What exactly have you accomplished besides being born into the right family?"

I turned calmly and walked back toward the dressing room, hearing her snap at the designer behind me.

"This gown is unacceptable now! Start over completely!"

"Yes, Miss Vergara, please calm down—"

After changing back into my clothes and finalizing details with the designer, who apologized profusely for the unpleasant encounter, I headed for the exit. I had no interest in prolonging this petty confrontation.

But Tiffany wasn't finished. She intercepted me at the door, her perfectly manicured hand gripping the doorframe as if blocking my escape.

"Serena Quinn," she spat the name like an insult, "does having Ryan Blackwood's protection make you think you're untouchable in New York now?"

My security immediately stepped forward, creating a barrier between us. I stayed calm, meeting her glare directly.

"Miss Vergara, this 'protection' you speak of exists only in your imagination. I didn't seek this conflict—you attacked me unprovoked. How exactly am I the one overstepping?"

Her face darkened further, anger practically radiating from her skin. "Serena," she dropped the formalities, leaning closer despite my security's presence, "I suggest you lose the smug attitude. Blackwood Enterprise's future leadership isn't settled yet. What happens when your precious Ryan loses his position? Where will that leave you?"

I couldn't help smiling. Women like Tiffany were so predictable—always resorting to threats when their egos were bruised.

"Miss Vergara, Blackwood's leadership isn't determined by your opinions. If you're this concerned about corporate politics, perhaps you should develop some skills of your own instead of relying on your family name."

I paused deliberately, watching her face as I delivered my final blow. "Otherwise, history will only remember you as..." I enunciated each word clearly, "the fiancée of New York's crippled Blackwood."

"You—!" She lunged forward instinctively, only to be blocked by my security. Her face contorted with such fury that for a moment, I thought she might actually try to slap me.

I smiled serenely, understanding now why Kane and Tiffany found each other. They were perfectly matched in their toxicity.

"Let's go," I said to my security team, walking past her trembling form to the waiting car outside.

As we pulled away from the curb, I placed a protective hand on my belly, feeling our daughter kick in response. "Well, little one," I whispered, "that's your first lesson in standing your ground. Never let anyone make you feel small—even when you're growing bigger by the day."

Source: