

CEO's Regret After I Divorced

#Chapter 221 Kane's Threat - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 221 Kane's Threat

Chapter 221: Chapter 221 Kane's Threat

Serena's POV

I closed the car door behind me, feeling a small wave of satisfaction as I left that nasty woman standing there fuming on the sidewalk. My bodyguards quickly settled in, one in front with the driver and one beside me, both watching me with concern.

"Are you alright, Mrs. Blackwood?" one of them asked, his eyes scanning my face for any signs of distress.

"I'm fine," I assured him, smoothing my hand over my baby bump. "Some people just don't know when to shut their mouths."

The encounter with Tiffany Vergara had been unexpected but not surprising. I'd heard about Kane Blackwood's fiancée—the spoiled daughter of the Vergara family who was supposedly only marrying him for business connections between their families. Looking at her venomous personality up close, I understood why they matched so well.

"Should we inform Mr. Blackwood about the incident?" my bodyguard asked, already reaching for his phone.

I waved him off. "No need. It was just a catty exchange over a dress. Nothing worth bothering Ryan about."

But as we drove away from the International Tower, I replayed her words in my mind. That thinly veiled threat about Ryan not being in power for long... was that just bitter talk, or did she know something I didn't?

My phone buzzed with a message. Ryan.

"How was the fitting? Did the dress work out?"

I smiled, deciding not to mention my run-in with Tiffany. Why give her the satisfaction of becoming a topic of conversation?

"Just needs a slight adjustment for my growing bump. Should be perfect after that."

Three dots appeared immediately, followed by his response: "Can't wait to see you in it. How was the appointment before that? Everything okay with our little princess?"

My heart warmed as I typed back: "Everything's perfect. She's right on track, strong heartbeat. Doctor says I'm doing great."

I hesitated, then added: "By the way, ran into Kane's fiancée at the designer's. Charming woman... if you find vipers charming."

His response came instantly: "What happened? Did she say something to you?"

"Nothing worth repeating. Just some comments about my pregnant body in formal wear. And vague threats about you losing control of Blackwood."

This time, the three dots appeared and disappeared several times before his message came through: "I'm calling Simon. I want security footage from the store. And I'll be having a conversation with Kane about keeping his fiancée in line."

I could practically feel his anger through the phone. "Ryan, it's really not necessary—"

"It is," he cut me off with another text. "No one speaks to my wife that way. Especially not while you're carrying our child."

His protectiveness made me smile despite the unpleasant encounter. It was still strange sometimes, having someone care this much about my wellbeing. After years of being overlooked and undervalued—first during my amnesia and then during our previous marriage—Ryan's fierce attention felt both foreign and wonderful.

"Your wife, huh?" I texted back. "The wedding planner hasn't even started yet."

"Technicality," came his immediate response. "In my mind, you're already Mrs. Blackwood again."

I felt a flutter in my chest that had nothing to do with the baby. "Careful, Ryan. People might think you've gone soft."

"Only for you," he replied. "And our daughter. Everyone else still thinks I'm a heartless bastard."

"As they should," I texted back with a smiling emoji. "Keeps them on their toes."

When we arrived at the penthouse, I found Simon waiting in the lobby, looking anxious.

"Mrs. Serena," he said, stepping forward to take my bags. "Mr. Blackwood asked me to check on you personally."

I rolled my eyes. "He texted you the moment I mentioned Tiffany, didn't he?"

Simon's expression confirmed it. "He's... concerned."

"He's overreacting," I corrected, but couldn't help smiling. "It was just a catty exchange between women, Simon. Nothing I couldn't handle."

"I don't doubt that, ma'am," Simon said, escorting me to the elevator. "But Mr. Blackwood also asked me to inform you that he's moved up his return. He'll be back from Chicago tonight instead of tomorrow."

I raised my eyebrows. "Because of this? Simon, that's ridiculous. He has important meetings—"

"Which he's rescheduled," Simon said firmly. "His exact words were 'nothing is more important than making sure Serena and the baby are safe.'"

The elevator doors closed, and I leaned against the wall, a mixture of exasperation and affection washing over me. "He really has gone soft," I muttered.

Simon pretended not to hear, but I caught the small smile on his face. "The wedding planner will be here at ten tomorrow morning. Mr. Blackwood has cleared both your schedules for the entire day."

"Of course he has," I sighed, but couldn't suppress my smile.

Author's POV

Tiffany Vergara watched Serena's car disappear from sight, grinding her teeth with rage. Her perfectly manicured nails dug into her palms as she spat out her command.

"Take me to Kane's villa. NOW."

Twenty minutes later, she stormed into Kane Blackwood's private residence, her heels clicking violently against the marble floor. She flung her designer bag onto the glass coffee table with such force it nearly shattered.

"Kane!" she shouted, her voice echoing through the minimalist space. "What happened to all your big talk? Why hasn't Blackwood Enterprise been affected at all by your schemes?"

Kane sat in his wheelchair near the window, his expression darkening as she continued her tirade.

"You're completely useless! Do you honestly think I still want to marry you? Let's just cancel this engagement altogether!"

Tiffany was redirecting all the humiliation she'd suffered from Serena straight at Kane. Her words became increasingly cruel. "A useless cripple! You're nothing but a waste of my time!"

Kane's face hardened. The spies he'd planted within the company had nearly all been removed. The internal situation at Blackwood was becoming increasingly opaque to him, and now this woman had the audacity to burst in and throw a tantrum?

"Tiffany, SHUT YOUR MOUTH!" he roared suddenly.

She froze momentarily, shock flashing across her features before her voice rose even louder. "You dare tell ME to shut up? Have you forgotten what you promised me initially? If you can't deliver, and still won't cancel our engagement, are you planning to drag me down to hell with you?"

Kane's lips curved into a sinister smile that didn't reach his cold eyes. "You're absolutely right, Tiffany. If I can't take control of Blackwood Enterprise, I'll absolutely drag you down with me." He leaned forward in his wheelchair, his knuckles white against the armrests. "Don't forget, we're engaged now. You'll never break free from this arrangement... ever."

Tiffany stood paralyzed, genuinely frightened by the darkness she saw in his expression. "What exactly do you want?" she asked, her voice slightly less confident.

Kane drummed his fingers impatiently against the table beside him. "I've heard the Vergara family has connections with Dr. Vans, the retired surgeon. If he's willing to help, my legs might actually have a chance of recovery." His eyes narrowed as he stared directly at her. "Tiffany, help me stand on my own two feet again, and my odds of success increase dramatically." He paused, his words calculated. "Unless you enjoy being known as the fiancée of a cripple?"

Something flickered in Tiffany's eyes. Despite her reluctance, her future prospects demanded she comply. Self-interest eventually won out.

"Tiffany, our partnership continues. Instead of throwing tantrums, focus on what matters," Kane said coldly.

The memory of Serena's smug face floated into Tiffany's mind, fueling her anger further. She desperately wanted to crush that woman beneath her heel.

"I can contact Dr. Vans for you," she finally conceded, "but don't forget what you promised me."

Kane's face broke into a smile that never reached his eyes. "Of course. We're a team, Tiffany. As long as you help me secure Blackwood Enterprise, I'll give you everything you desire."

Tiffany gave an indignant snort, snatched her bag, and stormed out without another word.

The moment she left, Kane's expression transformed into one of utter contempt.

"Stupid woman!" he muttered, turning to his butler who stood silently by the door. "The next time she comes, don't let her in to see me directly."

The butler's face showed discomfort. "Sir... Miss Vergara forced her way in."

Kane shot him such a frigid glare that the man immediately lowered his head, not daring to offer any further explanation.

Source:

Chapter 222: Chapter 222 The Misunderstood Heart

Serena's POV

I watched Ethan shift uncomfortably in his seat, looking like a schoolboy caught passing notes. Poor guy. Maya had practically frozen him with that glare when we walked in.

"Ethan," I said, leaning against my desk, "you need to talk to her. Now."

He ran his fingers through his perfectly styled hair, messing it up slightly. "It's complicated, Serena."

"No, it's not," I crossed my arms. "You led her on in London, whether you meant to or not. And now you're avoiding her like she's got the plague."

Ethan winced at my directness. That's one thing about regaining pieces of myself - I'm not as soft-spoken as I used to be. The old Serena might have sugar-coated things.

"I didn't mean to give her false hope," he mumbled, looking down at his expensive shoes. "We spent time together, had dinner a few times. I enjoyed her company, but..."

"But what?" I pushed. "Maya isn't just my business partner, Ethan. She stood by me when I had nothing. When I was drowning after the divorce. She's family to me."

I walked over to the window, watching employees bustling about in the main design area. Maya was directing someone with animated gestures, professional as always despite her personal frustrations.

"You know what it's like for women like us in this industry?" I asked, not really expecting an answer. "We're constantly underestimated. Constantly having to prove ourselves."

And when we open up to someone, show vulnerability..." I turned back to face him. "That takes courage."

Ethan's face softened. "I never meant to hurt her."

"Intention doesn't matter when someone's heart is involved," I replied. "She puts on a tough exterior, but she's human. You can't just fly in from London, charm her, then pretend nothing happened."

"What exactly am I supposed to say?" He looked genuinely lost.

I sighed, shaking my head. "The truth, Ethan. Whatever that is. If you're not interested, say so clearly. If you are but you're hesitating because of work or distance or whatever else... say that too. She deserves honesty."

He stood up suddenly, pacing my office. "It's not that simple. The LUXE and Dreamland partnership is important. If things go badly between us—"

"Oh please," I cut him off. "We're all professionals. Maya would never let personal matters affect business. That's not who she is."

Ethan stopped pacing and looked at me thoughtfully. "You really care about her."

"Like I said - she's family." I walked to the door. "Now go talk to her. Clear the air. No more excuses."

I opened my office door pointedly, making it clear our conversation was finished.

"What if she throws something at me?" he asked, only half-joking.

I couldn't help but smile. "Duck."

With visible reluctance, Ethan straightened his tie and walked out. I watched through my glass walls as he approached Maya's office, knocking tentatively. She looked up, surprise briefly crossing her face before that mask of cool indifference slipped back into place.

She gestured for him to enter, and as the door closed behind them, I felt a strange mixture of hope and worry. Maya deserved someone who recognized her worth. Whether that someone was my brother or not remained to be seen.

I turned away, giving them privacy. My phone vibrated with a message from Lucy confirming my afternoon appointments. Back to work. Dreamland wouldn't run itself, and after yesterday's confrontation with Tiffany, I needed to stay focused.

Whatever was happening between Maya and Ethan, they'd have to figure it out themselves. I'd done my part as both friend and sister. Now it was up to them to find their own way through this mess.

Ethan's POV

I pushed open Maya's office door after knocking, feeling like I was walking into a lion's den. My palms were sweaty, something that never happened during multi-million dollar negotiations. Yet here I was, nervous as a schoolboy asking someone to dance.

Maya was furiously slamming file folders around, clearly in a mood.

"Come in!" she snapped without looking up, obviously expecting someone else.

I stepped inside, closing the door behind me. She continued shuffling papers, impatience radiating from her every movement.

"Is it fixed yet?" she demanded, still not looking up.

When no answer came, she finally raised her head. The surprise in her eyes quickly hardened into something cold and distant that made my chest tighten uncomfortably.

"What do you want?" The warmth I'd once seen in London was completely gone.

I moved forward, trying my best to sound sincere. "Maya, can we talk?"

Maya gave me a dismissive once-over, her lips curling into something between a sneer and a grimace. "What's there to talk about? You're not interested in me. Message received."

"Truth is," she continued with biting sarcasm, "I wasn't planning on pursuing anything with you either. An older woman, younger man situation comes with too many complications. I don't have time to waste."

I shifted awkwardly, my carefully rehearsed speech evaporating from my mind. "Are you... angry with me?"

Maya's bitter laugh cut through the air. "Ethan Quinn, people should have a conscience. Back in London, you were so attentive, checking if I was cold, asking about my day, taking me sightseeing."

Her eyes flashed dangerously. "I finally gathered my courage, and you just ran away! What exactly was your intention?"

Looking at her angry expression, guilt pressed down on me like a physical weight. I'd never meant to hurt her. Being around Maya had felt... different. Exciting. Challenging. And that scared me more than I wanted to admit.

"Please calm down," I said, hating how patronizing it sounded even to my own ears. "Can we sit and talk properly?"

Maya took a deep breath, visibly collecting herself. She stood and moved to the couch, dropping onto it with a deliberate lack of grace that somehow still looked elegant.

"Fine," she said flatly. "Let's hear what you have to say."

I sat down, keeping a respectful distance between us. "I want to apologize for last time. Everything happened so suddenly, and I... I didn't know how to respond, so I left. It wasn't appropriate, and I regret it."

Maya's mouth twisted slightly, but she didn't interrupt. Some of the tension seemed to leave her shoulders.

"Maya, when it comes to relationships, I'm... inexperienced," I continued, feeling increasingly awkward. "I didn't realize my actions might give you the wrong impression, so—"

"I understand completely," Maya cut me off, standing abruptly. Her expression had shifted to professional detachment. "You can go now, Ethan."

I froze mid-sentence. Wait, that wasn't what I meant to say at all. Serena had told me to be honest, and I was trying to explain that while I hadn't intended to lead her on, I did enjoy our time together. That maybe we could see where things might go.

"Maya, you—"

"Please leave," she said, already back behind her desk, eyes fixed on her computer screen. "I have work to do."

I swallowed the words on the tip of my tongue, nodded stiffly, and left her office. As I closed the door behind me, instead of feeling relieved that the awkward conversation was over, I felt worse. Much worse.

Why did Maya's dismissal bother me so much? Wasn't this what I wanted—clarity, no complications? Then why did I feel like I'd just lost something important before I even knew I had it?

Her face when she told me to leave kept replaying in my mind. The spark in her eyes had gone completely flat. I'd seen that same passionate woman laughing under London rain, arguing brilliantly over design concepts, challenging my every assumption.

Now she looked at me like I was just another business associate.

And somehow, that felt much worse than any anger could have.

Source:

Chapter 223: Chapter 223 When Honesty Hurts

Serena's POV

I spotted Ethan through the glass walls of my office, looking completely lost. His shoulders were slumped in a way I'd never seen before—the usually poised Ethan Quinn looking like he'd just been hit by a truck.

I grabbed my water glass and walked over, keeping my voice low. "Ethan? How did it go?"

He shook his head, avoiding my eyes. "Serena, I have to go. Something came up."

"Wait, what happened with Maya?" I pressed, touching his arm lightly.

"I think I made things worse," he muttered, running a hand through his hair. "I tried to explain, but the words came out all wrong. She basically kicked me out."

I frowned. "What exactly did you say to her?"

"I tried telling her I was inexperienced with relationships, that I didn't mean to lead her on... but before I could explain that I actually do enjoy spending time with her, she shut me down."

I sighed deeply. "Oh Ethan. That's not what I meant when I said be honest. You made it sound like you were rejecting her."

"I know that now," he said miserably. "I've got to get back to the office. We'll talk later."

As I watched him walk away, I couldn't help but feel partly responsible. Maybe I shouldn't have pushed him to talk to Maya so soon.

A designer approached with revised sketches, heading toward Maya's office, but I intercepted them quickly.

"Let me take a look first," I said, guiding them back to my office instead. "Maya needs some space right now."

After reviewing the work and suggesting a few minor adjustments, I stretched and checked my phone. A headline immediately caught my attention:

【BREAKING: Blackwood Group's Latest Project Fails—Multiple Ventures Under Second Major Shareholder Crumbling】

My eyes lit up as I scanned the article carefully. Kane was facing massive public backlash, and Blackwood Group was taking significant hits in the market.

Concern mixed with my satisfaction—I didn't want Ryan's company to suffer irreparable damage. I quickly dialed his number.

"How bad is it at the company?" I asked when he answered.

Ryan's low chuckle surprised me. "So you've seen the news?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "Is this Lucian's doing?"

"Every bit of it," Ryan said, his voice carrying a hint of admiration. "Kane's only going to get what he deserves from here on out."

"What about the financial damage to the company?"

"Don't worry. I'm making sure Kane bears full responsibility for the losses from his failed projects," he said confidently. "The board's already agreed."

Relief washed over me. "Good. He needs to pay for what he did."

"Exactly. How's your day going?" Ryan asked, his voice softening in that way that still made my heart flutter a little.

"Busy as usual. The Vergara collection is coming together nicely," I replied, settling into our conversation. We chatted for a few more minutes before saying goodbye.

I had just hung up when Maya appeared in my doorway, eyes red-rimmed, looking utterly miserable. She took in my smile—leftover from talking to Ryan—and her lips turned down in a wounded pout.

"Are you free tonight?" she asked. "I need a drinking buddy."

My smile faded. "Maya, drowning your sorrows won't help. You need to—"

"Right, forgot you're pregnant," she cut me off bitterly. "Fine. I'll go to the club alone and drink myself stupid."

She spun to leave, and I jumped up from my desk. "Wait! You can't go alone. That's not safe."

"Then come with me," she challenged.

I hesitated, thinking of my promise to Ryan to take better care of myself and the baby.

"I won't drink, obviously," I added quickly. "But I'm not letting you go alone."

Maya's expression softened slightly. "I'll head home to change first and text you the address. Don't be late."

"I won't," I promised.

After Maya left, I tried to finish up some work, but my mind kept drifting to what might have happened between her and Ethan. The evening light was fading when the office door opened, and Ryan walked in.

"Working late again?" he asked, leaning against the doorframe with that casual elegance that always made me stare a second too long.

I shook my head, gathering my things. "I'm actually heading out. Maya needs me tonight."

Ryan's eyebrow arched. "What's wrong with her?"

"Heart trouble," I said simply. "My brother happened."

Understanding dawned on his face. "Ah. And you're going where exactly?"

"Some bar. She wants to drown her sorrows." I stood up, grabbing my purse. "I've asked Bob to come along in case she gets too drunk to handle."

Ryan's eyes narrowed slightly. "Bob gets to go but I don't?"

"Are you actually jealous of our security guard?" I couldn't help but laugh. "Ryan, Maya's heartbroken. Having my husband there while she vents about my brother would be awkward."

"I don't like you going to bars in your condition," he said, his protective instinct showing.

"I'm pregnant, not made of glass," I reminded him. "And I won't be drinking, obviously."

He stepped closer, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "Promise you'll call if anything happens?"

The tender gesture made my heart skip. "I promise. I won't be late."

Ryan's hand rested briefly on my still-flat stomach. "Both of you be careful."

"We will," I said softly, touched by his concern. As I headed for the door, he followed.

"At least let me drive you there."

I didn't argue. Truth be told, I enjoyed these little moments with him—these small, normal husband-wife interactions we'd never had during our first marriage.

The bar Maya had chosen was called Nightshade, a three-story monstrosity with neon lights and a line stretching down the block. Ryan frowned when he saw it.

"Text me when you're ready to leave. I'll come get you, no matter what time," he said firmly.

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I'll be fine. Go home and get some rest."

Inside, the music was deafening. I covered my ears, wincing as I made my way upstairs to the VIP section. Thank god Maya had connections—I couldn't have handled the main floor for more than five minutes.

The private room was blessedly quieter, but my relief vanished when I saw the ridiculous amount of alcohol Maya had ordered. Bottles of wine, champagne, and harder liquors covered nearly every surface.

"Maya, this is excessive," I said, eyeing her worriedly.

She responded by grabbing a bottle of red wine and tilting it directly to her mouth. I lunged forward, snatching it away.

"Are you insane? You'll pass out before we've been here an hour!"

Maya gave a bitter laugh, her eyes already glassy. "That's the point, isn't it?"

I sighed, moving the bottles out of her immediate reach. "Maya, please. You're better than this."

Her face crumpled suddenly, tears welling up. "He told me he wasn't interested in me, Serena! Your brother actually called a meeting to reject me!"

"What? That can't be right," I said, confused. "Ethan told me—"

"Oh, he was very clear," Maya slurred, cutting me off. "Said he 'didn't mean to give me the wrong impression' and that he's 'inexperienced with relationships.' Like I'm some desperate woman throwing myself at him!"

I winced, realizing what had happened. Ethan had completely botched the conversation, saying all the wrong things before getting to his actual point.

"Maya, I think there's been a misunderstanding—"

"No misunderstanding," she insisted, her voice rising. "He humiliated me. In my own office!"

Before I could respond, Maya grabbed an intercom device I hadn't noticed on the couch.

"Send up your most attractive male models!" she shouted into it. "All of them! Money's no object!"

I stared at her, bewildered. "This place has male models? What kind of bar is this?"

The answer came minutes later when the door swung open and several shirtless men in tight pants filed in, flexing and smiling in our direction. A manager type followed, bowing slightly to Maya.

"Miss Carter, these are our most requested entertainers. Will they be suitable?"

Maya squinted through her drunken haze, frowning slightly. I noticed her gaze fixating on one particular model whose dark hair and lean build did bear a passing resemblance to my brother.

"Keep them all!" she declared, waving her hand dramatically.

"Maya!" I hissed, mortified. "You can't be serious."

She ignored me, pointing to the Ethan look-alike. "You. Come sit by me."

This was going to be a very long night.

Source:

Chapter 224: Chapter 224 Drunk Confessions

Serena's POV

The manager grinned with dollar signs practically dancing in his eyes. "Alright boys, make sure these lovely ladies are well taken care of!"

The male models quickly swarmed around us, making me jump to my feet in alarm. Ryan was still waiting outside—if he knew I was in here surrounded by male entertainers, he'd probably lose his mind.

"Why so tense, beautiful? Sit down," one model cooed, boldly grabbing my hand. His eyes swept over me with practiced charm. "We get clients like you all the time. Husband not giving you enough attention? Here, you can tell this boy all about it."

I froze for a split second before yanking my hand away like I'd been electrocuted. "You've misunderstood. I'm not your client."

With a frown, I flung open the door and waved Bob in. "Watch Maya. Don't let these guys do anything to her. I need to make a call."

Bob nodded, his eyes widening as he took in the scene—Maya surrounded by half-naked men, looking way too comfortable.

Maya was on a touchy-feely spree, caressing one guy's cheek, tracing another's jawline, then squeezing someone else's abs with gleeful abandon.

"Fucking asshole," she slurred, eyes unfocused. "You didn't want me, huh? Why are you all over me now?"

This was getting dangerous fast.

I stepped outside and called my brother, explaining the situation as quickly as possible.

"A bar? Why would you take a pregnant woman to a bar?" Ethan sounded completely confused.

"No time to explain. Maya's ordered a bunch of male models and she's completely wasted. I'm worried she'll—"

"Male models?" Ethan cut me off, his voice suddenly sharp. "I'm on my way."

He hung up before I could say another word. I stared at my phone, caught between amusement and exasperation.

When I returned to the private room, Maya had collapsed into one model's arms, her head lolling against his chest. My stomach clenched with worry.

"All of you, out. Now," I ordered, my voice leaving no room for argument.

I motioned Bob inside. "Get rid of them and settle the bill."

Bob nodded and efficiently herded the disappointed entertainers out the door.

Finally, silence fell over the room. Maya slumped against the couch, completely out of it. I sighed deeply, thanking whatever instinct had made me come along tonight. This could have ended so badly.

The door opened again, and Ryan appeared, looking annoyed.

"What's going on in here?" he asked, eyeing Maya's disheveled state.

"She's drunk," I replied simply.

Ryan nodded. "Then let's get her home. This place is too loud."

I shook my head. "Hold on. We need to wait."

"For what?" Ryan's brow furrowed in confusion.

Before I could answer, the door burst open. Ethan rushed in, his sleeves rolled up haphazardly and his hair a mess. He'd clearly dropped everything to get here.

His eyes immediately found Maya sprawled across the couch, and his expression darkened.

"How did she get this drunk?" he demanded.

I shot him a glare. "Why do you think? What exactly did you say to her this afternoon?"

Ethan pressed his lips together, refusing to answer.

In her revealing outfit—tiny camisole and shorts that showed off way too much leg—Maya suddenly opened her eyes and gave Ethan a seductive smile.

"Heyyy, let's keep drinking!" she giggled, clearly delirious.

Ethan's jaw tightened as he shrugged off his jacket and moved toward her, draping it over her exposed shoulders.

Maya seized the opportunity, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him close. "Keep partying with me. I've got plenty of money for tips, baby."

That comment made Ethan's face darken even further. Realizing the futility of reasoning with her, he scooped her up in his arms, turning to us with a resigned expression.

"Serena, Ryan, I'll take her home."

I didn't comment on his sudden formal acknowledgment of Ryan, just smiled and waved him off. "Go ahead."

Without another word, Ethan carried Maya out, cradling her protectively against his chest.

Ryan watched them leave, then turned to me with an amused smile. "What was that? Some kind of honey trap?"

I couldn't help laughing. "Something like that. If Ethan didn't care about Maya, he wouldn't have rushed over here tonight."

"Some people need a push to realize what's in their hearts," I added.

Ryan nodded, a knowing smile playing at his lips. "Shall we go home now?"

The ride back was quiet, both of us lost in our own thoughts. I kept wondering if my matchmaking attempt would pay off or if I'd just made things worse between Maya and Ethan. Ryan's hand found mine across the center console, his thumb gently stroking my skin.

When we reached home, the tension that had been building between us finally erupted. The moment the elevator doors closed behind us, Ryan's mouth was on mine, his kiss hungry and demanding.

"Do you know how crazy I went imagining you in that place?" he growled against my lips, pressing me against the wall. "All those men..."

I gasped as his hands gripped my waist. "I wasn't there for them."

"I know," he murmured, trailing hot kisses down my neck. "But seeing you walk out of there, knowing they were looking at you..."

We stumbled into our bedroom, shedding clothes along the way. His fingers fumbled with my dress zipper, his usual composure completely abandoned.

"Ryan," I breathed as he laid me on the bed, his eyes devouring every inch of me. "The baby—"

"I'll be careful," he promised, his voice rough with desire. "So careful, Serena."

His hands explored my body with reverent intensity, pausing at the slight curve of my belly. The way he touched me—like I was precious and sexy all at once—made my heart race.

I reached for him, pulling him down to me, needing to feel his weight, his heat. When he finally entered me, slowly and with exquisite control, I cried out, arching against him.

"God, I've missed this," I whispered, wrapping my legs around him.

Ryan's pace was measured at first, his movements deliberate and gentle. But as our passion built, his restraint began to slip.

"Tell me if it's too much," he panted against my ear.

"Don't stop," I urged, digging my nails into his back.

Our bodies moved together in perfect rhythm, finding that familiar dance that had always been so right between us. Ryan's hand slipped between us, his fingers finding exactly where I needed him most.

"Look at me," he commanded softly. "I want to see you."

I opened my eyes, meeting his intense gaze as waves of pleasure began to build inside me. The intimacy of that connection—seeing the raw emotion in his eyes—pushed me over the edge.

I cried out his name as ecstasy crashed through me, my body trembling beneath his. Ryan followed moments later, his face buried in my neck, my name a prayer on his lips.

Afterward, he gathered me against his chest, his heartbeat gradually slowing beneath my ear. His hand traced lazy patterns on my back as we lay tangled in the sheets.

"I've been thinking," he murmured into my hair.

"Hmm?" I was barely conscious, floating in blissful exhaustion.

"About what you said earlier. Some people need a push to realize what's in their hearts." His voice grew softer. "I was one of those people, wasn't I?"

I tilted my head to look up at him, surprised by the vulnerability in his expression.

"We both were," I admitted, reaching up to trace his jawline. "But we're here now. That's what matters."

Ryan kissed my forehead, pulling me closer. "I'm never letting you go again. You know that, right?"

Source:

Chapter 225: Chapter 225 Morning After Misunderstanding

Maya's POV

I woke up at an ungodly hour, my head pounding like a construction site. Where the hell was I? Some hotel room by the looks of it, way too fancy for my usual taste. Sunlight streamed through half-drawn curtains, making my headache even worse.

As I pushed myself up, squinting against the brightness, I nearly had a heart attack. There was Ethan—fucking Ethan Quinn—slumped over in a chair beside the bed, fast asleep.

Holy shit.

The morning light caught in his dark hair and fell across his rumpled dress shirt. Even exhausted and disheveled, he looked annoyingly perfect. What was he doing here? What happened last night?

I frantically checked myself under the covers. Fully dressed. Thank God. At least we hadn't... well, whatever.

I couldn't help staring at him. His usual perfectly composed expression was softened in sleep, though his eyebrows were still slightly furrowed. Something about seeing the always-in-control Ethan Quinn passed out in a chair made my heart do a stupid little flip.

Before I could stop myself, my hand reached out toward his hair. It looked so thick and soft—how did he keep it that way?

My fingers hadn't even touched him when his eyes snapped open. Steel gray met mine, and for a moment, we just stared at each other. The air between us felt electric.

I recovered first, yanking my hand back and clearing my throat. "Why are you here? Where am I?"

Ethan straightened, wincing as he rotated his obviously stiff neck. His arm looked numb as he tried to move it.

"It's a hotel," he said flatly. "You were drunk out of your mind last night. I didn't know where you lived, so I brought you here."

I glanced around and recognized the suite—his regular New York hotel. Heat rushed to my face as embarrassment hit me full force. Christ, had he been watching me sleep all night? I refused to let him see how mortified I felt.

"Who asked you to bring me here?" I shot back defensively. "I was having a great time last night."

Ethan's expression darkened instantly. He made a sound somewhere between a scoff and a snort. "Yes, I'm sure you and those male models were having a fantastic time."

"I was being a good Samaritan. My mistake." His voice turned cold, detached. The way he spoke to business rivals, not to me.

"You can leave now."

Something about his tone set me off. "What's with the attitude? Fine. I'm going."

I threw back the covers and jumped out of bed, shoving my feet into my heels. Two steps later, my ankle twisted viciously beneath me.

"Shit!"

Ethan moved with surprising speed, catching me around the waist before I could faceplant. "Careful!"

I tried to steady myself with one hand on the bed, but our balance was off. We tumbled backward, landing on the mattress with Ethan practically on top of me.

My breath caught in my throat. I could feel the heat radiating from his body, smell his expensive cologne mixed with coffee. His face hovered inches from mine, those gray eyes wide with surprise.

My heart hammered so loudly I was certain he could hear it. His lips parted slightly, and for one insane moment, I thought he might actually kiss me.

Instead, he practically leapt off me, straightening his shirt like it was on fire.

"Sorry," he said stiffly, avoiding my eyes. "That was... unintentional."

My cheeks burned with humiliation. Of course it was unintentional. The great Ethan Quinn wouldn't willingly touch me like that. The rejection stung more than I cared to admit, turning my embarrassment into anger.

I stood up, kicked off my death-trap heels, and dangled them from my fingers.

"Thanks for the five-star drunk-sitting service," I said with false brightness. "I'll be going now."

His eyes dropped to my bare feet. "You're going to walk out barefoot?"

I forced a laugh that sounded brittle even to my own ears. "Ethan, do us both a favor and stop with the fake concern. It'll just confuse me again."

The words spilled out before I could stop them. "Let's just keep things professional from now on. Colleagues, not even friends. It's simpler that way."

I turned to leave with as much dignity as I could muster. "Bye."

"Wait." His voice came out sharper than either of us expected.

I paused but didn't turn around. My heart was doing that stupid thing again, hoping for something I knew wouldn't come.

"What now?" I asked, proud of how steady my voice sounded.

I heard him sigh, then his footsteps crossed the room. He appeared in front of me, hotel slippers in hand. Not the complimentary ones—his own.

"Wear these," he said quietly, placing them on the floor before my feet.

I stared at the slippers for a long moment before slipping them on without comment. Something about this small gesture felt more intimate than if he'd kissed me.

We left the room in silence, rode the elevator in silence, and walked to his car in silence. The tension between us was thick enough to cut with a knife.

As he drove me home, I kept my gaze fixed firmly out the window. When we reached my apartment building, I climbed out without looking back, his oversized slippers still on my feet.

I didn't say goodbye. Neither did he.

* * *

Ethan's POV

After dropping Maya off, I sat in my car longer than necessary, gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white. Images from last night kept flashing through my mind—Maya stumbling in those ridiculous heels, Maya singing off-key at 3 AM, Maya getting sick twice in the bathroom while I held her hair back.

For anyone else, I would have called a cab or had hotel staff deal with it. But with her...

I ran a hand through my hair, frustrated by my own behavior. Last night had been a disaster from the moment Serena called. When she mentioned male models, something primal and possessive had erupted inside me. I'd left an important meeting without explanation, breaking every rule of professional conduct I lived by.

And for what? To find Maya drunkenly draped over some shirtless stranger, wearing barely anything herself.

"Keep partying with me. I've got plenty of money for tips, baby." Her slurred words echoed in my mind, making me clench my jaw all over again.

I started the car and pulled away from her building, trying to focus on the day ahead. I had meetings scheduled, decisions to make, a company to run. I couldn't afford to be distracted by a woman who clearly wanted nothing to do with me.

But as fall air rushed through the cracked window, cooling my face, I had to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth. Something had changed within me—a crack in the perfect facade I'd maintained my entire life.

That crack had a name: Maya Carter.

And I had no idea what to do about it.

Source:

Chapter 226: Chapter 226 Unspoken Secrets

Serena's POV

I couldn't shake the image of Maya's face when she mentioned Ethan. There was something raw there, something hurt that went beyond professional frustration. And that "colleagues, not even friends" comment she'd dropped earlier? Ouch.

My phone buzzed with a text from Ryan: "Wear the blue dress tonight. The one from Paris."

I smiled despite myself. Six months ago, I would've been thrilled by such a direct command about my wardrobe. Now I typed back: "I'll wear what I want, but thanks for the fashion advice, Mr. Blackwood."

The door swung open without warning, and Maya marched back in, clutching her tablet like a shield.

"I forgot to mention—" she stopped mid-sentence, catching me sprawled unprofessionally across my furniture. "Comfortable, are we?"

"Extremely," I grinned, not bothering to sit up properly. "What'd you forget?"

She tapped something on her tablet. "Celeste can't make it tonight. Family emergency."

"Oh no, is everything okay?"

"Her grandmother fell. Nothing life-threatening, but she needs to be there." Maya hesitated, biting her lower lip. "So it'll just be us."

I sat up straighter. "Us and about a hundred wealthy socialites dying to see Lucian West stick it to Kane."

"And Ethan Quinn," Maya added casually—too casually.

I froze. "Ethan's coming?"

"LUXE is one of Celestial Gems' biggest competitors. Of course he'll be there." Maya studied me with suspicion. "Why are you making that face?"

"What face? I'm not making a face."

"That's definitely a face. The same face you made when you called him a 'bad boy' earlier."

I winced. "It just slipped out."

Maya crossed her arms, eyes narrowing. "You're hiding something."

"I'm not!" I protested, feeling my cheeks heat up.

"You are. You're doing that thing where you blink too much." She pointed accusingly at my face. "Spill it, Serena. How do you really know Ethan Quinn?"

I swallowed hard. This wasn't how I'd planned to tell her—or anyone, for that matter.

"We... might have met before."

"Before what?"

"Before... everything." I waved my hand vaguely.

Maya sat down slowly in the chair opposite me, her expression shifting from suspicious to concerned. "Serena, what aren't you telling me?"

I took a deep breath. Maya was my best friend, my rock through everything. She deserved some truth, even if I couldn't tell her all of it yet.

"Remember when I couldn't remember anything from before my accident? There are... pieces coming back."

Her eyes widened. "Are you serious? Since when?"

"A while now," I admitted. "Little flashes here and there. Nothing concrete enough to talk about."

"And Ethan is in these memories?" she pressed.

I nodded reluctantly. "Something like that."

"Were you two... involved?" Her voice had gone unnaturally flat.

"God, no!" I laughed, perhaps too loudly. "Nothing like that. We just... knew each other."

Maya stared at me for a long moment, clearly not buying my vague explanation. Finally, she stood up.

"Fine. Keep your secrets. But promise me you're not plotting something ridiculous like setting us up."

I raised my right hand. "I solemnly swear I am not trying to set you up with Ethan Quinn."

Not anymore, at least. Not after seeing that wounded look in her eyes this morning.

Maya nodded, apparently satisfied. As she turned to leave, I couldn't help myself.

"So... what exactly happened after I so irresponsibly abandoned you last night?" I wiggled my eyebrows.

"Nothing happened." She gripped her tablet tighter.

"Nothing? Not even a little something? Oh, honey."

"Don't 'oh honey' me. I'm fine." Maya headed for the door. "I'll see you tonight. Wear something that'll make Ryan's jaw drop."

After she left, I collapsed back onto the couch, staring at the ceiling. My brother was an idiot. The way he looked at Maya when he thought no one was watching—it was the same way Ryan sometimes looked at me now.

I sighed heavily. Tonight was going to be interesting.

My phone buzzed again with another text from Ryan: "Wear whatever you want. You look beautiful in everything."

I smiled. At least one Blackwood man was learning.

I arrived at the venue with Ryan, fashionably late but perfectly timed. After our early dinner and a quick change into evening wear, we made quite the entrance at Celestial Gems' gala.

The ballroom sparkled under crystal chandeliers, soft jazz floating through the air as New York's elite mingled with champagne flutes in hand. I smoothed down my midnight blue gown, grateful Ryan had given me time to prepare mentally for tonight's social chess match.

Lucian spotted us immediately, breaking away from his conversation to approach. His smile was different now—less calculating, more genuine.

"I knew you'd come to enjoy the show," he said, clinking his glass against Ryan's.

The familiarity in his voice surprised me. These two former rivals had clearly developed some kind of grudging respect for each other. Amazing how quickly things change when you share a common enemy.

"When you send an invitation this pretty," Ryan replied smoothly, "how could we refuse? Though I'm curious if our mutual friend will make an appearance tonight."

We all knew exactly who "our mutual friend" was. Kane. The name hung unspoken between us.

Lucian's eyes gleamed mischievously. "That's half the entertainment, isn't it? Watching him squirm when he realizes White Industries signed with me instead."

I couldn't help but smile. "You're enjoying this way too much."

"Absolutely," Lucian admitted without a hint of shame. "Kane's been a thorn in everyone's side for too long. Tonight's just the beginning."

Ryan slipped his arm around my waist, a subtle gesture of possession that didn't go unnoticed by others in the room. I caught several curious glances our way.

"Speaking of entertainment," I said, scanning the crowded room, "I invited Maya and Celeste tonight. Have you seen them?"

Lucian pointed toward the far end of the room. "Your designer friends arrived about twenty minutes ago. Fair warning—your brother's been hovering around them like a shark."

"My brother?" I tensed involuntarily. Ethan was here?

Ryan's hand tightened slightly at my waist, his jaw setting in that way it did whenever Ethan was mentioned.

"Let's go say hello," Ryan suggested, his tone neutral but his eyes watching me carefully.

As we made our way across the room, I spotted Maya in a stunning red dress that made her look like a vintage movie star. She was deep in conversation with a potential client, her professional smile firmly in place. No sign of the hungover mess from this morning. That woman's recovery powers were superhuman.

And then I saw him. Ethan stood nearby, pretending to listen to someone else while his eyes remained fixed on Maya. His expression was so carefully controlled it had to be deliberate.

"This should be interesting," I muttered under my breath.

Ryan leaned down, his lips brushing my ear. "Want to place bets on who breaks first?"

I elbowed him playfully. "That's terrible! But my money's on Ethan. He looks ready to combust."

"Ten minutes before he makes some excuse to talk to her?"

"Five," I countered with a smirk.

Little did I know, the real drama of the evening hadn't even begun. The ballroom doors swung open dramatically, and Kane and Tiffany Vergara came.

The music seemed to falter for just a moment as heads turned.

"Well," Ryan said quietly, "looks like everyone's here for the show now."

Source:

CEO's Regret After I Divorced #Chapter 227 The Fall of Kane - Read CEO's Regret After I Divorced Chapter 227 The Fall of Kane

Chapter 227: Chapter 227 The Fall of Kane

Serena's POV

I watched Kane and Tiffany make their grand entrance, dressed in matching midnight blue outfits that screamed "power couple." If Kane wasn't stuck in that wheelchair, they might have actually looked perfect together. But reality's a bitch, isn't it?

"Quite the dramatic entrance," I whispered to Ryan, unable to hold back a small laugh.

Ryan squeezed my hand gently, his thumb tracing small circles against my skin. "Let's go sit over there for a bit. I want a front-row seat to whatever disaster is about to unfold."

I nodded, but before we could move, Kane had already wheeled himself toward Lucian with Tiffany clicking along beside him in her stilettos. The tension in the air thickened instantly, like someone had cranked up the thermostat in an already stuffy room.

Kane shot Lucian a smile so cold it could've frozen champagne. "What a lively party tonight. Where's Mr. White hiding? Or did he send you to do his dirty work as usual?"

Lucian didn't even flinch. He took a leisurely sip of his drink before responding, "Oh, he's here. He just doesn't want to see you." He delivered this with such casual cruelty that I almost winced.

Kane's eyes darkened dangerously, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the arms of his wheelchair. "Lucian, are you really determined to make an enemy of me? Because I promise you'll regret it."

"Don't act innocent," Lucian scoffed, his voice dropping to a dangerous purr. "You know exactly what you did. Did you really think burying the truth would keep it buried forever?"

Lucian turned his attention to Tiffany, his voice dripping with mockery. "It's just a shame for Miss Vergara, having to marry a cripple. Tell me, is it the family fortune or just desperation that has you clinging to damaged goods?"

Tiffany flinched visibly before composing herself. Her perfectly manicured nails dug into her palm as she forced a smile.

"Mr. West, show some respect," she hissed through clenched teeth. "Kane is the future son-in-law of the Vergara family. Do you really want to make an enemy of us too? Or have you forgotten who controls half your supply chain in Europe?"

"How adorable, defending your master," Lucian smirked, his eyes glinting with malice. "Enjoy the party while you can. I doubt you'll be invited to many more once everyone realizes you've backed the wrong horse—or should I say, the wrong wheelchair?"

With that parting shot, Lucian walked away, leaving them standing—well, one of them standing—in awkward silence. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. Lucian was brutal, but Kane had it coming.

Though their conversation had been hushed, everyone around them had caught the vibe. Combined with the recent rumors circulating through New York's elite circles, it wasn't hard to guess that Kane and Lucian had become enemies. And in this world, no one wanted to be on the losing side.

For the rest of the evening, not a single guest approached Kane and Tiffany. They sat alone, two beautifully dressed pariahs in a room full of social butterflies. I almost felt sorry for them. Almost.

"Did Kane really not anticipate this?" I asked, genuinely curious. "Why would he even show up tonight? Did he honestly think people would just ignore everything he's done?"

Ryan's mouth curled into a satisfied smile as he handed me a fresh glass of champagne. "Some people need to experience humiliation firsthand before they understand their position. Those two are exactly that type—too arrogant to believe they could ever fall from grace."

I glanced over at Tiffany again. Despite her predicament, she was still impeccably dressed and gorgeous. But she was completely alone—no other Vergara family members had bothered to attend with her. That spoke volumes.

"Ryan, why would the Vergara family agree to this match in the first place? It makes no sense. Kane's position is obviously unstable."

"Tiffany is their only daughter, but she has no real power within the family," Ryan explained, swirling his champagne lazily. "She's spent years overseas, working under her brother's supervision, trying to prove herself. Mr. Vergara is probably using her as a bet—gambling one daughter for a potential alliance with Blackwood. If the gamble fails, they lose nothing of value."

I felt a chill run down my spine. The casual cruelty of it all struck me hard. To think of someone's daughter being used as nothing more than a chess piece...

"Tiffany doesn't seem stupid. Couldn't she fight back against this arrangement?" I watched her across the room, wondering what was really going on behind those perfectly made-up eyes.

Ryan chuckled softly, his breath warm against my ear. "It's not that she can't fight back. She's gambling too, in her own way. She thinks Kane might be her ticket to power—both in the Vergara family and beyond. She's playing a dangerous game."

I took a deep breath, watching the miserable couple across the room. "The whole Vergara family seems to be a bunch of gamblers."

"Unfortunately for them," Ryan said with quiet confidence, his fingers tracing a line down my bare arm, "their bets are about to lose spectacularly. Kane has no idea what's coming for him."

His tone was so matter-of-fact that I didn't doubt him for a second. Ryan never made threats; he made promises. If the Vergara family wanted to blame someone, they should blame their own poor judgment for backing Kane of all people.

Source:

Chapter 228: Chapter 228 A Matchmaker's Scheme

Serena's POV

I strained my neck looking around the ballroom, scanning the sea of faces for Maya. She had vanished completely.

"Where did Maya suddenly disappear to?" I muttered, my eyes still searching the crowded venue.

Ryan shrugged casually. "Maybe she went home to rest."

I shook my head, feeling something wasn't quite right about that explanation. Then another thought hit me.

"Wait—Ethan's gone too?"

As the words left my mouth, my mind jumped to the obvious conclusion. I turned to Ryan with wide eyes.

"You don't think... those two are together somewhere, do you?"

Ryan raised an eyebrow, looking exasperated yet amused by my instant matchmaking reflex.

"Serena, relationship matters are better left alone. Let them figure things out themselves."

I sighed dramatically. "Easy for you to say! One's my best friend and one's my brother. How can I not worry about them?"

"What exactly did you have in mind?" Ryan asked, probably already regretting the question.

I motioned him closer with a little curl of my finger, and when he leaned in, I whispered my brilliant plan in his ear. His lips twitched with barely contained amusement.

"That doesn't seem appropriate," he said, but I could tell he wasn't entirely opposed.

"There's nothing inappropriate about it! Relationships need time to develop. Will you help me or not?" I looked up at him with my best pleading eyes.

Ryan ran his fingers through my hair, his smile growing increasingly indulgent. "Of course. Whatever makes you happy, I'll help you do it."

I broke into a triumphant grin, already imagining my best friend and brother in sickeningly cute couple scenarios. Ryan promised to go find them while I waited, and I watched him disappear into the crowd, feeling extremely satisfied with myself.

Ryan's POV

After searching the venue thoroughly, I finally spotted them on the second-floor balcony.

According to Serena's plan, I was supposed to approach them about a collaboration project, forcing them to work together regularly. With a few additional strategic interventions from me, romance would supposedly blossom naturally.

It was a decent plan, but watching them now—standing side by side in awkward silence, pretending to admire the night view—I decided on a different approach altogether.

They hadn't spoken a word to each other for what must have been minutes. I observed them quietly before stepping forward to break the silence.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

They both turned, acknowledging me with polite nods. Maya's eyes darted around nervously.

"I should probably get back to Serena," she said quickly, already moving to leave.

"Actually, I need to discuss something with both of you," I said, blocking her escape route.

Maya looked surprised. "With me, Mr. Blackwood? Are you sure?"

I cleared my throat. "I'm planning to propose to Serena, and I'd like your help organizing the perfect proposal."

"You're her best friend," I continued, focusing on Maya. "You know better than anyone what kind of proposal she'd want."

Maya's eyes instantly lit up. "Absolutely! Count me in."

She paused, glancing sideways at Ethan with obvious hesitation. "Though I'm not sure Mr. Quinn needs to be involved. How could he help?"

Ethan frowned. "I can certainly be helpful. Mr. Blackwood wouldn't have sought me out without reason."

I nodded. "Exactly. The most important part of any proposal is the ring."

"I want to commission a truly unique ring—designed collaboratively by both your companies."

Maya let out a surprised gasp. "Mr. Blackwood, that's—how would that even work? Our styles are completely different!"

"Maybe LUXE Jewelry should handle it alone," she continued. "Dreamland's style is too familiar to Serena—it wouldn't surprise her."

Ethan nodded in agreement. "Miss Carter has a point. I'd be happy to take full responsibility for the ring."

I shook my head firmly. "No. What would make this truly special is having you two collaborate. It would mean everything to Serena."

Maya's frown deepened, her suspicion clearly growing. "I understand my role as her best friend, but what exactly is Mr. Quinn's role here?"

Ethan and I exchanged a glance, and I realized we were both at a loss for words. Maya's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Are you two hiding something from me?" she asked, her voice sharp with sudden insight.

Ethan's eyes dropped to the floor, his guilty expression almost giving everything away. I maintained my composure.

"Miss Carter," I said smoothly, "you wouldn't refuse to help with the proposal, would you?"

The diversion worked perfectly. Maya immediately backtracked.

"Of course not! This is a once-in-a-lifetime moment for Serena!"

"I'm happy you two are finally making it official," she added with genuine warmth. "Don't worry, Mr. Quinn and I will create something perfect together."

I barely contained my relief as I gave them one final instruction.

"If Serena asks what you're working on, just tell her it's a collaboration with Blackwood Industries."

They both nodded, and I couldn't help the satisfied smile that spread across my face. Sometimes, the best matchmaking happens when people think they're working on something else entirely.

Source:

Chapter 229: Chapter 229 Verbal Warfare in Heels

Serena's POV

I'd been feeling pretty pleased with myself over my matchmaking scheme, but the moment I spotted Tiffany pushing Kane's wheelchair in my direction, my mood soured instantly.

"Miss Quinn, so dedicated to networking even with that baby bump," Tiffany said with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Though I wonder—are you here tonight as Dreamland Studio's boss or as Ryan's woman?"

She paused, her smirk growing more venomous. "Oh, I almost forgot. You're not actually Mrs. Blackwood, are you? Married once, then thrown out like trash. I'm guessing it's only because of that baby in your belly that you've managed to worm your way back into Ryan's life?"

I stared at her coldly. This was only our second meeting, yet the hostility between us felt ancient and instinctive. No surprise there—Kane and Ryan were sworn enemies, after all.

"Miss Vergara, your information is embarrassingly outdated," I replied smoothly, watching her barrage of insults hit with all the impact of a feather.

"Whatever my identity tonight, I have every right to be here. Though I must say, it's disappointing not to see other Vergara family members in attendance."

I tilted my head innocently. "By the way, have you two set a date for your engagement party yet?"

Tiffany's eyes narrowed dangerously. I'd hit a nerve. Kane's disability had always been a sensitive subject for her—she couldn't stand even whispered gossip about it, and here I was, bringing it into the open.

I flashed my brightest smile, knowing it would cut deeper than any frown. "You simply must let Ryan and me know when you do. You two are so perfectly matched—you really should stay together forever."

My blessing sounded like a curse to her ears, exactly as I'd intended.

"Don't get too cocky, Serena," she hissed.

I laughed lightly. "You misunderstand, Miss Vergara. This is a heartfelt wish! After all, you and his uncle share the same passion for gambling, don't you? How could you not be compatible?"

I deliberately emphasized "gambling," my eyes dancing with meaning. Both their faces darkened immediately.

Lucian, spotting the tense scene from across the room, hurried over. "Serena, is everything alright?"

I looked up at him with a small smile. "Nothing important. Just chatting with my future aunt-in-law."

"We were just discussing their engagement party. They haven't set a date yet—I hope there's no trouble in paradise?" I added sweetly.

Lucian, catching on immediately, jumped in. "I doubt it. Mr. Kane clearly knew tonight's event would be lively and specifically brought his fiancée along."

Tiffany gritted her teeth, glaring at both of us. "You two are quite the double act. Anyone watching might think you're the couple."

"Before returning to the country, I heard rumors about your frequent 'collaborations' and the gossip surrounding them. I thought it was just tabloid nonsense, but now I see—where there's smoke, there's fire."

She expected us to squirm, but Lucian and I simply exchanged amused glances.

"Miss Vergara, have you ever actually had friends?" I asked innocently. "Otherwise, how could you believe such ridiculous gossip?"

"People with dirty minds see dirt everywhere. Don't you think?"

Tiffany's expression turned stormy, but with Lucian standing protectively nearby, she didn't dare make a move.

"Serena, you should be careful when you go out," she threatened, her voice dropping to something sinister. "You never know when that baby in your belly might just... mysteriously disappear."

My smile vanished instantly. I could tolerate many things, but threats against my child crossed every line.

"If you dare touch my child, I'll make sure you die painfully," Ryan's voice cut through the tension as he appeared behind me.

Maya rushed to my side, deliberately shoving Tiffany as she passed. "Good dogs don't block the way!"

"Who do you think you are to speak to me like that?" Tiffany snarled.

I stood up, gently pulling my friend back. "Tiffany, are you really determined to cause a scene tonight?"

Our commotion had drawn attention; numerous guests were now watching. Tiffany and Kane found themselves surrounded, completely isolated.

"Kane," Lucian said, loud enough for nearby guests to hear, "I understand your frustration. Your deal with the White family just failed, but Celestial Gems isn't like you. Our collaboration with Mr. White will be extremely successful."

His statement triggered an immediate wave of whispers around us.

"Did they come here just to cause trouble? How classless."

"No wonder Mr. White only made a brief appearance before leaving—he's avoiding this plague."

"Interesting that Mr. Blackwood isn't defending his uncle tonight."

"Their relationship was never good—why would he?"

"Poor Miss Vergara, having to marry someone who's..."

The word "crippled" remained unspoken, even among the gossipers. Kane wasn't someone people dared to insult openly.

Tiffany scanned the crowd with icy contempt, clearly regretting her decision to accompany Kane tonight.

Kane cleared his throat and forced a smile. "Mr. West is joking. Project failures happen for many reasons. I'm genuinely here to congratulate Celestial Gems on their partnership with the White family."

"Though I should warn Mr. West—Blackwood Group's collaboration with the White family wasn't smooth. Celestial Gems might not necessarily succeed either."

Author's POV

"I've said enough. Tiffany and I have plans to visit home, so we'll be leaving now." Kane smoothly wrapped things up, turning the awkward confrontation into a polite exit.

He looked at Tiffany. "Let's go."

Tiffany swallowed her anger and wheeled Kane away, the perfect picture of defeat. Only once they were safely in their car did she explode.

"Lucian teamed up with Ryan and Serena to humiliate us, and you're just going to take it? Today was mortifying! If my father and brothers found out about this..."

She bit her lip, unable to even finish the thought.

Kane shot her an irritated look. "Enough. Stop talking."

"What about the matter you asked me to discuss with my father? Has he considered it?"

Tiffany scoffed. "My father never makes a move without seeing something in it for him. He won't agree unless you offer something substantial."

Their "matter" was Kane's request for Mr. Vergara to help him secure new projects in New York – essentially looking for powerful connections to leverage.

Kane's face darkened at her response. He immediately instructed the driver to head to the Vergara estate.

"What are you doing?" Tiffany raised an eyebrow. "It's late. Are you planning to talk to my father now?"

"Your words clearly have no effect. Should I just sit back and wait for disaster?"

Tiffany frowned, skeptical. Kane had been struggling under Celestial Gems' pressure lately. She couldn't imagine what strategy he might use to convince her father.

The car moved silently through the night. Tiffany hadn't been drinking, but Serena's arrogance had given her a throbbing headache. She rubbed her temples, frustration building with every passing minute.

"Here."

A small pill bottle appeared in front of her. She looked up, confused.

"What's this?"

"Don't you get headaches? My assistant prepared this specially. It's extremely effective for pain."

"Take one. You'll feel better."

In the dim light of the car, Kane's expression was impossible to read, his face obscured by shadows.

Source:

Chapter 230: Chapter 230 The Proposal Project

Serena's POV

I've been noticing Maya and Ethan spending a lot of time together lately. This isn't the first time I've caught them whispering in Maya's office.

"You two have been—" I started asking, but Maya cut me off immediately.

"Serena, don't get the wrong idea. Mr. Quinn and I are just working on a collaboration."

Ethan nodded in agreement. "Yes, a collaboration."

I couldn't help but smile knowingly. Ryan's plan was clearly working—look at them, presenting a united front.

"Fine, collaboration it is. I'll leave you two alone then." I backed out of the office tactfully, but not before giving Ethan an encouraging glance that said "go for it."

I lingered outside, chatting with a few designers, watching as Maya and Ethan eventually emerged from the office walking side by side.

"Looks like our Miss Carter's spring romance is blooming," I said with a grin.

The designers giggled in agreement.

"Mr. Quinn and Miss Carter look so perfect together, even just from behind!" one commented.

Another chimed in, "Age-gap relationships are so interesting these days."

"Absolutely! Mr. Quinn has been coming to the studio constantly and doesn't let anyone disturb them. They must be together already."

Their confident speculation made my eyes light up. "Really? They're already together?"

"Well, I'm just guessing," one of the senior designers said, "but as someone with experience, these two clearly have feelings for each other. It's only a matter of time."

I clapped my hands together excitedly. "That's wonderful!"

The thought of my best friend marrying my brother—even though he didn't know he was my brother yet—sounded like a dream. We'd be even closer than before. It was definitely worth celebrating.

Later that evening, I called Ryan to share the gossip.

"My plan is clearly working," he said. "Sometimes people just need to spend more time together."

Ryan chuckled softly but didn't elaborate. Then he changed the subject entirely. "Serena, I think we should go to London in a few days."

My smile froze. That was unexpected. "London? Why?"

"Your past is something you'll have to face sooner or later," Ryan said gently. "The therapy hasn't been very effective. I think we need to take you to meet your parents in person."

"What do you think?"

I hadn't expected this day to come so quickly. My heart raced as anxiety swept through me. My fingers tightened around the phone, and I must have been silent too long because Ryan's voice softened further.

"Serena? Are you still there?"

"I'm here," I whispered, hating how small my voice sounded. "It's just—I don't know if I'm ready."

"You don't have to face them alone," Ryan assured me. "I'll be right there with you, every step of the way."

I closed my eyes, trying to calm my racing heart. "What if they reject me? What if they don't want me back in their lives?"

"Then that's their loss," Ryan said firmly. "But you deserve answers, Serena. You deserve to know where you came from."

I stood up and walked to the window, watching raindrops start to slide down the glass. "I'm scared," I admitted. "What if remembering changes everything? What if I'm not who I think I am?"

"You'll always be Serena to me," Ryan said, his voice so warm and certain it made my eyes sting. "Nothing could change how I feel about you. Nothing could make me stop loving you."

The sincerity in his voice made my chest tighten. This was a far cry from the cold, distant man I'd married years ago.

"I'll be with you through all of it," he continued. "If it gets too overwhelming, we'll leave immediately. This is about healing you, not hurting you."

I took a deep breath. "Promise you won't leave me alone with them?"

"I promise. We'll face this together, like everything else."

His words steadied me, like an anchor in a storm. This man who once couldn't bear to look at me was now promising to stand by me through one of the most frightening moments of my life.

"Okay," I finally agreed, my voice stronger. "Let's go to London."

Ethan's POV

I spent an absurd amount of time getting ready this morning. Changed my outfit three times before settling on a slate-gray suit with a navy tie. Even applied a touch of cologne—something I rarely bother with for business meetings.

Who am I kidding? This isn't just any meeting. It's Maya.

I arrived at the café early, picked a quiet corner table, and ordered us both coffees. When she walked in, something tightened in my chest. She wore a deep burgundy blazer over a cream blouse, her red-brown hair falling in soft waves around her shoulders.

"I think we've finally nailed the design," she said, sliding the finalized ring sketches across the table. But my mind was elsewhere.

"Why the sudden trip to London?" Maya asked, stirring her coffee. "Working on something with LUXE Jewelry?"

I shook my head, feeling the weight of the secret I was keeping. My sister was about to discover her true identity—her true family. Our family.

"Don't tell me..." Maya narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "The proposal ceremony isn't happening in London, is it?"

The question caught me off guard. I hadn't expected her to jump to that conclusion.

"I doubt it," I managed to say, trying to keep my voice casual. "For something that significant, Ryan would surely want you there to witness it."

Maya made an indignant sound. "I better be! I'm Serena's best friend. If Ryan dares to propose without me there, I'll never forgive him."

She leaned forward, eyes intense. "You're going back too, aren't you?"

I nodded, guilt squirming in my stomach. Of course I was going—this whole trip to New York had been about finding my sister. Wherever Serena went now, I needed to follow.

"Then do me a favor," Maya said, oblivious to my discomfort. "Keep an eye on them. Let me know if anything happens."

I nodded again, feeling increasingly dishonest. She had no idea what was really happening, and I couldn't tell her.

Our meeting was cut short when her assistant called. With Serena away, the studio needed Maya's immediate attention.

As she gathered her things to leave, something desperate seized me. I couldn't let her walk away like this—not when I didn't know when I'd see her again.

"Maya," I called out.

She paused, sliding her phone back into her pocket. "Something else?"

I stood up, moved closer. Her perfume—something with notes of vanilla and jasmine—made my head swim slightly. Without thinking, I reached out to straighten her slightly rumpled collar.

She flinched away, eyes darting sideways, but not before I caught the flush creeping up her neck.

"What are you doing?" Her voice came out higher than usual.

"Your collar was crooked," I said, trying to sound matter-of-fact despite the thundering in my chest. My fingers still tingled from the brief contact. "I'm heading back to London soon. I don't know when we'll see each other again."

"If—" I started to say, wanting to suggest we stay in touch, wanting to tell her that meeting her had been the unexpected highlight of my trip, but she cut me off.

"Why would I need to see you?" The words came out sharp, defensive. "Ethan, haven't we established this already? We're strictly professional. These meetings have only been about Serena's ring. Nothing between us is changing."

She took two steps back, creating a gulf between us. When she looked up again, her expression was perfectly composed, all traces of vulnerability gone.

"Mr. Quinn, I should go now."

All the things I wanted to say—that I couldn't stop thinking about her, that she was the reason I kept finding excuses to visit the studio, that something about her pulled at me in ways I couldn't explain—died in my throat.

"Right," was all I managed to say.

I watched her walk away, her confident stride never faltering as she pushed through the café door and disappeared into the crowd.

Only then did I let out the breath I'd been holding, a heavy sigh that seemed to carry all my unspoken words with it. I'd gone and done exactly what I promised myself I wouldn't—I'd let myself develop feelings for someone who clearly had no interest in reciprocating them.

London suddenly seemed very far away, and very cold.

Source: