

CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 281

Serena's POV

The moment I stepped off the plane onto New York soil, exhaustion melted away as anticipation took its place. After the whirlwind in London, I couldn't wait to surprise Maya with my early return and see my daughter's precious face again. I'd missed Vivian terribly during my time away.

As I navigated through the terminal, wheeling my carry-on behind me, I spotted them—not just Maya, but Ryan too, standing side by side near the arrival gate. My steps faltered momentarily, surprise washing over me. I hadn't told either of them my exact arrival time.

"What's with that face?" Maya called out, already rushing toward me with arms wide open. "Aren't you happy to see your best friend and your dashing handsome husband waiting for you?"

Before I could respond, she enveloped me in a fierce hug that nearly knocked the wind from my lungs. The familiar scent of her signature perfume—something citrusy with hints of jasmine—filled my senses, and I couldn't help but smile against her shoulder.

"I'm not unhappy," I laughed, pulling back slightly. "Just surprised. How did you know I was landing now? I wanted to surprise you both."

Maya dangled her phone in front of me with a mischievous grin. "I have my sources, darling. Did you really think the Quinn family wouldn't keep me updated on your movements?"

Of course. I should have known better than to think I could sneak back into the country without my family alerting Maya.

I turned to Ryan, who stood watching our reunion with a soft expression I was still getting used to seeing on his face. "And you? How did you know?"

Ryan's lips curved into that half-smile that still made my heart skip a beat. "Heart connection, perhaps?" His tone was playful, but something in his eyes made me wonder if he wasn't entirely joking.

"Oh God, please!" Maya groaned dramatically, making a gagging motion. "Don't start with the lovey-dovey stuff in front of me. Ethan just flew back to London, and I don't need the reminder that you two get to go home together while I'm sleeping alone."

I couldn't resist teasing her. "Back to long-distance again? Such a shame."

“Let’s not dwell on my tragic love life,” Maya declared, linking her arm through mine. “More important question—are you coming back to the studio with me to debrief about London, or are you heading home with Mr. Perfect Hair here?”

I hesitated. After days away, I desperately wanted to see Vivian, but I also knew Maya was eager to hear about Ivy and the London expansion firsthand.

Before I could voice my dilemma, Ryan spoke up. “I’ll drive you both to the studio. The debriefing shouldn’t take too long, right?”

Maya’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Wow, that’s unexpectedly accommodating of you, Mr. Blackwood. In that case, I’m borrowing your wife for exactly ninety minutes, not a second longer.”

She threw her arm around my shoulders in a friendly half-hug as we walked toward the exit, Ryan following with my luggage.

At the studio, I recounted everything that had happened in London, from Ivy’s dramatic resignation to Matthews’ spectacular fall from grace. Maya and I dissolved into fits of laughter as I described his face when he realized I was backing Ivy.

“I wish I could’ve seen it!” Maya exclaimed, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. “The almighty Matthews, finally getting exactly what he deserved!”

Ryan, seated beside me on the studio’s plush sofa, watched our exchange with evident amusement. Though he wasn’t actively participating in our gossip session, his presence felt natural, comfortable—something that would have seemed impossible just months ago.

“So you really think Ivy can handle running the London division?” Maya asked, her expression turning more serious.

“With your guidance initially, absolutely,” I confirmed. “Which reminds me—I need you in London next week. You’ll help Ivy settle into her role properly, and…” I paused dramatically, “you might just run into a certain Quinn heir while you’re there.”

Maya’s eyes widened, a brilliant smile breaking across her face. “Are you serious? Serena, I absolutely adore you!” She lunged across the coffee table to hug me again, nearly knocking over our drinks in the process.

After nearly two hours of strategizing and catching up—well beyond the promised ninety minutes—Ryan finally cleared his throat. “I hate to interrupt, but someone at home is probably wondering where her mother is.”

The mention of Vivian immediately redirected my focus. With promises to Maya about finalizing details tomorrow, Ryan and I headed home.

The moment we stepped through the front door of the Blackwood mansion, I heard the familiar babbling sounds coming from the nursery. My heart lurched with longing.

“Go,” Ryan urged softly, taking my coat. “She just woke up from her nap.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I practically ran to the nursery, where I found my beautiful six-month-old daughter sitting in her crib, happily playing with her fingers and making those adorable nonsensical sounds that I had missed desperately.

“Hello, my sweet girl,” I cooed, lifting her into my arms. Vivian’s eyes widened with recognition, and she immediately reached for my face with her tiny hands. “Did you miss Mommy? Because Mommy missed you so, so much.”

I inhaled her baby scent—that perfect mixture of baby lotion and something uniquely Vivian—and felt my eyes grow misty. I hadn’t realized just how much I’d missed holding her until this moment.

“Look how much you’ve grown in just a week,” I murmured, kissing her chubby cheeks. “You’re getting so big! Have you been good for Daddy and Nanny Margaret?”

Vivian responded with an enthusiastic string of babbles, gripping my necklace with surprising strength for such tiny fingers.

“She’s been asking about you every day,” Ryan’s voice came from the doorway where he stood watching us. “At least, that’s what I like to think those midnight crying sessions were about.”

I turned toward him, Vivian balanced on my hip, and noticed a hint of something—was that jealousy?—in his expression.

“What about you?” I asked softly. “Did you miss me too?”

Ryan pushed away from the doorframe and approached us, his eyes never leaving mine. “More than I thought possible,” he admitted, his voice low and sincere.

I smiled and stepped closer, rising onto my tiptoes to press a soft kiss to his cheek. “I missed you too. Both of you.”

His arm slipped around my waist, drawing me and Vivian against his chest in a gentle embrace. For a moment, we simply stood there, the three of us together again.

Vivian broke the silence with a delighted squeal, patting both our faces as if to make sure we were really there. Ryan laughed, a deep, genuine sound that still caught me off guard sometimes—so different from the cold, distant man I’d first married.

“I think someone’s happy to have her family complete again,” he said, tickling Vivian’s tummy and eliciting another joyful squeal.

As we moved to the living room, Vivian perched on my lap while Ryan prepared drinks for us, I felt a profound sense of contentment settle over me. The London trip had been a professional triumph, but this—this moment of domestic tranquility with my husband and daughter—felt like the true victory.

Ryan returned with two glasses of wine, handing one to me before settling beside us on the sofa. Vivian immediately reached for him, and he scooped her up effortlessly, those large hands that commanded billion-dollar deals now gently supporting our daughter's back.

"She's definitely grown," I observed, watching how comfortably they interacted. "You two seem to have bonded while I was away."

Ryan nodded, a soft smile playing on his lips as Vivian grabbed his finger and held on tight. "We came to an understanding, didn't we, princess?"

As the evening progressed, with Vivian eventually dozing off against Ryan's chest, I felt the last of the tension from my travels melting away. Ryan caught me watching them, his expression softening further. "Welcome home, Serena," he murmured.

Home. The word held such different meaning now than it had when I'd first come to live under the Blackwood roof.

"It's good to be back," I whispered, and meant it with every fiber of my being.

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Serena's POV

The morning sunlight streamed through the windows as I dressed Vivian in her little denim overalls. The sight of her kicking her legs excitedly and cooing made my heart swell with joy.

"Someone's in a good mood today," Ryan remarked, leaning against the doorframe of the nursery. His hair was still slightly damp from his shower, and the casual button-down shirt he wore was a refreshing change from his usual business attire.

"She knows we're going out," I replied, scooping our daughter up. "Don't you, sweetie? You know Mommy and Daddy are taking you shopping today."

Ryan approached us, his expression softening as Vivian immediately reached for him. "I still can't believe how much she's grown in just these few months," he said, taking her from my arms with practiced ease. "None of her clothes fit properly anymore."

I smiled, watching them together. “That’s what happens when you have a healthy, growing baby. Though I suspect Margaret has been sneaking her extra servings of that organic baby food you special ordered.”

“Only the best for our princess,” Ryan responded without a hint of apology, placing a gentle kiss on Vivian’s forehead.

“The car’s ready whenever we are,” Ryan said, bouncing Vivian gently in his arms. “I’ve cleared my schedule until three.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Ryan Blackwood taking a morning off work for a family shopping trip? The board would have a collective heart attack if they knew.”

His lips curved into that half-smile that never failed to quicken my pulse. “Let them. Some things are more important than quarterly reports.”

An hour later, we were walking through an exclusive children’s boutique on Fifth Avenue, with Vivian perched comfortably in her stroller.

“What about this one?” I held up a pale yellow sundress with delicate embroidered flowers along the hem.

“Beautiful,” Ryan nodded approvingly. “Though she’ll probably wear it once before outgrowing it.”

“Then we’d better take photos,” I laughed, adding it to our growing collection.

As I moved through the racks of children’s clothing, I felt Ryan’s eyes on me, his gaze warming my skin even from across the store. When I glanced up, he was watching me with an intensity that made my cheeks flush.

“What?” I asked softly, moving back to his side.

“Nothing,” he murmured, but his fingers brushed mine as I reached for the stroller handle. “Just enjoying the view.”

The saleswoman approached us with a professional smile. “Finding everything alright, Mr. and Mrs. Blackwood?”

“Yes, thank you,” I replied.

“Your daughter is absolutely gorgeous,” the woman continued, bending slightly to smile at Vivian, who responded with a happy gurgle. “She has your eyes, Mrs. Blackwood, and her father’s smile.”

I felt a surge of pride that surprised me with its intensity. “Thank you.”

After selecting what seemed like enough clothing to dress ten babies, we paused at the store's small café area for refreshments. Vivian sat contentedly on Ryan's lap, fascinated by the silver spoon he let her hold.

"We should take a photo," I suggested, pulling out my phone. "To commemorate Vivian's first proper shopping spree."

Ryan nodded, shifting Vivian in his arms as I prepared to snap the picture. Just as I was about to take it, a passing shopper offered to take one of all three of us.

"That would be lovely, thank you," I said, handing over my phone.

Ryan's arm slid around my waist, drawing me closer as Vivian sat between us, her tiny hands clapping together in delight. The stranger took several shots, capturing not just our poses but the spontaneous moments—Ryan tickling Vivian's chin, my laughter as she grabbed for my necklace, the three of us looking at each other rather than the camera.

When I scrolled through the photos afterward, my breath caught in my throat. We looked like... a family. A real, loving family—not the coldly cordial arrangement our marriage had once been.

"Send me those," Ryan said quietly, looking over my shoulder at the images. His thumb stroked small circles on my hip where his hand still rested. "Especially that one."

He pointed to a photo where I was gazing down at Vivian with unmistakable adoration while Ryan looked at both of us, his expression so tender it made my heart clench.

"I will," I promised, my voice slightly unsteady.

We finished our shopping expedition with bags full of new clothes, toys, and even a few items for ourselves—Ryan had insisted on buying me a silk scarf that matched my eyes, despite my protests that we were supposed to be shopping for Vivian.

By the time we arrived home, Vivian was drowsy from all the excitement, her little eyelids drooping as I carried her into the house.

"I'll take her to Margaret," Ryan offered, carefully lifting our daughter from my arms. "She's due for her nap anyway."

I nodded gratefully, suddenly aware of my own fatigue from the morning's activities. "I'll unpack these bags in the meantime."

Margaret, Vivian's devoted nanny, greeted us in the hallway with her customary warm smile. "Had a good outing, did we?" she asked, already reaching for Vivian.

"Very productive," Ryan replied, transferring our sleepy daughter to her capable hands. "She should sleep well after all that stimulation."

“I’ll see to it she has a proper rest,” Margaret assured us. “You two take some time for yourselves. You’ve both been working so hard lately.”

With a knowing smile that made me wonder exactly what she was implying, Margaret carried Vivian off to the nursery, leaving Ryan and I alone in the entrance hall.

I turned toward the shopping bags, intending to sort through our purchases, when I felt Ryan’s hands on my shoulders from behind.

“Leave those,” he murmured, his breath warm against my ear. “They can wait.”

A delicious shiver ran down my spine as his fingers trailed down my arms. “Ryan—”

Before I could finish my sentence, he turned me to face him, his eyes dark with an emotion I recognized immediately. My breath hitched as his gaze dropped to my lips.

“I’ve been wanting to do this all morning,” he confessed, his voice low and rough with desire. “Watching you with Vivian, seeing you smile... do you have any idea what you do to me, Serena?”

Without waiting for my response, he swept me into his arms in one fluid motion, cradling me against his chest as if I weighed nothing at all. I gasped, my arms instinctively circling his neck.

“Ryan! What are you doing?” I laughed breathlessly.

“Taking my wife to our bedroom,” he answered simply, already striding up the grand staircase. “Unless you have objections?”

The heat in his gaze sent warmth flooding through me. “No objections,” I whispered, tightening my arms around his neck.

The journey to our bedroom seemed both endless and too brief. When he finally kicked the door shut behind us and set me gently on my feet, his hands remained at my waist, drawing me closer.

“Do you know how difficult it’s been,” he murmured, his lips brushing my temple, “having you back home, sharing our bed, and trying to be a gentleman?”

I smiled up at him, trailing my fingers along the line of his jaw. “I wasn’t aware you were trying to be a gentleman, Mr. Blackwood.”

His answering laugh was low and sensual. “I’ve been patient, Serena. I wanted to give you time after your trip. But seeing you today with our daughter, watching you laugh...” His fingers traced my cheek with reverence. “I can’t wait any longer.”

“Then don’t,” I whispered, rising on my tiptoes to press my lips to his.

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Ryan's lips captured mine with such hunger that I nearly lost my balance. His arms tightened around me, pulling me flush against his hard body as one hand tangled in my hair. The kiss deepened instantly, months of restraint crumbling between us like sand castles before a rising tide.

"God, I've missed you," he breathed against my mouth, his voice rough with desire. "Every night lying beside you, not touching you... it's been torture."

His confession sent liquid heat pooling low in my belly. I slid my hands up his chest, feeling the rapid beating of his heart beneath my fingertips. "I've missed you too," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

Ryan's eyes darkened, the storm-gray irises nearly black with passion. Without warning, he lifted me again and carried me to our bed, laying me down with surprising gentleness that contrasted with the barely restrained need in his expression.

"You're even more beautiful now," he murmured, his gaze traveling slowly over my body. "Motherhood suits you, Mrs. Blackwood."

I reached for him, needing to feel his weight on me. "Less talking," I demanded softly, pulling at his shirt buttons.

A wicked smile curved his lips as he caught my wrists in one hand, pinning them above my head. "Patience, sweetheart. I've waited months for this moment. I intend to savor it."

With his free hand, he traced the neckline of my blouse, his fingers skimming just above the fabric, not quite touching my skin. The anticipation made me arch toward him, seeking contact.

"Ryan," I breathed, half-plea, half-warning.

"Yes, love?" His smile was pure sin as he slowly—agonizingly slowly—began unbuttoning my blouse, his knuckles brushing deliberately against my heated skin with each movement.

When the last button gave way, he pushed the fabric aside, his breath catching audibly at the sight of my lace-covered breasts. "Perfect," he whispered, bending to press his lips to the swell of flesh above the delicate fabric.

I shivered as he trailed kisses along my collarbone, down to the valley between my breasts. He released my wrists to slide his hands beneath me, expertly unhooking my bra in one smooth motion. As the garment fell away, he drew back slightly, his gaze appreciative and hungry.

“You have no idea how many nights I’ve dreamed of this,” he confessed, cupping my breasts reverently. His thumbs brushed over the sensitive peaks, drawing a soft moan from my lips. “The sounds you make…” He smiled, repeating the motion. “I’ve missed those too.”

My hands found their way to his shirt, determined to feel his skin against mine. This time he allowed it, helping me push the fabric from his shoulders until his chest was bare. I ran my palms over the defined muscles, tracing the contours I’d memorized long ago.

Ryan’s skin burned beneath my fingertips, his breathing growing heavier as my hands ventured lower. When I reached the waistband of his trousers, his larger hand covered mine, guiding it to the impressive bulge straining against the fabric.

“See what you do to me?” he murmured, his voice strained. “Just the sight of you makes me hard.”

The bold declaration sent fresh heat surging through me. I squeezed him gently through the material, rewarded by his sharp intake of breath and the flash of pure need in his eyes.

In one swift movement, he had me completely undressed, his gaze devouring every inch of exposed skin with unconcealed hunger. His fingers traced patterns on my stomach, dipping lower with each pass until they brushed the sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

“Open for me,” he commanded softly, his voice like velvet wrapped around steel.

I obeyed without hesitation, my legs parting as his hand slipped between them. A gasp escaped me as his fingers found their target, already slick with desire.

“So wet for me,” he groaned, his touch expert and deliberate. “I’ve missed this… missed how responsive you are.”

His fingers circled and stroked, building a delicious pressure that had me writhing beneath his touch. Just as I felt myself approaching the edge, he withdrew, earning a whimper of protest from my lips.

“Not yet,” he murmured, his smile promising wicked delights. “I want to taste you first.”

Before I could respond, he was moving down my body, positioning himself between my thighs. The first touch of his tongue against my sensitive flesh drew a cry from my lips, my back arching off the mattress.

“Ryan!” I gasped, my fingers clutching at the sheets.

He hummed in approval, the vibration adding to the exquisite sensation as he continued his skilled assault. His hands gripped my hips, holding me in place as I squirmed beneath his relentless attention.

When he added his fingers to the mix, curling them inside me while his tongue worked its magic, I shattered completely. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me as he continued, drawing out my release until I was trembling and gasping his name.

Only then did he pull away, rising to shed his remaining clothes with quick, efficient movements. The sight of him fully naked sent another pulse of desire through me, despite my recent climax.

Ryan positioned himself over me, his powerful body caging mine as he braced himself on his forearms. “Tell me you want this,” he demanded, his voice tight with restraint. “Tell me you want me.”

I reached up to frame his face with my hands, drawing him down for a passionate kiss. “I want you, Ryan,” I whispered against his lips. “I’ve always wanted you.”

With a groan that sounded almost pained, he pushed forward, entering me in one powerful thrust that had us both gasping. He stilled for a moment, his forehead resting against mine as we adjusted to the overwhelming sensation of being joined again after so long.

“You feel like heaven,” he murmured, his eyes holding mine as he began to move.

Our bodies remembered each other, falling into a rhythm that built steadily in intensity. His hands seemed to be everywhere at once—caressing my breasts, gripping my hips, sliding beneath me to lift me into each thrust.

“Serena,” he groaned, his movements becoming more urgent. “God, Serena...”

The sound of my name on his lips, raw with passion, pushed me closer to the edge. I wrapped my legs around his waist, changing the angle and drawing him deeper. The new position hit something exquisite inside me with each thrust, making me cry out.

“Yes,” he encouraged, recognizing the signs of my approaching climax. “Let go for me, sweetheart. I want to feel you come around me.”

His words, combined with the delicious friction of our bodies moving together, sent me spiraling over the edge for the second time. I clung to his shoulders, my nails leaving crescent marks in his skin as pleasure exploded through every nerve ending.

Ryan followed moments later, my name a hoarse cry on his lips as he buried himself deep inside me, his powerful body shuddering with release.

For several minutes afterward, we lay tangled together, our breathing gradually slowing, his weight a comforting pressure above me. When he finally moved to roll off me, I made a small sound of protest, not wanting to lose the connection.

He chuckled softly, pressing a tender kiss to my temple as he settled beside me, drawing me against his chest. “I’m not going anywhere,” he promised, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my bare back.

I nestled into his embrace, feeling more content than I could remember being in a very long time. “That was...”

“Overdue,” he finished for me, a smile in his voice. “And only the beginning.”

I raised my head to look at him, finding his eyes warm with both satisfaction and renewed desire. “The beginning?” I echoed, my own body already responding to the promise in his gaze.

“Mmm.” His hand slid down to cup my bottom, squeezing gently. “I told you, Mrs. Blackwood—I’ve been patient for months. Do you really think I’d be satisfied with just once?”

The heat in his eyes made my breath catch. “And here I thought the great Ryan Blackwood might need time to recover,” I teased, trailing my fingers down his chest.

His answering growl was playful as he rolled us over, pinning me beneath him once more. “Let me show you exactly how quickly I recover,” he murmured, lowering his head to capture my lips in another searing kiss.

As his hands began their skilled exploration of my body once more, I surrendered completely to the passion between us, knowing with perfect certainty that this—this connection, this man—was exactly where I belonged.

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Ryan’s POV

The evening sunlight filtered through the windows of my corner office as I signed the last document on my desk. Leaning back in my leather chair, I couldn’t help the satisfaction spreading through me. Since Maya’s departure for London, Serena had taken over the New York headquarters with remarkable efficiency. Everything was running smoother than I’d dared hope.

The London Fashion Week triumph had boosted Dreamland Studio’s international profile substantially, and Blackwood Group’s stock prices were soaring in response. This morning’s Wall Street Journal had featured us prominently—“Power Couple Revolutionizing Fashion and Finance”—with a photo of Serena and me at last month’s charity gala. The publicity couldn’t have been better timed.

I’d authorized substantial bonuses for all employees earlier today. Good news should be shared, after all. Now, I was looking forward to getting home to Serena and little Vivian.

Just as I was about to leave, my phone rang. Ethan Quinn. My brother-in-law rarely called during business hours.

“Ryan,” Ethan’s voice was tight, controlled, but I caught the underlying tension immediately. “Quinn Enterprises has a situation.”

My body tensed instinctively. “What’s happening?”

“Some ancient history has been deliberately resurfaced,” he explained. “Financial irregularities from before Serena or I were involved in the company. Someone’s orchestrating this to damage our reputation.”

I gripped the phone tighter. “How bad?”

“Potentially devastating. I’m handling it, but…” he paused. “That’s not why I called. I need you to keep this from Serena.”

Of course. Serena had only recently given birth. The last thing she needed was family crisis.

“She just had Vivian,” Ethan continued. “She’s finally happy and settled after everything she’s been through. I won’t have this stress affecting her or the baby.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t find out,” I promised gravely. “Do you need Blackwood resources? Legal team? PR crisis management?”

“Not yet. I have a plan in motion,” Ethan replied. “But I’ll reach out if things escalate.”

“Whatever you need,” I said firmly. “The Blackwood name stands with Quinn.”

After hanging up, I sat motionless, mind racing. If this scandal broke publicly, Serena would inevitably discover it. I needed to monitor the situation closely and keep her distracted until Ethan resolved the issue.

Decision made, I grabbed my jacket and headed out. “Cancel my remaining appointments,” I instructed my assistant. “Family matter.”

Thirty minutes later, I was waiting in Serena’s office at Dreamland Studio.

Through the glass walls, I could see her in the conference room, confidently leading a meeting with her design team. My chest tightened watching her—this brilliant, beautiful woman who had somehow become mine again after I’d nearly lost her forever.

When the meeting finally dispersed, Serena walked into her office, a stack of design portfolios in her arms. Her face brightened with surprise when she saw me.

“Ryan? What are you doing here?” Her smile was radiant, sending warmth through me despite my concerns.

Rising from the couch, I crossed to her, taking the heavy portfolios and setting them aside before placing a light kiss on her lips.

“Wrapped up early today,” I replied casually. “Thought I’d surprise my wife and take her home.”

Her eyes sparkled with pleasure. “That’s sweet, but I need to finish reviewing these designs first.” She gestured toward the portfolios I’d just set down. “Give me about forty minutes?”

“Take your time,” I assured her, settling back onto the couch. “I’ll just answer some emails while I wait.”

While Serena worked, I pretended to be absorbed in my phone, occasionally glancing up to watch her. Her brow furrowed in concentration as she made notes on design sketches, occasionally tucking a strand of hair behind her ear—a gesture I found irrationally endearing.

Outside, darkness gradually fell over Manhattan, the city transforming into a glittering panorama of lights. Finally, Serena closed the last portfolio with a satisfied sigh.

“All done,” she announced, stretching her arms above her head. “Let’s go home to our daughter.”

As she gathered her belongings, she suddenly paused. “Oh, I should call Maya to check on the London situation. I haven’t had a chance to talk with her since yesterday.”

My pulse quickened. Maya was with Ethan in London—she’d likely know about the crisis.

“Actually,” Serena reconsidered, reaching for her phone, “I’ll call Ethan instead. They’re probably together anyway.”

Moving swiftly, I took the phone from her hand before she could dial. “It’s nearly midnight in London,” I pointed out smoothly. “They’re either sleeping or… otherwise occupied.”

Serena’s eyebrows rose slightly at my intervention, but then she nodded. “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking about the time difference.”

“Then I’ll call Eleanor,” she suggested. “I want to know if he’s brought Maya home for dinner.”

“Serena,” I said, unable to completely mask my frustration, “why are you suddenly so invested in your brother’s love life?”

The moment the words left my mouth, I realized my mistake. Serena’s relationship with her recently rediscovered brother was still new and precious to her. Of course she’d be interested in his happiness.

“I just meant,” I backtracked smoothly, “that young love needs space to grow. Let them figure things out without sister hovering.”

Serena’s eyes narrowed slightly as she studied my face. After years together, she could read me better than anyone.

“Ryan,” she said slowly, “are you hiding something from me?”

I maintained my neutral expression while internally cursing Ethan’s timing. “What would I possibly be hiding?”

Her gaze didn’t waver. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out. You’ve been acting strangely since you arrived, and now you’re practically snatching my phone away when I mention calling London.”

“You’re imagining things,” I insisted, taking her hand in mine. “I just wanted an uninterrupted evening with my beautiful wife. Is that a crime?”

I pulled her closer, brushing my lips against her temple. “The nanny has Vivian for another three hours. I thought we might have dinner at that new Italian place you’ve been wanting to try.”

Her suspicion visibly wavered, though not entirely convinced. “Really? That’s all?”

“What else would it be?” I countered, keeping my tone light. “Now grab your coat before I change my mind and take you straight home instead.”

Her smile returned gradually as she reached for her coat. “Fine, but if I find out you’re keeping secrets, Ryan Blackwood, there will be consequences.”

I smiled back, ignoring the twist of guilt in my gut. This secret wasn’t mine to share, and protecting her was worth the temporary deception. Ethan would resolve the issue quickly, and Serena would never need to know.

“No secrets between us,” I promised, the half-truth bitter on my tongue as I guided her toward the elevator with my hand at the small of her back. “Just dinner, wine, and getting home in time to relieve the nanny.”

As we descended to the lobby, Serena leaned against me, her warmth and trust making my protective instincts surge. I’d shield her from this storm, whatever it took. She’d been through enough already.

The irony wasn’t lost on me—that I was once again keeping information from her, albeit with different intentions than before. But this time, my secrecy came from love, not indifference.

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Serena's POV

Something wasn't quite right.

The thought nagged at me throughout the afternoon as I tried to focus on the latest design portfolios. Ryan's unexpected office visit, his odd insistence on keeping me away from my phone when I mentioned calling London—small things that wouldn't normally raise flags, but together formed a pattern that set my internal alarms ringing.

After our romantic dinner last night, I'd let my suspicions fade. Perhaps I was being paranoid. But this morning, I noticed Ryan checking his phone more frequently than usual, his expression darkening briefly before smoothing into practiced neutrality whenever I entered the room.

Once at my office, I waited until I was alone before dialing Maya's number.

The video call rang for nearly a minute before connecting. When Maya's face finally appeared on screen, I immediately noticed the shadows under her eyes, poorly concealed with makeup.

"Maya, what took you so long? Were you avoiding me?" I tried to keep my tone light.

She attempted a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Sorry, I was just in a meeting."

A meeting at 9 PM London time? Unlikely, but I played along. "How's everything at the London branch? Is Zara Percy handling things well?"

"Everything's fine," Maya replied, her voice slightly too bright. "The branch is running smoothly. You don't need to worry."

I trusted Maya implicitly with business matters, so I nodded and shifted to what I really wanted to discuss. "And what about you and Ethan? Has he taken you to meet the extended Quinn family yet?" I leaned closer to my screen, grinning. "Come on, spill everything. No secrets between best friends."

The change was immediate and alarming. What little color remained in Maya's face drained away, and her forced smile vanished completely. Her eyes darted away from the camera.

"Maya?" I straightened in my chair, all playfulness gone. "What's wrong? Did something happen between you and Ethan?"

She shook her head too quickly. "No, nothing happened."

"Nothing? Then why do you look like you haven't slept in days?" I pressed, concern mounting. "Are you two fighting?"

“Really, Serena, everything’s fine,” Maya insisted, but her trembling voice betrayed her.

“That’s it. If you won’t tell me what’s going on, I’ll call Ethan directly,” I declared, protective instincts flaring. “If he’s done something to upset you—”

“No, don’t—” Maya started, but I had already ended the call, my fingers immediately dialing Ethan’s number.

The call went straight to voicemail. I tried again. Nothing. Three more attempts yielded the same result. My brother, who prided himself on being perpetually available for business calls, wasn’t answering.

Dread settled in my stomach like a stone. This wasn’t normal. Ethan and Maya were two of the most level-headed people I knew. They wouldn’t be acting this way over a simple lovers’ quarrel.

I left my office, mind racing with possibilities, each worse than the last. As I passed through the main workspace, I noticed several employees huddled near the coffee station, their hushed conversation abruptly ceasing when they spotted me.

“Good morning,” I said, observing their awkward smiles and averted gazes.

“Morning, Mrs. Blackwood,” they chorused, dispersing with suspicious haste.

I continued walking, unease growing stronger. Something was happening—something everyone seemed aware of except me.

Twenty minutes later, I strode into the Blackwood Group headquarters, bypassing Ryan’s assistant with a polite but firm nod. I needed answers, and I needed them now.

Ryan was just exiting the conference room, surrounded by executives. His eyes widened when he saw me, surprise quickly replaced by concern.

“Serena? I didn’t expect you here today.” He dismissed his team with a subtle gesture and guided me toward his office. “Is everything alright?”

Once inside with the door closed, I turned to him, arms crossed. “No, everything is not alright. Maya looks terrible and is clearly hiding something, and Ethan isn’t answering his phone. What’s going on, Ryan?”

Ryan’s expression tightened almost imperceptibly. “I’m sure it’s nothing serious. Maybe they had a disagreement—”

“Stop it,” I interrupted, my voice low but firm. “I know when I’m being managed, Ryan. You’ve been acting strange since yesterday, practically snatching my phone when I mentioned calling London.”

When he didn't immediately respond, I felt cold certainty wash over me. "I'm going to London. Tonight."

"What?" Ryan moved to block my path to the door. "Serena, be reasonable. You can't just fly to London on a whim. What about Vivian? The collection deadline next week?"

"Reasonable?" I echoed incredulously. "My family is clearly in some kind of crisis, everyone's hiding it from me, and you want me to be reasonable? Either tell me what's happening, or I'm booking the next flight out."

Ryan's shoulders sagged slightly. He gestured toward the seating area. "Please sit down first."

I perched on the edge of the leather sofa, heart pounding. "Tell me everything. No more protecting me from whatever this is."

Ryan sat beside me, taking my hands in his. "Quinn Enterprises is facing some... complications. Ethan asked me not to tell you because he didn't want you worried."

"What kind of complications?" I demanded, pulling my hands free. "Serious enough that my brother won't answer his phone and my best friend looks like she hasn't slept in days?"

Ryan's silence confirmed my fears.

"Ryan, I'm not some fragile doll that needs to be shielded from reality," I said, my voice rising despite my efforts to stay calm. "I'm a Quinn and a Blackwood. Whatever this is, I have a right to know."

"You're right," Ryan conceded, his expression grave. "You do deserve to know."

I steeled myself, gripping the edge of the sofa. "Tell me. How bad is it?"

"It could be significant," he admitted. "But nothing we can't handle. The Blackwood resources are at your family's disposal, and Ethan has a solid plan—"

"What exactly happened?" I cut through his reassurances, needing facts, not comfort.

"The company is under attack," he finally admitted. "Someone is dragging up old accusations against your father."

"What accusations?" I demanded, my voice rising despite my efforts to stay calm.

Ryan met my gaze steadily. "People are claiming your father forced out his brother and essentially drove your grandfather to his death to gain control of the company."

A startled laugh escaped me—more from shock than amusement. "That's absurd! Who would believe such ridiculous lies about the Quinn family?"

“Unfortunately, the financial press is running with the story,” Ryan said, moving to sit beside me. “Ethan has been working around the clock to contain it. He specifically asked me to shield you from this stress.”

I sank back in the chair, the pieces finally falling into place. “And that’s why Maya looked so devastated. She’s been watching Ethan deal with this nightmare while pretending everything was fine when talking to me.”

The weight of it all settled on my shoulders. My youngest brother was shouldering this massive crisis alone, believing he needed to protect me.

“I can’t believe I thought they were having relationship problems,” I murmured, shame washing over me. “All this time, Ethan has been fighting to protect our family name.”

Ryan took my hand, his thumb tracing soothing circles against my skin. “This isn’t your fault, Serena. I’ve already sent our best crisis management team to London. We’re going to help Quinn Enterprises weather this storm.”

“You should have told me immediately,” I said, the hurt evident in my voice.

“I know,” he acknowledged. “But after everything you’ve been through—the memory loss, the pregnancy, building Dreamland Studio into what it is today—I wanted to protect you. We both did.”

Before I could respond, Ryan’s phone rang. His expression changed when he saw the caller ID.

“It’s Ethan,” he said, immediately answering and putting it on speaker.

My brother’s voice came through, tense and strained in a way I’d never heard before. “Ryan, there’s been a development. My father collapsed during an emergency board meeting. He’s being rushed to the hospital now.”

CEO’s Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 286

Serena’s POV

My world tilted on its axis. “Ethan!” I cried out. “What happened? Is he going to be alright?”

There was a moment of stunned silence before my brother responded. “Serena? You’re there too?”

“Yes, and I’m coming to London immediately,” I said, already rising to my feet. “What hospital is he at?”

“Royal London,” Ethan replied, his voice cracking slightly. “The doctors say it might be his heart, but they’re not certain yet.”

“We’ll be on the Blackwood jet within the hour,” Ryan interjected, his decision made instantly. “Have someone meet us at the airport.”

After ending the call, I stood frozen for a moment, trying to process everything.

Ryan’s arms wrapped around me, pulling me against his chest. “He’ll be alright, Serena. Your father is strong.”

I nodded against his shoulder, grateful for his strength even as anger still simmered beneath the surface. “You should have told me sooner.”

“I know,” he whispered against my hair. “I’m sorry.”

Pulling back, I wiped away tears I hadn’t realized were falling. “We need to get home and pack. I need to arrange care for Vivian—”

“Already done,” Ryan interrupted, his phone in hand. “I’ve texted Simon to prepare the jet and called Mrs. Bennett to pack an overnight bag for us. Margaret has agreed to stay with Vivian. We can leave within the hour.”

Despite everything, I felt a surge of gratitude for his efficiency. “Thank you.”

As we rode the elevator down to the lobby, Ryan kept his arm firmly around my waist, his presence both comforting and steadying. Yet I couldn’t shake the feeling that this crisis was only beginning to unfold.

Ethan’s POV

The rhythmic beep of hospital monitors echoed in my ears as I stared through the observation window at my father’s unconscious form. For a man who had always embodied strength and resilience, he looked unnervingly fragile against the stark white hospital sheets.

I pressed my palm against the cool glass separating us, my jaw tight with frustration. This was exactly what I’d been trying to prevent. This was why I hadn’t wanted Serena involved.

“Damn it,” I muttered, running my free hand through my already disheveled hair.

Three weeks ago, when the first whispers of scandal began circulating around Quinn Enterprises, I had convinced myself it was nothing—just another attempt by competitors to undermine our position in the market. Family-owned empires like ours always attracted jealousy and speculation. I thought we could weather this storm as we had countless others before.

How naive I’d been.

The soft click of heels against tile announced my sisters' arrival before I saw them. I turned to find Eleanor and Zoe rushing toward me, their faces etched with concern.

"Ethan!" Eleanor reached me first, her normally perfect composure slipping as she gripped my arm. "How is he? What happened?"

I guided them away from the nurses' station, lowering my voice. "The doctors say it's exhaustion complicated by elevated blood pressure. They're keeping him sedated while they run more tests, but they believe he'll recover." I swallowed hard, forcing confidence into my voice. "He'll be fine."

Eleanor peered through the window, her knuckles white as she clutched her designer handbag. "How could this happen? He was perfectly healthy at Sunday dinner."

"Healthy people don't just collapse during board meetings," Zoe interjected, she fixed me with a penetrating stare. "What really happened, Ethan? All of it."

I glanced around to ensure we weren't overheard before responding. "The board meeting turned hostile. Grayson was leading the charge, demanding Father step down temporarily while the 'allegations' are investigated." My voice hardened with contempt. "As if there's anything to investigate beyond malicious gossip."

"Those ungrateful vultures!" Eleanor hissed, her elegant features contorted with rage. "After everything the Quinn family has done for them—the opportunities, the wealth we've created together. The minute there's trouble, they circle like sharks."

Zoe remained calmer, though I could see the calculation in her eyes. "Have you identified the source of these rumors? Someone must be orchestrating this."

I leaned against the wall, suddenly feeling the weight of four sleepless nights. "It has Uncle Edward's fingerprints all over it. The timing, the specific details about Grandfather's will—information only family would know."

"But Edward's been gone for decades," Eleanor objected. "Why return now?"

"Because Father is approaching retirement age," I explained grimly. "The company is at its most valuable, and the succession plan will be finalized next quarter. If Edward wants revenge or a piece of the empire, this is his moment."

Zoe nodded slowly. "What evidence do we have to refute these claims?"

I ran my hand over my face, confronting the most frustrating aspect of our predicament. "That's the problem. Grandfather changed his will just weeks before his death. On paper, it looks suspicious—especially to outsiders who don't know the whole story."

“Uncle Edward embezzled company funds and nearly bankrupted our London office,” Eleanor snapped. “Of course Grandfather disinherited him!”

“We know that,” I said wearily. “But all the key witnesses are dead. The family lawyer who drafted the will. Grandfather himself. Even Mother, who could have testified to Father’s innocence.”

“So what’s your plan?” Zoe asked directly. My eldest sister had always been the pragmatist, cutting through emotion to focus on solutions.

I hesitated. “I’ve been trying to contain it internally. Reassuring major clients, speaking individually with board members. But Grayson Henderson has turned this into a power play. He controls fifteen percent of our shares, and he’s convinced other minority shareholders to join his coalition.”

“Why not go on the offensive?” Eleanor suggested. “Expose Uncle Edward’s past crimes. Remind everyone why he was exiled in the first place.”

“It would look desperate,” I countered. “Like we’re deflecting rather than addressing the accusations. Besides, most of those records were deliberately sealed to protect the company’s reputation.”

Zoe paced the small waiting area, her mind visibly working through scenarios. “We need to stabilize the company first. The rumors can be addressed later, when Father is recovered and can defend himself.”

“I agree,” Eleanor nodded. “Who’s leading the charge among the shareholders? Beyond Henderson?”

“Parker, and the Miyazaki Group,” I replied, listing our most vocal critics. “They’re demanding an emergency shareholders’ meeting next week.”

“Perfect,” Eleanor said with sudden determination. “I’ll handle Henderson. We financed his daughter’s fashion line last spring—he owes me. Zoe, you take Miyazaki. You negotiated their last contract.”

For the first time in days, I felt a flicker of hope. With my sisters’ connections and influence, we might at least buy some time. But I knew we needed more—something decisive to turn the tide completely.

“I’ve called in reinforcements,” I admitted, checking my watch. “Ryan Blackwood and Serena are flying in. They should land in a few hours.”

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were determined to keep Serena out of this mess. Something about protecting her from stress?”

I sighed. “That was before Father collapsed. We need all hands on deck now—and Serena’s not just any hand. She’s a Quinn. Plus, Ryan’s influence extends even further than ours in certain circles.”

Before my sisters could respond, my phone vibrated with an incoming call—Maya. Relief washed over me at the sight of her name.

“I need to take this,” I said, stepping away from my sisters. “Maya’s been coordinating with our PR team.”

I answered quickly, moving toward a quieter corner of the waiting room. “Hey.”

“How is he?” Maya asked, her voice warm with concern.

“Stable,” I replied, allowing some of my carefully maintained composure to slip. “But unconscious. The doctors are optimistic.”

“I’ve finished at the office,” she said. “Do you want me to come to the hospital?”

“Please,” I whispered, surprised by the raw emotion in my voice. “I need you here.”

Twenty minutes later, I spotted Maya hurrying through the hospital entrance, her red-brown hair pulled back in a hasty ponytail, eyes searching the lobby until they found mine. The sight of her—determined, loyal, unwavering—loosened something tight in my chest.

I met her halfway, pulling her into my arms without caring who might see. The familiar scent of her perfume—something citrusy and clean—grounded me in a way nothing else could.

“I’m so sorry about your father,” she murmured against my shoulder, her arms tightening around me. “But he’s strong, Ethan. Like all of you Quinns.”

I pressed a kiss to her temple, allowing myself this brief moment of comfort. “Thank you for being here. For everything you’ve done these past weeks.”

She pulled back slightly, her gray eyes meeting mine with fierce certainty. “This is going to work out. We’ll fight through this together, I promise.”

“Come on,” I said, taking her hand firmly in mine. “My sisters are eager to update you on their plan. And knowing Eleanor, it’s already morphed into something terrifyingly effective.”

Maya squeezed my hand, her smile brightening. “That’s what I’m counting on. The Quinn siblings united—heaven help whoever started this mess.”

CEO’s Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 287

Author's POV

News of Liam Quinn's hospitalization spread through London's financial district like wildfire, igniting a media frenzy that couldn't be contained. Headlines painted a damning portrait, suggesting his collapse was nothing more than a calculated ploy to escape scrutiny.

"QUINN PATRIARCH'S CONVENIENT ILLNESS: SYMPATHY PLAY OR GUILTY CONSCIENCE?" screamed one tabloid.

"FAMILY DYNASTY CRUMBLING: LIAM QUINN'S HOSPITAL STAY RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT INHERITANCE SCANDAL," declared another.

The coordinated nature of these attacks was unmistakable—too precise to be coincidental, too relentless to be silenced through conventional channels.

Ryan's sleek black Bentley pulled up to the private entrance of Royal London Hospital, where security personnel immediately moved to escort him and Serena through a side door, away from the small gathering of paparazzi who had caught wind of their arrival.

"Vultures," Ryan muttered under his breath, his hand protectively at the small of Serena's back as they were led through pristine corridors toward the VIP wing.

Serena's stomach knotted with anxiety. The last time she'd seen her father, he had been unconscious, vulnerable in a way she'd never witnessed before. Now, despite being awake, the updates from Ethan suggested he was deteriorating rather than improving—his body betraying him just when the Quinn family needed his strength most.

When they entered the private suite, Liam was propped up against white pillows, his complexion ashen and drawn. The monitors beside him beeped steadily, but there was no disguising how much the crisis had aged him in just days. His eyes, however, brightened momentarily at the sight of his daughter.

"Sweetheart," he said, his voice noticeably weaker than usual. "You shouldn't have come."

Serena moved swiftly to her father's side, taking his hand in hers. The sight of his weakened state sent a surge of protective anger through her.

"Dad, please stop," she said firmly. "The only thing that matters right now is your recovery. The company can wait. Everything else can wait."

Ryan stepped forward, his commanding presence filling the room despite his respectful demeanor. "Mr. Quinn, I've brought the specialists from New York as we discussed. They'll consult with your medical team this afternoon."

Liam attempted to straighten himself, wincing slightly with the effort. “Thank you, Ryan. And please, we’ve moved beyond ‘Mr. Quinn’ by now, haven’t we? Especially considering the circumstances.”

“Of course, Liam,” Ryan nodded, a rare smile softening his usually stern features.

Serena watched the exchange with quiet appreciation. Even without a formal wedding ceremony, Ryan had seamlessly stepped into his role as her partner and protector of her family. The man who had once been her greatest adversary was now her strongest ally.

“The company situation,” Liam began, his breath catching slightly, “it’s deteriorating by the hour. The board is in chaos, and Grayson Henderson is capitalizing on every moment of my absence.”

“Dad, you need to focus on getting better,” Serena insisted, adjusting his pillows. “Ryan and I will handle the rest. That’s why we’re here.”

Ryan moved closer to the bed, his expression serious. “Liam, these rumors didn’t materialize from thin air. They’re too specific, too detailed about past events. If we’re going to effectively counter them, I need to understand what truly happened with your brother Edward and your father’s will.”

“It was supposed to be simple,” he finally said, his voice hollow. “Father’s original will divided everything equally between Edward and me—fifty-fifty ownership, shared leadership responsibilities. Edward was younger, but brilliant when it came to business strategy. We were meant to complement each other’s strengths.”

He paused, a fit of coughing interrupting his narrative. Serena quickly offered him water, concern etching deeper lines into her face.

“What happened?” Ryan prompted gently once Liam had recovered.

“Money started disappearing,” Liam continued, his eyes hardening with the painful memory. “Not small amounts—millions. Father noticed discrepancies in the quarterly reports and launched a private investigation. The trail led directly to Edward.”

Liam’s hand trembled slightly as he set down the water glass. “He’d diverted company funds into a high-risk venture capital project—some revolutionary technology that promised extraordinary returns. When the project collapsed, Edward couldn’t cover his tracks. The money was gone.”

“When Father confronted him, Edward didn’t even deny it. He justified it as a ‘necessary risk’ for the company’s future. Said Father was too conservative, that the company would stagnate without bold moves.” Liam shook his head bitterly. “The betrayal nearly killed my father. He had a massive heart attack the next day.”

“And that’s when he changed the will,” Serena murmured, pieces of the family mystery finally falling into place.

“Yes. From his hospital bed, he summoned his attorneys and cut Edward out completely. Stripped him of his shares, his position, even his trust fund. Ordered him to leave London and never return to the family fold.” Liam’s expression was a mixture of regret and resignation. “Edward swore revenge. Said Father would regret choosing me, that one day he’d return and take everything that should have been his.”

Ryan’s analytical mind was already working through implications. “Do you have documentation from the failed investment? Names of other investors, project details, anything that would prove Edward’s embezzlement?”

“I’ve had people searching for years,” Liam admitted wearily. “The investment firm dissolved immediately after the collapse. The principals scattered. We tracked one former employee to Dubai, another to Singapore, but they vanished before we could make contact.”

Serena squeezed her father’s hand. “There must be records somewhere. No financial transaction of that magnitude disappears completely.”

Ryan nodded thoughtfully. “I agree. And I’m certain Edward has returned to London—he’s orchestrating this from nearby, not from abroad.”

A monitor beside the bed began beeping more rapidly, drawing everyone’s attention to Liam’s increasing heart rate.

“That’s enough for today,” Serena said firmly. “Dad needs rest.”

Ryan checked his watch. “You’re right. Liam, we’ll handle this. Focus on getting stronger—that’s your only responsibility right now.”

Liam reached out, grasping Ryan’s arm with surprising strength. “Thank you, son. For everything you’re doing for my daughter... for our family.”

The simple words carried the weight of acceptance, of trust hard-won. Ryan covered Liam’s hand with his own, the gesture speaking volumes between the men.

“We’ll be back tomorrow,” Serena promised, kissing her father’s forehead. “Please rest, and don’t even think about checking your phone for company updates. Ethan and the others are managing day-to-day operations.”

As they left the hospital room, Serena felt a curious mixture of determination and dread. “He’s worse than yesterday,” she whispered once they were alone in the corridor.

Ryan pulled her gently into his embrace. “The stress is exacerbating his condition. Which is exactly why we need to resolve this quickly.”

Separating, they moved with purpose toward the elevator. “I’ll head to Quinn headquarters,” Ryan decided. “We need to make our presence known to the board immediately. It’s time to show them the Quinn family isn’t standing alone.”

Serena nodded. “I’ll go to the family estate. Mother needs support, and Eleanor mentioned some old files in Father’s study that might be relevant.”

“Perfect.” Ryan’s phone buzzed with an incoming message. “Simon has already initiated the first phase of our response. By this afternoon, those malicious stories will start disappearing from every reputable news outlet.”

“How exactly are you managing that?” Serena asked, one eyebrow raised.

A dangerous smile played at Ryan’s lips. “Let’s just say the Blackwood Group has significant advertising budgets that can be reallocated very quickly. Plus, our legal team is particularly creative with cease-and-desist letters.”

“Remind me never to get on your bad side again,” Serena murmured, a reluctant smile forming despite the circumstances.

“Too late for that,” Ryan replied, brushing his lips against her temple before the elevator doors opened. “We’ll reconvene for dinner. My team is already gathering intelligence on Edward’s current whereabouts and associates.”

Across town, in a luxurious penthouse overlooking the Thames, Edward Quinn stared incredulously at his laptop screen. One by one, the carefully planted news stories were disappearing, pulled from publication without explanation.

“What the hell is happening?” he demanded, slamming his fist against the mahogany desk. “These were supposed to run for days! We paid good money to ensure that!”

His assistant shifted uncomfortably. “It appears the Blackwood Group has intervened, sir.”

“Blackwood?” Edward’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “What does Ryan Blackwood have to do with any of this?”

“He’s engaged to your niece, sir. Serena Quinn. They arrived in London this morning.”

Edward’s face darkened with fury. “Of course. Little Serena found herself a powerful protector. How convenient.” He paced the opulent room, mind racing. “The Blackwood Group might control the media, but they can’t silence shareholder discontent. What’s the status with Parker?”

“Mr. Parker is awaiting your call. He’s secured the proxy votes as planned.”

Edward's lips curved into a cold smile. "Then perhaps it's time we accelerate our timetable. If my dear brother thinks he can hide in his hospital bed while his daughter's husband fights his battles, he's sorely mistaken."

He reached for his phone, scrolling to a familiar contact. "Silas," he purred when the call connected. "It's time for you to earn your percentage."

After ending the call, Edward walked to the floor-to-ceiling windows, gazing out at the city he'd been forced to abandon decades ago. "Welcome home, brother," he murmured to his own reflection in the glass. "Let's see how well you've prepared your children for war."

CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 288

Serena's POV

The media storm had finally begun to die down, but I knew better than to assume this meant our troubles were over.

"The worst is behind us," Ethan explained, sliding a report across the polished mahogany table. "But our public image is still pretty banged up. The stock has dropped seventeen percent since Dad's hospitalization."

I scanned the numbers, feeling my stomach drop. "How long until we see recovery?"

"Three months at minimum," he replied, loosening his tie with a weary sigh. "And that's with going full throttle on damage control."

"I've been putting together a comprehensive charity initiative," Ethan continued, pulling up a presentation on his tablet. "Strategic donations to London's most respected institutions—children's hospitals, education foundations, historical preservation. It's our fastest way to clean up the Quinn name."

"That's brilliant," I nodded, leaning forward to examine the detailed proposal. "Start with the children's hospital. It looks great, and the cause is genuinely worthy."

What I didn't expect was for our efforts to hit a brick wall at every turn.

Within forty-eight hours, Ethan's carefully crafted charity initiative crashed and burned. Every organization we approached suddenly got cold feet, offering vague excuses about "scheduling conflicts" or "procedural complications."

"They said no?" I stared at my assistant Lucy in disbelief as she delivered the news. "St. Margaret's Children's Hospital actually passed on a seven-figure donation?"

“I’m afraid so, Mrs. Serena,” Lucy replied, visibly uncomfortable. “They cited recent... bad press regarding the Quinn family. The director suggested perhaps revisiting the partnership when things have ’cooled off.’”

Ethan slammed his fist against the desk, his face turning red with anger. “This is total bullshit! Since when do charitable organizations turn down legitimate donations?”

The door swung open, and Ryan strode in with Simon trailing behind him, both men wearing matching expressions of grim seriousness. My heart lifted slightly at the sight of Ryan—he moved through the world with such unwavering confidence, as if uncertainty was a concept that simply didn’t apply to him.

“Since someone started pulling strings behind the scenes,” Ryan answered, having overheard Ethan’s outburst. “My sources have confirmed it’s not happening naturally. Someone’s actively shutting you down.”

I crossed my arms, already pretty sure I knew the answer. “Who?”

“Silas Parker,” Ryan confirmed, his jaw tightening. “His dirty work is all over this. His assistant has been making visits to every major charitable foundation in London.”

Ethan’s expression darkened. “Parker. Of course it would be him.”

For those unfamiliar with London’s jewelry dynasty rivalries, the Quinn-Parker feud was the stuff of legends. What had begun as healthy competition decades ago had escalated into all-out war when LUXE Jewelry Company—our family business—had shot to the top while Parker Gems crashed and burned in a catastrophic investment failure. Silas Parker had never forgiven my father for succeeding where he had failed.

“Parker would screw over children’s cancer treatments just to get back at our family,” Ethan muttered, disgust evident in his voice. “He’s been waiting forever for us to stumble.”

Ryan moved to stand beside me, his hand resting protectively at the small of my back. “There are other ways to rebuild your reputation. Parker can only block so much.”

As if on cue, Lucy reappeared at the door, this time bearing a thick cream envelope embossed with the Parker family crest.

“This was just delivered by courier,” she explained, placing it on the desk.

Ethan picked it up, his expression shifting from confusion to disbelief as he read the contents. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“What is it?” I asked, moving closer.

“A wedding invitation,” Ethan scoffed, handing me the ornate card. “Elena Parker is getting married this weekend at the Dorchester. And we’re all invited.”

I studied the elaborate invitation with its gold leaf detailing and fancy calligraphy. Elena’s marriage had been arranged years ago—a business alliance with the son of another prominent family. But the timing of this sudden ceremony couldn’t be more suspicious.

“How perfect,” I remarked, my voice cool despite the anger simmering beneath. “The Parkers host London’s biggest social event of the season just as our family faces its darkest hour.”

“It’s all for show,” Ryan observed, his analytical mind always way ahead. “Silas wants to show off his daughter’s advantageous marriage while your father is hospitalized and your company is vulnerable. It’s pure theater designed to showcase his family’s strength against your obvious weakness.”

Ethan’s laugh was bitter. “Should we send our regrets, then? Rob him of the pleasure of watching us squirm through his daughter’s wedding reception?”

I placed the invitation back on the desk, my mind made up. “No. We’re going.”

“Serena...” Ethan began, concern evident in his voice.

“This is exactly what Silas wants—for us to hide in shame while he presents himself as London’s rising jewelry dynasty,” I insisted. “We can’t give him that victory.”

Ryan’s eyes met mine, approval and understanding passing between us. “I agree. Sometimes the most powerful statement is simply showing your face.”

The same invitation arrived at the Quinn family estate later that evening, causing a totally different reaction from my sisters. I’d just returned from checking on Vivian, who was peacefully sleeping under the watchful eye of her nurse, when I found Eleanor and Zoe going at it in the drawing room.

“This is a trap,” Eleanor insisted, waving the invitation like it was radioactive. “Silas Parker deliberately timed this wedding to humiliate us. With Father in the hospital and all these rumors circulating, he wants the entire Quinn family on parade like wounded animals.”

My mother had already retired upstairs, emotionally exhausted after spending the day at my father’s bedside. The news of his condition had hit her like a truck; only our combined efforts had prevented her from camping out in his hospital room permanently.

“Is that what you think, Eleanor? That we should crawl into a hole and let everyone believe the worst about our family?” Zoe challenged, her fiery temperament in full force. “That’s exactly what Silas Parker wants.”

I entered the room, catching the tail end of their debate. “Zoe’s right,” I said quietly, causing both sisters to turn toward me. “We’re going to that wedding.”

Eleanor shook her head, genuine concern in her eyes. “Serena, think about this. This isn’t just any social event—it’s designed specifically to make us uncomfortable. Parker will have the room packed with people loyal to him. You’ll be walking into a snake pit.”

I moved to the antique sideboard and poured myself a small glass of brandy, feeling the weight of the past few days bearing down on me. “Then it’s a good thing I’ve had practice with snakes.”

“I love your attitude,” Zoe grinned, her eyes sparkling with the promise of confrontation. “Let’s show those vultures that it takes more than rumors to take down the Quinn family.”

Eleanor sighed in defeat. “Fine, but what about proof? What about clearing Father’s name? The wedding is in three days, Serena. Does Ryan have anything solid yet?”

I sipped the amber liquid slowly, feeling its warmth spread through my chest. The truth was, I had no idea if Ryan’s investigation had turned up anything real. He’d been working 24/7 with his security team, chasing leads across three continents. But Edward Quinn had decades to cover his tracks, and time was not on our side.

“If Ryan finds the evidence, great,” I finally answered, setting down my glass with quiet determination. “If not, we still hold our ground. Either way, I want Silas Parker and everyone else to understand one thing crystal clear—”

“My father may be in a hospital bed, but the Quinn family is far from finished. Not even close.”

CEO’s Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 289

Serena’s POV

I smoothed down the front of my black Valentino gown.

“Ready?” Ethan asked, offering his arm as our car pulled up to the entrance of the Moran Hotel.

“As I’ll ever be,” I replied, accepting his support. The grand marble steps leading into London’s most prestigious venue were already crowded with the city’s elite, all dressed in their finest and eager to witness the social event of the season.

Ryan appeared at my other side, looking devastatingly handsome in his tailored black tux. “Remember, we’re making a statement just by walking through those doors. Head high.”

The moment we stepped into the opulent ballroom, I felt the shift in the atmosphere—the momentary hush, followed by the unmistakable buzz of gossip. Heads turned, conversations paused, and eyes locked onto us with a mixture of curiosity, disdain, and poorly concealed excitement.

“Quinn family actually showed up?”

“With their father hospitalized and that financial scandal brewing? Bold move.”

“Parker and Quinn in the same room—this wedding just got interesting.”

I kept my expression neutral, my stride confident. Years in the public eye had taught me the power of appearing unbothered, even when every whisper felt like a pinprick against my skin.

Across the room, I spotted her immediately—Elena Parker, resplendent in white, clinging to her new husband’s arm like he was her personal trophy. The moment our eyes met, her smile transformed from practiced radiance to something far more predatory.

“She’s spotted us,” I murmured to Ethan. “Prepare for impact.”

Ryan’s hand found the small of my back, a subtle gesture of support that didn’t go unnoticed by the watching crowd. “Let her come to us. This is her territory, but you hold all the power.”

Elena’s whispered conversation with her husband didn’t require lip-reading to understand. I could practically hear her venomous commentary from across the room. After a theatrical pause, she glided toward us, pulling along her bewildered-looking groom.

“Serena,” Elena cooed, her voice dripping with false warmth. “I’m absolutely shocked you came. Given the... unfortunate state of Quinn family affairs lately, I assumed you’d be too busy putting out fires.” Her smile sharpened. “How truly bittersweet that some families celebrate while others crumble, isn’t it?”

I took a moment to assess her wedding decor—the predictable floral arrangements, the safe color palette, the utter lack of originality—before meeting her gaze.

“Your invitation seemed sincere enough,” I replied, my voice cool and measured. “Though I must say, the decorations are surprisingly... adequate. Very appropriate for you.”

The flash of anger in her eyes was worth the trip alone.

“At least I have a proper wedding,” Elena snapped, recovering quickly. “I heard you’ve managed to have a child without ever walking down the aisle. How very modern of you, Serena. Or perhaps Ryan Blackwood just hasn’t deemed you worthy of a ceremony yet?”

I felt Ryan tense beside me, but his face remained impassive.

“Elena,” I sighed, “still hung up on the same old insecurities, I see. Though I’m surprised you rushed into marriage so quickly. Given your rather extensive dating history, I would have thought you’d need more time to be certain.” I glanced meaningfully at her uncomfortable-looking husband. “What was the final count? Ten boyfriends? Twelve?”

Jasper Ashwood’s expression darkened instantly, his smile faltering as he cast a questioning look toward his new bride.

Elena’s cheeks flushed crimson. “Don’t you dare try to poison my marriage, Serena,” she hissed, clutching her husband’s arm possessively. “Jasper is the only man I’ve ever truly loved. Unlike you, living in sin with Blackwood without even a proper commitment.”

Before I could respond, Ryan stepped forward, his voice smooth as silk but sharp as steel.

“I’m afraid you’ve misunderstood our situation entirely,” he said, taking my hand in his and bringing it to his lips. “Serena and I are engaged. The wedding delay has been entirely my struggle, as she’s been focused on her remarkable career.” His eyes found mine, filled with such convincing adoration that even I almost believed him. “I’ve been practically begging her to marry me properly since Vivian was born.”

“If you could persuade her to stop making me wait, Mrs. Ashwood, I would be eternally grateful,” Ryan added with a devastating smile that made several nearby women audibly sigh.

Ethan barely contained his laughter, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. “Elena, you really shouldn’t measure others by your own limited standards,” he added casually. “After all, not every woman has the opportunity to marry someone like Ryan.” His gaze swept dismissively over Jasper. “Some have to settle for… alternatives.”

The brutal simplicity of the insult left Jasper looking like he’d been slapped. Elena’s perfectly made-up face contorted with rage, her façade of the gracious bride completely shattered.

“You Quinns are all the same—arrogant even when you’re falling apart,” she spat. “Your family is drowning in scandal, your reputation is in tatters, and you still walk in here like you own the place.” Her eyes narrowed to venomous slits. “I’ll enjoy watching your family’s complete destruction, Serena. Every humiliating detail.”

With that parting shot, she yanked her shell-shocked husband away, leaving us standing in a bubble of uncomfortable silence.

“Well,” Ethan muttered under his breath, “that went about as well as expected.”

Ryan’s hand hadn’t left mine. “You handled her perfectly,” he said quietly, his thumb stroking small circles against my palm. “Now we circulate, smile, and show everyone in this room that the Quinns aren’t hiding from anything.”

I squeezed his hand gratefully before releasing it. “Let’s split up. Cover more ground that way.”

As I watched Ryan and Ethan move into different sections of the ballroom, I squared my shoulders and prepared for battle. This wasn't just a wedding reception—it was a battlefield, and I had no intention of retreating.

The moment Elena and Jasper disappeared into the crowd, I began scanning the ballroom, searching for the man who'd orchestrated this entire spectacle. Silas Parker's conspicuous absence was strange—the father of the bride missing from his own daughter's wedding reception?

“Looking for someone?” Ryan asked quietly, his hand still firmly holding mine.

“Silas Parker. He should be here gloating.”

Ryan nodded. “He's making us wait. Classic power play.”

I watched as several guests began cautiously approaching Ethan, their expressions a careful blend of curiosity and calculation. Their words were polite enough—inquiries about our father's health, expressions of shock about the recent scandals—but their true intentions were transparent.

“Mr. Blackwood, I've been following your work with sustainable energy investment in Southeast Asia,” one silver-haired man said, completely ignoring me and Ethan to focus on Ryan. “My firm has been looking to expand in that direction. Perhaps we could discuss potential partnerships?”

Ryan offered a courteous but noncommittal response. These people weren't here to support the Quinn family—they were vultures circling what they perceived as a dying empire, trying to curry favor with the predator they believed would pick the carcass clean.

“Amazing how quickly they forget years of partnership with Quinn Enterprises,” Ethan muttered under his breath, forcing a smile as another group approached.

Just then, a ripple of murmurs swept through the crowd, and all heads turned toward the entrance. Silas Parker had finally made his grand entrance, walking shoulder to shoulder with a middle-aged man in an expensive charcoal suit. The two were laughing together like old friends, completely at ease.

“Isn't that Edward?” someone whispered nearby, loud enough for me to catch.

“What's he doing back in London?”

“He used to be quite the big shot, didn't he?”

“Things just got interesting.”

CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 290

Serena's POV

The crowd parted as Silas Parker made his way toward us.

"Mrs. Serena Quinn-Blackwood," Silas announced loudly enough for nearby guests to hear. "What an unexpected pleasure. I didn't think you'd actually honor us with your presence."

His tone made it clear my attendance was anything but a pleasure. The calculated gleam in his eyes told me he'd been counting on it.

Ethan's smile never reached his eyes as he responded. "Mr. Parker specifically sent invitations to the Quinn family. How could we possibly decline such a... thoughtful gesture?"

"Though we weren't aware," I added smoothly, "that someone exiled from the Quinn family had suddenly become so chummy with the Parkers. When exactly did that fascinating development occur?"

Edward fixed his cold gaze on Ethan, his lip curling with disdain. "Is this how Liam raised his children? To address their elders without proper respect? Disgraceful."

Ethan let out a contemptuous laugh. "Someone thrown out of the family by our grandfather dares to call himself our elder? That's rich."

He turned to me with theatrical disbelief. "Sis, isn't this absurd?"

"Completely absurd," I agreed, meeting Edward's glare with unflinching calm.

Edward's complexion darkened to an unhealthy shade of red.

"I was forced out because of Liam's machinations," he announced, voice rising strategically to ensure everyone could hear. "He envied my abilities and feared our father would favor me. He orchestrated my downfall out of jealousy."

He turned to address the watching crowd directly. "Many of you have known me for decades. Who among you doesn't remember how I transformed Quinn Enterprises in my youth? Ask yourselves who was really responsible for the company's initial success."

The murmurs started immediately, exactly as he'd planned.

"Edward was brilliant in those early days..."

"The Quinn fortunes certainly rose under his leadership before Liam took control..."

“Eleanor only started running operations recently, and then that brother of hers stepped in...”

Edward’s face reflected satisfied victory. He’d clearly been planting these seeds for weeks, cultivating doubt like a precious garden.

I felt Ryan’s hand at the small of my back, a silent reminder of his support. Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward, my voice cutting through the whispers.

“Are we really accepting baseless accusations as truth now?” I asked, my tone crisp with authority. “Edward was expelled from Quinn Enterprises by my grandfather himself—not my father. That’s documented fact, not family gossip.”

I turned to face the crowd directly. “Everyone in this room knows the Quinn and Parker families have been rivals for generations. Yet here stands my uncle, newly returned to London and immediately aligned with our oldest competitors.” I raised an eyebrow. “And we’re meant to take his word as gospel?”

The silence that followed was delicious. Guests exchanged uncertain glances, suddenly reconsidering the narrative they’d been so eager to believe moments before.

Edward and Silas exchanged a look of barely concealed fury. They hadn’t expected me to counter so effectively.

“Uncle Edward,” I continued, emphasizing the family title with exquisite politeness, “out of respect for your age, I’ll address you as family today. But perhaps you could explain to us ‘disrespectful youngsters’ why you’re suddenly best friends with the man who’s spent decades trying to destroy our family business?”

Edward’s jaw tightened, the muscles visibly working beneath his skin. The standoff stretched uncomfortably until I broke it with a calculated smile.

“Since we’re airing family matters publicly,” I continued, “allow me to address the rumors circulating about my father. These absurd claims about him harming relatives to seize control of the company have left everyone at Quinn Enterprises utterly baffled.”

I met Edward’s gaze directly. “The truth is considerably less dramatic. Edward was expelled from Quinn Enterprises because he misappropriated company funds for a high-risk investment venture that my grandfather fortunately discovered before it bankrupted us all.”

I kept my voice steady, my posture relaxed. “Edward’s ambition has always exceeded his ethics. That’s why he was removed—not because of some melodramatic conspiracy.”

“You dare!” Edward snarled. “You make these accusations without a shred of evidence. That’s slander, Serena.”

“Interesting,” I replied coolly. “When accusations come from your mouth, they’re truth, but when I speak, it’s slander? Your double standard is showing, Uncle.”

Scattered laughter rippled through the crowd. I caught Ethan’s appreciative smirk from the corner of my eye. Ryan remained stone-faced beside me, but I sensed his approval in the way he stood slightly closer.

Edward, realizing he was losing control of the narrative, abandoned all pretense of civility.

“I won’t stoop to arguing with a child,” he spat. “Your grandfather’s will was legally verified and witnessed. The lawyer present can testify to everything I’ve claimed.”

His smug expression told me this had been his plan all along—to ambush us at a public event where we’d be vulnerable, surrounded by industry peers. He’d brought receipts, while assuming we’d come unprepared.

“How convenient,” I replied, not bothering to hide my disdain. “You came fully armed for battle at someone else’s wedding. Tell me, Uncle Edward, is this really the venue you’ve chosen for a family confrontation? Are we meant to summon lawyers and examine documents between the first dance and the cake cutting?”

From across the room, I spotted Elena emerging from the ladies’ room, her eyes widening as she realized the entire reception had congregated around our little drama.

She shrieked, shoving through her guests. “How dare you! This is MY wedding day! If you continue disrupting my celebration, I’ll have security remove you immediately!”

I turned to Elena with the warmest smile I could muster. “You’re absolutely right, Elena. Today is your special day, and we’re all here to celebrate you. We’re guests bearing good wishes, not troublemakers.”

Then I pivoted toward Edward, my expression hardening. “It seems you’ll need to pack away your little performance, Uncle. Elena is threatening to have you removed, and that would be terribly embarrassing for someone who’s only just returned to London society, wouldn’t it? Being ejected from the Parker wedding would hardly help your credibility.”

Edward’s face contorted with rage, but he was trapped by social convention.

I took Ryan’s arm casually, as though this entire confrontation had been nothing more than a minor inconvenience. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, I believe my fiancé promised me a dance.”