

CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 311

Serena's POV

I walked into Dreamland Studio Monday morning feeling like a completely different person than the one who'd left for Vegas. The glass doors slid open, revealing the sleek, open-concept workspace I'd poured my heart into creating. Light poured through floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating design stations where my team was already buzzing with activity.

“She’s back!” Lucy called out, her brown bob swinging as she rushed over to hug me. “How was Vegas with Mr. CEO? Did you actually see anything besides your hotel room?”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help smiling. “We actually spent most of our time at the International Jewelry Expo.”

“Well, whatever happened there, you’re practically glowing,” she said, stepping back to assess me.

The rest of the team gathered around, peppering me with questions about Vegas, the expo, and yes, my time with Ryan. I found myself describing the displays with animated gestures, my words tumbling out faster than I could control them.

“I need everyone in the conference room in fifteen,” I announced suddenly, my mind racing with ideas. “We’re about to shake things up.”

Lucy appeared at my side as if materialized from thin air, tablet in hand. “I’ve already pulled the quarterly projections and our current client roster. What else do you need ready?”

God, I loved her efficiency. “Pull our supplier contracts and the partnership proposals we’ve shelved in the last six months. All of them.”

Thirty minutes later, I stood at the head of our glass conference table, feeling a surge of confidence I hadn’t experienced in years.

“Vegas wasn’t just a trip—it was an awakening,” I began, pacing slowly. “We’ve been thinking too small. Playing it safe. Creating beautiful pieces, yes, but staying in our comfort zone.”

I projected images from the expo onto the wall screen. “The market is evolving. Luxury consumers don’t just want pretty jewelry anymore—they want stories, sustainability, innovation. And we’re going to give it to them.”

For the next hour, I outlined my vision: restructured design teams working in specialized pods rather than individually, direct partnerships with ethical mining operations, a completely revamped client consultation process, and an aggressive expansion into digital custom design experiences.

“This is... ambitious,” Celeste said carefully when I finished. She adjusted her glasses, studying the workflow chart I’d sketched. “We’d need to completely overhaul our production timeline.”

“And triple our marketing budget,” Lucy added.

“I know it’s a lot,” I acknowledged. “But we have the talent in this room to make it happen.”

“You seem different, Serena,” Celeste observed. “Like you’ve been fighting a war we didn’t even know was happening.”

I smiled. “Maybe I have been. But I’m done fighting myself. The question is, are you all in?”

The room erupted in excited chatter.

That energy carried me through the week as we began implementing changes. I was deep in discussion with our website developers when Lucy appeared at my office door.

“Mr. Lancaster is here to see you,” she announced, a curious look in her eyes.

“Send him in,” I said, quickly clearing sketches from my desk.

Cedric walked in with the same confident stride I remembered. “Serena,” he said warmly. “Still the most talented designer I know.”

“Cedric,” I stood to hug him. “What brings you to New York?”

“Business expansion,” he replied, settling into the chair across from me. “Lancaster Design is opening a New York office.”

We fell into easy conversation about design philosophies and industry trends. Unlike my explanations to Ryan, which required translating my passion into terms he could appreciate, talking with Cedric was like speaking in our native tongue. When he mentioned specific cutting techniques or design challenges, I didn’t have to stop and explain the basics.

“I’d love to discuss potential collaboration,” he said finally. “Our aesthetics have always been complementary rather than competitive.”

“I’d like that,” I replied honestly. “Though we’re in the middle of some major restructuring.”

“Even better timing, then. Can I schedule something through your assistant?”

I nodded, and he left with a promise to be in touch. True to his word, Lucy informed me he’d scheduled a meeting for the following week.

That evening, I rushed home to my daughter. The moment I walked through the door, Vivian's delighted squeal made every stress of the day evaporate. Her tiny arms reached for me as the nanny handed her over.

"There's my beautiful girl," I cooed, breathing in her baby-powder scent.

For the next hour, I lost myself in her world—her babbling attempts at conversation, her determination to show me every toy she owned, the way her little fingers wrapped around mine.

I was so absorbed with Vivian that I barely heard Ryan come home. His footsteps sounded behind me as I was tucking her in for the night.

"Hey," he whispered, sliding an arm around my waist and pressing a kiss to my temple. "I missed you today."

"Mmm," I leaned back against him briefly, enjoying his warmth. "How was your day?"

"Endless meetings," he said, gently pulling me toward our bedroom once Vivian was settled. "But I kept thinking about coming home to you."

In our room, Ryan turned me to face him, his hands trailing down to my hips. "Vegas feels so far away already," he murmured, leaning in to kiss me.

I returned the kiss softly but pulled back after a moment, exhaustion suddenly hitting me like a wave. "Ryan, I'm sorry... I'm just completely drained tonight."

Disappointment flickered across his face, but he nodded. "You've been working non-stop since we got back."

"I have so many new ideas for Dreamland," I said, changing into my nightclothes. "This could be our breakthrough moment, Ryan. I need to strike while the inspiration is fresh."

"I understand," he said, sitting on the edge of our bed. "But I miss you."

I sat beside him, taking his hand. "It's only been a few days."

"It feels longer," he admitted. "I got used to having your full attention in Vegas."

I smiled, squeezing his fingers. "I'm still here. I'm just... stretched thin right now between Vivian and work."

"And where do I fit in that equation?" His voice was gentle, not accusatory.

"You're always part of me," I said, resting my head against his shoulder. "But can you understand that I need this time to focus on Dreamland? It's important to me."

Ryan was quiet for a moment. “I want to support your dreams, Serena. I do. I just don’t want us to lose what we found in Vegas.”

“We won’t,” I promised, looking up at him. “But this is my chance to build something truly mine. Something that matters.”

He nodded slowly. “Just don’t forget that we matter too.”

“Never,” I whispered, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. “Just be patient with me. This intense phase won’t last forever.”

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Serena’s POV

The next morning, I impulsively decided to take Vivian shopping. We needed to get out of the house, just the two of us. Something about the mounting tension with Ryan made me crave this simple escape—just me and my daughter exploring the world without the weight of expectations or disappointments crushing us.

I was buckling her into her stroller outside Bloomingdale’s when I heard a familiar voice.

“Is that little Vivian Blackwood?” Cedric approached, smiling broadly. “She has your eyes.”

My heart did this weird little skip. I hadn’t prepared to run into anyone I knew, least of all him.

“Cedric,” I said, surprised. “What are you doing around here?”

“My hotel’s just down the block. I was about to grab coffee before some property viewings.” He knelt to Vivian’s level. “Hello there, beautiful.”

Vivian, normally shy with strangers, gave him a gummy smile and reached for his finger. The ease of their connection hit me right in the chest—a bittersweet what-if that I quickly shoved away.

“She likes you,” I observed, genuinely surprised. Vivian usually took forever to warm up to new people. Even some of Ryan’s business associates she’d seen multiple times still got her legendary death glare.

“I have that effect on the ladies,” he joked, standing. “Shopping day?”

I nodded. “She’s growing like a weed, needs a whole new wardrobe.”

“Mind if I tag along? I could use a break from real estate agents, and afterward, we could hash out some preliminary ideas for our collaboration over coffee.”

I hesitated for a split second. A voice in my head—sounding exactly like Ryan’s—warned me this wasn’t appropriate. It was just shopping and a work meeting, but something felt... complicated. Still, having another adult to talk to while navigating department store aisles sounded like heaven. And God knows I needed someone who understood my creative vision to bounce ideas off of.

“Sure, why not?” I finally said, telling that nagging voice to shut up.

Shopping with Cedric was surprisingly amazing. He had an eye for color and made Vivian giggle by trying on tiny hats alongside her. There was no awkwardness between us—just the comfortable rhythm of old friends who shared both history and passion for the same craft. The hours melted away, filled with laughter and easy conversation that made me realize how starved I’d been for this kind of intellectual connection.

Three hours later, loaded down with bags and with a very happy baby, we headed to a café near Central Park.

“So I’ve been thinking about your fine jewelry line,” Cedric began after we’d ordered. “What if we combined your signature settings with some of the sustainable sourcing methods I’ve developed in East Africa?”

I leaned forward, my creative brain instantly firing on all cylinders. The artistic part of me lit up like a Christmas tree, sketches and designs already forming in my mind. “That could work brilliantly with the direction I’m taking Dreamland. Tell me more about these sources—”

“Serena.”

The deep, ice-cold voice sliced through our conversation like a knife. My entire body tensed before I even fully registered who was speaking. I looked up to find Ryan looming beside our table, his eyes hard as granite as they moved between Cedric and me.

“Ryan,” I managed, suddenly feeling like I’d been caught cheating, though I knew I hadn’t. My face burned with guilt I had no reason to feel. “How did you even find us?”

Ryan didn’t acknowledge the introduction. His gaze fixed on Vivian, who was contentedly playing with a stuffed animal Cedric had bought her. The muscle in his jaw twitched—that familiar warning sign that he was barely keeping his temper in check.

“Get your things,” he said, his voice controlled but loaded with tension. “You and Vivian are coming with me.”

“Ryan, we’re in the middle of a meeting—” I started, embarrassment quickly morphing into fury. How dare he swoop in here like I was some runaway kid?

“Now, Serena.”

I swallowed hard, humiliation and anger colliding in my chest. Every eye in the café seemed to be on us. “I’m sorry, Cedric. Perhaps we can reschedule?”

Cedric stood politely. “Of course. Lovely meeting you, Mr. Blackwood.” He extended his hand, which Ryan completely ignored.

With my cheeks on fire, I gathered Vivian and our shopping bags. Ryan took the baby from me without a word and began walking toward the exit where his car waited at the curb. His back was ramrod straight, shoulders squared like he was heading into battle. I followed behind, a hurricane brewing inside me. Who the hell did he think he was? We’d come so far in Vegas—or so I thought—and now he was back to treating me like property.

Inside the car, the silence was thick enough to choke on. I was just working up the courage to explain the innocent nature of the meeting when Ryan spoke.

“We’re going to have another wedding.”

I blinked, sure I’d lost my mind. “What?”

Ryan turned to me, his expression unreadable. “I want to marry you again. Properly this time. I want everyone to know you’re Serena Blackwood.”

My jaw hit the floor, but no words came out. After our secret reconciliation in London, we’d quietly resumed our married life, except I’d kept my maiden name, staying Serena Quinn professionally.

Why was he bringing this up now?

I looked at Ryan like he’d just announced he was moving us to Mars. His face was dead serious, jaw set in that stubborn way I’d come to recognize as his “this is happening” expression.

“A wedding?” I finally managed. “You’re bringing this up now? After making a scene in front of my business associate?”

“It’s not about the damn wedding!” Ryan’s voice carried through the door, his footsteps heavy as he followed me. “It’s about us, Serena!”

I whirled around when he entered, my arms crossed defensively. “I’m buried under deadlines, Ryan. The Quinn-Dreamland merger needs my personal attention, the London boutique launch is in three weeks, and I’ve already missed too much time with Vivian.”

His jaw tightened, that muscle twitching the way it always did when he was trying not to explode. “And where exactly do I fit into your jam-packed schedule? Between conference calls and bedtime stories?”

“That’s not fair.” I ran my fingers through my hair, exhaling slowly. “You know how important this is to me. I finally have everything—my family, my identity, my work—”

“And your husband?” Ryan moved closer, his gray-blue eyes intense. “Where does he fall on that list?”

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Serena’s POV

The worst part was, I understood his frustration.

I’d thrown myself back into work with a vengeance. Most days I was up before dawn sketching designs, taking calls during lunch, and working late into the night after Vivian fell asleep.

“I’m trying to juggle everything,” I said, my voice softer. “But you’re asking me to plan another wedding when we’re already married.”

“I’m asking you to let me celebrate the fact that I got you back,” Ryan countered, stepping closer until I could feel the heat radiating off him. “That we found each other again. Is that so unreasonable?”

Before I could answer, my phone buzzed with an incoming call. The screen lit up with Cedric’s name, and Ryan’s expression went dark immediately.

“Perfect timing,” he muttered.

I silenced the call. “Ryan—”

“No, go for it. Answer it. Lancaster clearly has something earth-shattering to discuss at nine in the evening.”

I tossed my phone onto the bed, irritation flaring. “He’s in town for the International Design Summit. We’re both keynote speakers.”

“How convenient.” Ryan’s voice was thick with sarcasm. “Your former almost-fiancé just happens to be in New York the same week I’m trying to convince my wife to go public with our marriage.”

“Just a friend,” I corrected sharply. “And I’ve never hidden our relationship. I wear your ring, I live in your home—”

“Our home,” he interrupted.

“—our home,” I amended. “But most of New York still thinks I’m single or engaged to Cedric thanks to those damn tabloids.”

Ryan’s phone pinged, and he glanced at it briefly before tossing it aside with a groan. “Speaking of tabloids,” he said, turning his screen toward me.

My stomach plummeted at the headline: “DESIGN DARLINGS REUNITED? Quinn and Lancaster spotted at exclusive NYC restaurant.”

The photo showed Cedric and me leaving a business lunch earlier that day, his hand placed innocently on my back as we pushed through paparazzi. Nothing inappropriate, but certainly enough to set tongues wagging.

“It was a business lunch,” I said wearily. “With Maya and three other designers.”

“Who were conveniently cropped out of the shot.” Ryan’s voice was tight. “This is exactly why I want to set the record straight. Have an actual ceremony here. Show everyone that you’re my wife.”

“So this is about your ego? Your need to claim your territory?” The moment the words left my mouth, I regretted them.

Ryan’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Is that what you think this is? Some caveman display of ownership?” He laughed bitterly. “Christ, Serena. After everything we’ve been through, do you still not understand?”

He turned away, running a hand through his hair in frustration. The silence between us felt weighted with unspoken words and hurt feelings.

When he finally looked back at me, his expression had softened slightly. “I almost lost you. Multiple times. To bullets, to your past, to your anger—which I totally deserved, by the way.” He stepped closer, taking my hands in his. “All I want is to stand in front of everyone we know and promise to never let you go again. Is that really so terrible?”

My anger melted away, replaced by a complicated mix of emotions. “No, it’s not terrible,” I admitted quietly. “It’s actually... pretty sweet.”

“Sweet?” He arched an eyebrow, clearly hoping for a better adjective.

A reluctant smile tugged at my lips. “Romantic?”

“Getting better.” His hands slid to my waist, pulling me closer.

“But Ryan,” I said, placing my palms against his chest, “I have the London opening, then Fashion Week, then—”

“Then Christmas, then New Year’s, then Valentine’s,” he finished. “There’s always going to be something, Serena. That’s life.”

Vivian’s sudden cry through the baby monitor interrupted us. I stepped back, already moving toward the door.

“I’ll get her,” Ryan said, his hand on my arm stopping me. “You chill out. Think about what I said.”

As he left to check on our daughter, I sank onto the edge of the bed, picking up my phone. Three missed calls from Cedric, two from Maya, and a text from my brother Ethan asking about tomorrow’s investor meeting.

Everyone wanted a piece of me—my time, my attention, my creativity. And now Ryan wanted a wedding, a public declaration that would steal focus from everything I’d built professionally.

But as I heard his deep voice through the monitor, softly soothing Vivian back to sleep, my resistance began to crumble. He was right—there would always be another deadline, another project, another reason to put it off.

By the time Ryan returned, I’d changed into my nightgown and was sitting cross-legged on the bed with my sketchbook, but not working—just thinking.

“She just needed her pacifier,” he said, climbing onto the bed beside me. “And maybe a little reassurance that her parents weren’t about to murder each other.”

I winced. “Were we that loud?”

“Probably not,” he admitted, “but I still felt guilty.”

We sat in silence for a moment before I finally spoke. “I don’t want some big circus. Nothing like Sophie would have wanted.”

Ryan stiffened beside me. “This has nothing to do with Sophie.”

“I know that,” I said quickly, reaching for his hand. “I just meant… if we do this—and I’m not saying yes yet—it would need to be something that feels like us. Not some high-society dog and pony show.”

Something shifted in his expression—a softening around his eyes, a hint of hope. “Does that mean you’re considering it?”

I hesitated, then nodded slowly. “I’ll think about it. But I need you to understand that my work isn’t just something I can drop whenever—”

He silenced me with a kiss, his hands cradling my face with surprising gentleness. “I would never ask you to be less than who you are,” he murmured against my lips.

I melted into him despite my best intentions, my sketchbook sliding forgotten to the floor. “And I need you to understand that Cedric is just a colleague now,” I said when we broke apart. “There’s nothing—”

“I know,” he interrupted, pressing his forehead to mine. “I trust you. It’s him I don’t trust.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Well, then it’s a good thing I’m not married to him, isn’t it?”

Ryan’s answering smile was wolfish as he guided me back against the pillows. “Exactly my point, Mrs. Blackwood. And soon, everyone else will know it too.”

As his lips found mine again, more insistent this time, I decided the wedding discussion could wait until morning. Or maybe the afternoon. Some battles weren’t worth fighting, especially when surrender felt this good.

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Serena’s POV

Life had been floating along beautifully. Ryan was neck-deep in wedding preparations, handling most details while I focused on my Dreamland Studio ventures with Maya. All I had to do was make occasional decisions when the wedding planner called, then return to my blissful bubble with Vivian.

It was just another ordinary morning. I’d finished breakfast and was getting Vivian ready for our daily walk in Central Park when my phone started vibrating against the marble counter.

“Maya,” I answered, cradling the phone between my ear and shoulder while buckling Vivian into her stroller. “What’s up?”

The silence on the other end lasted a second too long. “Serena, we have a situation.”

My hand froze on the buckle. Maya didn’t do drama or panic – her voice carrying that edge meant real trouble.

“Someone’s accusing you of plagiarism online. It’s spreading fast.”

The words hit me like ice water. “Plagiarism? Who’s making these claims?”

“Some European designer I’ve never heard of. They’ve posted comparison photos showing designs nearly identical to your spring collection. The problem is—” Maya hesitated, “—their publication dates are slightly earlier than ours.”

My stomach dropped. “That’s impossible. Those designs came directly from my sketchbook.”

“I know that. I’ve already called the crisis management team. They’re monitoring the situation, but it’s gaining traction quickly.”

I abandoned the stroller and paced across my kitchen, mind racing. “Let me contact this designer myself. There must be some misunderstanding.”

“Already tried,” Maya sighed heavily. “Their team is refusing direct communication. This feels calculated, Serena. Like they were waiting for the perfect moment to strike.”

Maya’s typing echoed through the phone. “Look, I’ve got the PR team working overtime, but you should see what’s happening online. It’s getting ugly.”

After hanging up, I kissed Vivian’s forehead and asked the nanny to take over our park plans. Then I locked myself in Ryan’s home office, hands trembling slightly as I opened his laptop.

My name was everywhere, paired with that toxic word: PLAGIARISM.

“This is ridiculous,” I whispered, clicking through the accusations.

The designer—someone named Lance Draven—had created side-by-side comparisons highlighting similarities between our collections. I had to admit, seeing them together was jarring. The color schemes, certain structural elements, even some of the embellishment patterns showed undeniable parallels.

But I knew with absolute certainty I’d never seen his work before creating mine.

The timestamp on his posts predated my collection reveal by three days. Three. Fucking. Days.

I dove deeper into his profile, examining his previous work. There were definite stylistic similarities to my aesthetic, but his execution lacked the technical refinement I’d spent years perfecting. He wasn’t well-known, but his social media following wasn’t tiny either.

The perfect profile for a sympathy-grabbing David versus Goliath narrative.

His post dripped with calculated victimhood: “Famous designer Lazuli plagiarized my work, transforming it into Dreamland Studio’s ‘original’ collection while I remain the voiceless victim of corporate theft.”

The comments section was a cesspool:

“Unknown designers create masterpieces that get ignored until some celebrity steals them for profit. DISGUSTING.”

“Do famous designers think they can get away with anything? Stand your ground, Lance!”

“Serena’s success was always suspicious. Sleeping your way to the top and stealing designs—classic.”

“Lazuli’s work is overrated anyway. Now we know why.”

I slammed the laptop shut, my chest tight with anger. “Fucking vultures,” I hissed, reopening it to send him a direct message.

[Hello Lance, this is Serena. There’s clearly a misunderstanding regarding plagiarism accusations. I’d appreciate discussing this privately to resolve the issue.]

[I categorically deny copying your work. I’m open to any legitimate verification process to prove this.]

I hit send, my message radiating the confidence of someone with nothing to hide. Because I didn’t. Every curve, every stitch, every embellishment in that collection came from my own creative process.

The message showed as “read” almost immediately, but no response followed.

“Seriously?” I muttered, sending another message:

[Since you’ve read my message, let’s talk directly. Your current approach is damaging my professional reputation without justification.]

Again, “read” but no reply.

I called Maya back. “He’s ignoring my messages but reading them instantly.”

“Not surprised,” she replied, her voice tight. “Our legal team is preparing a cease and desist, but honestly, that might just pour gasoline on this fire.”

While we strategized, my phone kept buzzing with notifications. The hashtag #SerenaStoleDesigns was trending, with comparison images spreading across every platform. Fashion bloggers, industry insiders, and keyboard warriors were all weighing in—mostly against me.

By afternoon, I’d developed a pounding headache. The walls felt like they were closing in as I scrolled through endless accusations. Even worse were the personal attacks—speculation about my relationship with Ryan, questioning my entire career, dragging up my past.

When Ryan came home and found me still in his office, surrounded by empty coffee cups and legal documents, his expression darkened dangerously.

“What’s going on?” he asked, loosening his tie.

I didn’t even look up. “Someone’s accusing me of plagiarism. It’s everywhere.”

He was silent for a moment, then I heard him set his briefcase down with deliberate control.

“Name,” he said quietly.

I finally glanced up. The cold calculation in his eyes made me shiver. “Ryan, don’t—”

“Give me the name, Serena.”

“Lance Draven. But please, let me handle this my way. The last thing I need is for people to think I’m hiding behind you.”

Ryan was already on his phone, typing rapidly. “No one attacks my wife’s reputation and gets away with it.”

“That’s exactly the problem!” I stood up abruptly. “I’m not just your wife! I’m a designer who built her career before I even met you. If you swoop in with the Blackwood legal army, everyone will say exactly what they’re already saying—that I’m using you to bully critics.”

He paused, studying my face. “So what’s your plan?”

I sank back into the chair. “I don’t know yet. But I need to fight this on my own terms.”

Ryan looked like he wanted to argue but instead came around the desk and massaged my shoulders. “This is suspicious timing with the wedding announcement.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I murmured, leaning into his touch.

“Have you looked at the design timestamps in your digital files? The metadata should prove when you created them.”

I straightened, turning to face him. “That’s... actually brilliant.”

A small, dangerous smile curved his lips. “I occasionally have good ideas.”

I quickly opened my design software, pulling up the original files. “The creation dates are all there in the metadata. Weeks before his supposed originals.”

“So he manipulated his timestamps,” Ryan concluded. “Amateur move.”

“But proving that will be tricky,” I frowned, checking the time. “I need to talk to Maya again. And probably Ethan too—LUXE should be prepared if this blows back on them.”

Ryan nodded, stepping back. “Do what you need to do. Just remember—” his eyes locked with mine, “—you don’t have to fight alone.”

As he left, my phone pinged with a notification. Lance Draven had finally responded to my message:

[Sorry, I don’t negotiate with thieves. See you in the court of public opinion, Mrs. Lazuli.]

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Maya’s POV

The London headquarters of LUXE Jewelry Company was in absolute chaos. I’d just hung up with Serena after our emergency call about that Lance Draven asshole, and I was already exhausted. Rain pelted against the floor-to-ceiling windows of the conference room, matching my stormy mood perfectly.

“No, that statement is completely unacceptable!” I snapped, shoving the tablet back across the polished table. The PR team flinched collectively. “We’re not ’looking into these concerning allegations.’ That phrasing makes it sound like there might be truth to them!”

The PR director, a usually composed woman named Charlotte, cleared her throat. “Mrs. Quinn, with respect, we need to acknowledge—”

“What we need,” I cut in, “is language that defends Serena without sounding defensive. Something like ’Dreamland Studio categorically rejects these false claims and is preparing evidence that will conclusively disprove all allegations.’”

My phone buzzed again—another Google alert for Serena’s name. The trending hashtags were multiplying by the minute. I scrolled through Twitter with growing horror.

“Jesus, they’re crucifying her,” I muttered, rubbing my temples. “Someone’s clearly orchestrating this. The timing’s too perfect with the Quinn-Blackwood wedding announcement and our merger plans.”

Charlotte exchanged nervous glances with her team. “Do you have any evidence of that?”

“Not yet.” I admitted, standing to pace the room.

The conference room door opened, and Ethan strode in. Even in crisis mode, I couldn't help noticing how commanding he looked in his tailored navy suit.

"Update?" he asked simply, loosening his tie.

I gestured toward the screens lining the wall, each displaying different social media platforms where the scandal was unfolding. "It's spreading like wildfire. That nobody Lance Draven is getting exactly what he wanted—attention and victim status."

Ethan studied the screens, his expression unreadable. "Have we confirmed when Serena actually created those designs?"

"Her files have earlier metadata timestamps," I replied, "but proving his are fraudulent will be tricky without court-ordered access to his original files."

The PR team continued typing furiously, monitoring every mention and planning counter-strategies. I'd been at this for six straight hours, and the stress was making me nauseous.

"Everyone out," Ethan suddenly ordered, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Take fifteen minutes."

The team scattered instantly, leaving us alone in the sleek conference room. As soon as the door closed, Ethan came behind me, hands gently massaging my shoulders.

"You need to calm down," he murmured against my ear. "This level of stress isn't good for you."

I shrugged away from his touch. "How can you be so fucking calm? This is your sister we're talking about! Her entire reputation—everything she's built—is under attack!"

"And yelling at the PR team will solve that how exactly?" Ethan's voice remained infuriatingly measured.

"At least I'm showing some emotion!" I spun to face him. "You're acting like this is just another quarterly report that needs adjusting. This is Serena! Your sister who's been through hell already!"

Something flashed in his eyes. "You think I don't care? I've already got three separate teams investigating Lance Draven's background. I've called in favors from industry contacts across Europe. I've spoken with Ryan twice this morning to coordinate our response."

I deflated slightly, crossing my arms. "Then why do you look so... unaffected?"

"Because one of us needs to keep a clear head," he said, softer now. "And clearly it's not going to be you today."

"That's not fair," I whispered, fighting back unexpected tears.

Ethan sighed, pulling me against his chest despite my resistance. “Maya, listen to me. Serena is stronger than you think. This won’t break her.”

I relaxed into his embrace, finally letting the exhaustion show. “I just hate seeing her attacked like this. After everything...”

“I know.” He kissed the top of my head. “But working yourself into collapse won’t help her. When’s the last time you ate?”

I honestly couldn’t remember. “Breakfast... maybe?”

“It’s nearly 5 PM,” he chided. “We’re going home for dinner. The PR team can handle things for a few hours.”

“But—”

“No buts. We’ll regroup tomorrow with fresh perspectives.”

As we gathered our things to leave, my phone pinged with a message from our social media manager: “Urgent—new developments. Check your email immediately.”

I quickly opened the attachment and felt my stomach drop. “Oh god, Ethan. Look at this.”

The screenshot showed what appeared to be private messages between Serena and Lance Draven—but they were nothing like the polite, professional messages she’d told me she’d sent. These were aggressive, threatening:

[Back off now or you’ll regret ever crossing paths with the Blackwood family. We can destroy your career with one phone call.]

Attached was another screenshot of Lance’s reply:

[Is this how you handle being caught? With threats? The world deserves to know who you really are, Serena.]

“This is fabricated,” I said immediately. “Serena would never write this.”

Ethan’s expression darkened as he studied the images. “Doesn’t matter if it’s real. It’s out there now.”

“We need to call her right away—”

“Not yet,” Ethan interrupted, already typing on his phone. “I’m contacting our digital forensics team first. We need to prove these are fake before she even responds.”

“The damage is already spreading,” I argued, watching new notifications flood in. “We can’t wait!”

“Maya,” Ethan’s voice was firm as he took my phone from my hands. “Trust me on this. Strategic silence for twelve hours won’t kill her reputation, but a hasty, emotional response might.”

I wanted to argue more but knew he was right. This had moved beyond a simple PR crisis—someone was actively trying to destroy Serena.

“Fine,” I conceded. “But I want our security team on high alert. If someone’s going this far to discredit her publicly, who knows what else they might try.”

“Already done,” Ethan replied, guiding me toward the elevator. “And I’ve got people digging deeper into Lance Draven. Something’s off about his sudden appearance.”

In the car ride home, I scrolled through the avalanche of new comments condemning Serena. People who’d never met her were calling her a bully, a fraud, a typical entitled rich woman. The narrative was spinning completely out of control.

“I think we need to consider bringing in WhisperStream,” I said quietly.

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “James? Are you sure that’s wise?”

“He understands social media dynamics better than our entire PR department combined. And he owes me a favor.”

“He’s unpredictable,” Ethan warned.

“So is this situation,” I countered. “We need someone who can fight fire with fire.”