

CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 316

Serena's POV

I felt like I was drowning in quicksand – the harder I struggled, the deeper I sank. It had been less than twenty-four hours since the plagiarism accusations first appeared, and now the situation had gone completely off the rails.

Lying in bed, I stared at my phone in disbelief. This Lance person had actually cooked up fake messages from me, complete with threats and intimidation, then posted them for the world to see. The manufactured conversation showed “me” warning him to delete his posts “or you’ll regret it.”

“This is absolutely insane,” I muttered, scrolling through the comments. People were going nuts over this, practically forming a digital lynch mob.

My phone rang – Maya again. We’d been glued to our phones since yesterday.

“Did you catch the latest?” I asked immediately.

“Yeah. We’re dealing with a complete nutjob,” Maya sounded exhausted. I could picture her pacing around Quinn headquarters in London, probably having pulled an all-nighter. “The PR team is hitting brick walls. Every time we get something taken down, it’s back up within an hour.”

“He faked messages from me, Maya. Using my actual profile picture.” My voice cracked slightly. “How is that not illegal?”

“It’s not. Our legal team is putting together a case now.” She paused. “Ethan’s helping too. He thinks we should ride out the initial shitstorm before making any major moves.”

I shot upright, suddenly furious. “Ride it out?”

“I know, I know. I nearly tore his head off for suggesting it too.” I could hear the slight smile in her voice. “But he might have a point about timing. Right now, people are too worked up to listen to reason.”

I massaged my temples, feeling a killer headache coming on. “My metadata evidence isn’t doing jack shit. People just assume I doctored the dates.”

Ryan appeared in the doorway, coffee mug in hand, immediately sensing my distress from my body language.

“I need to talk to Ethan directly,” I told Maya. “Can you patch him through?”

There was some shuffling, then my brother's voice came through. "Serena, how are you hanging in there?"

"How do you think?" I snapped, then immediately felt guilty. "Sorry. I'm just... this is a complete nightmare."

"I know. We're pulling out all the stops from this end," Ethan assured me. "I've got people digging into this Lance Draven character. Something smells fishy about his background."

"He's straight-up making up messages now, Ethan. Making me look like I'm some kind of thug."

"I saw. Don't take the bait – that's exactly what he wants."

Ryan moved closer, reading the tension in my shoulders. He sat on the edge of the bed, his presence immediately grounding me.

After hanging up, I tossed my phone aside and buried my face in my hands. "This is a total disaster."

Ryan's arm wrapped around my shoulders, his steady strength calming my frayed nerves. "Let me help you."

"How?" I looked up at him. "Your involvement will just make everyone say I'm hiding behind my powerful husband."

"Not if we play this smart." His jaw was set in that determined way I'd come to recognize, his protective instincts kicking into high gear. "Blackwood Industries has one of the best digital forensics teams in the country."

"Digital forensics?"

"Yes. They can analyze those fake messages, trace IP addresses, maybe even nail this bastard for tampering." He took my hand, his determination evident in his grip. "We do this quietly, behind the scenes. No public statement from me, no obvious Blackwood muscle."

I hesitated, then nodded slowly. "Okay. But I need to be in the loop on every step."

"Absolutely." He squeezed my hand, his authority and confidence reassuring. "Get dressed. We're going to war."

Two hours later, I sat in a sleek conference room at Blackwood headquarters, surrounded by Ryan's tech security team. They'd been briefed on the situation and were already tearing apart Lance Draven's digital footprint.

"Mrs. Blackwood," a woman with sharp eyes and a no-nonsense haircut addressed me, "I'm Vanessa, head of digital security. We've been dissecting the supposed messages you sent."

She pulled up some technical-looking data on the screen. “These are definitely bogus. The metadata shows inconsistencies that wouldn’t be present in genuine messages.”

“Can we prove that publicly?” I leaned forward, hope flickering in my chest.

“Absolutely. But there’s something else that’ll blow your mind.” She clicked to another screen. “We’ve been tracking the digital breadcrumbs associated with Lance Draven’s accounts. There’s something weird about the pattern.”

Ryan frowned, his business instincts on high alert. “What do you mean?”

“His social media presence only went live three months ago. Before that, the account existed but was basically dead. And here’s where it gets interesting – the geographical data shows the account was being used primarily from London until recently, when it suddenly switched to New York.”

“Someone passed off the account?” I asked, confused.

“Possibly. Or they’re using some serious tech magic to mask their location.” Vanessa tapped a few keys. “But what’s clear is that this isn’t some random nobody who happened to create similar work. This is a targeted hit job.”

Ryan’s phone buzzed. He glanced at it, then looked at me with intense focus. “Simon just sent me something that’s going to piss you off.”

He pulled up an email on the conference room screen. It contained a series of photos – Lance Draven at various industry events over the past few months. What hit me immediately was how he always seemed to be lurking in the shadows, watching, observing.

And in one photo, he was chatting with someone I recognized instantly.

“Are you kidding me…” I moved closer to the screen, my blood turning to ice.

“Ivy Hart,” Ryan confirmed grimly, his anger beginning to simmer. “Sophie’s sister.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered, the pieces suddenly slamming together.

Vanessa looked between us. “You know this woman?”

“Oh, we have history,” I said, my shock morphing into ice-cold determination. “And this just became personal as hell.”

Ryan’s expression had shifted into something absolutely lethal. “Keep digging,” he instructed the team, his commanding presence making everyone snap to attention. “I want everything you can find on both of these people.”

As we left the conference room, Ryan pulled me into an empty office, his protective instincts in overdrive. “This changes everything.”

“It explains the whole damn thing,” I said, pacing the room like I was ready to explode. “Ivy has always had it out for me. She’s a designer too, but she’s never gotten the recognition she thinks she deserves.”

“And she’s tight with Sophie,” Ryan added, his jaw clenched with barely contained fury. “This isn’t just about your designs. This is about screwing both of us over.”

I stopped pacing and looked at him, my resolve hardening. “I’m going to London. I’m handling this face-to-face.”

My phone pinged with a notification. Another post from Lance Draven:

[Received more threats from Serena’s legal team. They’re trying to silence the truth. Stay tuned for the FULL expose of how Dreamland Studio built its empire on stolen designs and intimidation.]

My hands clenched into fists, ready for battle.

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Author’s POV

Ryan’s investigation had finally hit pay dirt. The digital forensics team had traced Lance Draven’s connection to a company called ARt Design—a flashy new design firm making serious moves in Canada.

What they discovered about the plagiarism accusation was both simpler and more complex than anyone had anticipated. At its core, it had started as a coincidence. Both Lance Draven and Serena had drawn inspiration from the same viral internet image—standard practice in the design world. Lance had indeed published his initial design slightly earlier than Serena.

But the design Lance was now using to accuse Serena wasn’t his original work. It had been significantly modified after Serena published her creation—tweaked to more closely mirror her work, not the other way around.

This was the smoking gun they’d been desperately searching for.

After Serena touched down in London, she was greeted with this breakthrough news. She and Maya immediately called an emergency war council. Not only did they have Ryan’s rock-solid

evidence, but assistance from WhisperStream had blown the case wide open, allowing them to see the full scope of the deception.

“This completely destroys their narrative,” Maya said, her voice tight with controlled anger as she shared her findings with Serena. “He’s orchestrated this entire character assassination.”

Serena’s eyes blazed with fierce determination. “Send me everything you’ve found.”

Within the hour, she had published a devastating analysis online. The post included three images side by side: Lance’s original design, Serena’s creation, and Lance’s suspiciously modified “original” that he was now claiming Serena had copied. She included a meticulous, professional breakdown pointing out how Lance’s revised design incorporated elements that had appeared in her work first.

Lance Draven hadn’t been plagiarized—he was the one pulling a fast one, modifying his work to frame her after seeing her successful design.

“This isn’t about creative similarity,” she wrote in her final paragraph. “This is a calculated attack on my reputation and the integrity of Dreamland Studio.”

The response was explosive. Design enthusiasts began comparing the three versions themselves, and many quickly reached the same conclusion. Some of Serena’s ride-or-die followers brought up her extensive portfolio, pointing out her consistent excellence and innovative approach—qualities Lance’s work had never demonstrated.

“Check out her entire body of work,” one commenter wrote. “Lazuli has a signature style that’s been evolving for years. Lance’s work before this ‘controversy’ looks like amateur hour compared to what he’s claiming is his original design.”

Watching the tide begin to turn, Serena felt the knot in her chest loosen slightly. Evidence mattered. Truth mattered. People were starting to see through the deception.

“It’s working,” Maya told Serena, scrolling through the responses. “The narrative is shifting.”

At ARt Design’s headquarters, Lance Draven stared at his computer screen in full-blown panic mode. Serena’s counterattack was gaining traction, and he had jack shit for a legitimate response to her evidence. Everything she’d said was accurate.

He hastily arranged a meeting with his superior, the woman who had orchestrated the entire scheme: Sophie Hart.

When confronted with the problem, Sophie merely offered a cold smile. “Why are you freaking out? Your initial design was genuine, wasn’t it? And your revised version still predates hers.”

Lance hesitated, then understanding dawned. “Miss Hart, are you suggesting—”

“ARt Design will issue an official stamp of approval,” Sophie interrupted smoothly. “We’ll verify that your revised design was completed before Serena published hers. The documentation will go live this afternoon.”

“You don’t need to respond to her accusations directly. Just keep playing the victim card. Let our paperwork do the talking.”

After Lance left her office, Sophie arranged for the company to prepare the fabricated documentation. Within hours, ARt Design had publicly certified that Lance’s revised design had been completed weeks before Serena’s publication date—a complete lie, but one backed by what appeared to be a legit company.

The certification hit the internet like a nuclear bomb.

“Where’s your defense now, thief?” one comment read.

“I knew I was right to boycott LUXE! They’ve been ripping off real artists this whole time!” declared another.

“Busted red-handed and still lying through her teeth. Pathetic.”

The controversy had exploded into a full-scale war that the Design Association announced a formal investigation. Meanwhile, Dreamland Studio’s stock took a nosedive despite Maya’s around-the-clock damage control.

Behind the scenes, Ryan was like a man possessed, directing his team to investigate ARt Design itself, hell-bent on exposing the whole conspiracy. But corporate investigations took time they didn’t have.

The situation went from bad to worse when protesters appeared outside the Quinn family headquarters. Security removed them from the premises, but they simply set up shop across the street, livestreaming their accusations and drawing even more vultures.

It was in this complete chaos that Cedric Lancaster arrived at Serena’s office.

“Serena,” he said gently, finding her staring blankly at her computer screen like she was in a trance.

She managed a weak smile. “You’re here.”

“I dealt with those troublemakers outside,” he said, crossing the room to stand beside her desk. “They’ve moved on, at least for now.”

Serena sighed deeply. She'd been contemplating temporarily cutting ties with the Quinn family to minimize the damage to their reputation.

"Have they made any headway on proving the plagiarism claims false?" Cedric asked, his concern evident. "This whole thing screams setup."

"Of course it's a setup," Serena replied, frustration edging her voice. "But without concrete evidence to blow holes in their falsified documents, we're stuck."

She rubbed her temples. "ARt Design is clearly targeting me to grease the wheels for their entry into the domestic market. They want to kneecap the Quinn brand."

Cedric looked at her pale face, the dark circles under her eyes. "Don't run yourself into the ground. Your health comes first."

"I'm fine," Serena insisted, though she clearly wasn't.

"Why don't you let me take you home?" he suggested. "Ethan can hold down the fort. You need rest."

After a moment's hesitation, she nodded. "Maybe you're right. I'm not doing any good sitting here watching this train wreck unfold. The shareholders are already breathing down my neck for answers I don't have."

"Let's go," Cedric said, offering his hand. "There might still be paparazzi lurking outside. I'll make sure you get home safely."

Serena stood, and suddenly the world tilted sideways. Her vision darkened at the edges, and before she could steady herself, everything went black.

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Cedric's POV

I caught her before she hit the ground, calling her name with increasing urgency as panic surged through my veins. When she didn't respond, I lifted her into my arms and rushed her to the nearest hospital, her slight form feeling so fragile against my chest.

The sterile hospital corridor seemed endless as I paced anxiously, waiting for news. Every minute felt like an eternity. When the doctor finally emerged from Serena's room, I hurried forward, my heart in my throat.

"Is she alright? What happened?" I demanded, unable to mask the concern in my voice.

“The patient is stable,” the doctor assured me with practiced calmness. “This appears to be a case of acute stress combined with her pregnancy. The first trimester can be particularly challenging, and with her current stress levels, this collapse isn’t surprising.”

He adjusted his glasses and continued, “You need to ensure she gets proper rest and avoids stressful situations. Her condition is delicate right now.”

I froze, my mind struggling to process what I’d just heard. “Did you say... pregnancy?”

“Yes,” the doctor confirmed, checking his chart with clinical detachment. “She’s approximately six weeks along. Are you the father? She’ll need to stay for observation for at least a day or two.”

As the doctor walked away, I turned toward Serena’s room, a complex mixture of emotions churning inside me. The pregnancy changed everything. For Serena, for Ryan Blackwood, and possibly... for me. I couldn’t help the small flicker of hope that sparked in my chest, even as I tried to suppress it.

My gaze lingered on her sleeping form through the doorway, her face peaceful in contrast to the turmoil in my mind. She looked beautiful even now, vulnerable in sleep in a way she never allowed herself to be when awake.

Soon enough, Serena stirred, her eyes blinking open as she stared at the white ceiling with confusion clouding her features.

“What happened to me?” she asked softly, disoriented.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, the words “you’re pregnant” hovering on the tip of my tongue. Something held me back—perhaps selfishness, perhaps concern for her fragile state. Instead, I said, “How are you feeling? You should rest.”

I moved closer to her bedside. “The doctor says you need to stay for observation for a couple of days.”

Serena’s brow furrowed, her expression instantly troubled. “At a time like this? How can I possibly stay in the hospital?”

“Serena,” she pressed, her eyes searching mine, “what’s really wrong with me? You can tell me. I’m prepared for it.”

I forced a smile that didn’t reach my eyes. “Just severe stress. You pushed yourself too hard.”

“Please listen to the doctor,” I continued, gently adjusting her blanket. “Rest properly. Here, at least, no one will disturb you.”

She sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. “I’ll call Ethan and let him know I’m staying here tonight.”

I nodded and handed her the phone, watching as she crafted a careful excuse to her brother without mentioning the hospital. She asked him to keep an eye on the company and decided to temporarily hold off on addressing the plagiarism accusations.

Ethan agreed to everything, telling his sister to rest well before ending the call.

I went to buy some fruit for her, hoping the small gesture might lift her spirits. When I returned, I heard Serena’s voice from the hallway. She was on the phone with Ryan.

“Ryan, I’m fine, don’t worry about me,” she was saying, her voice taking on a warmth I’d never heard directed at me.

“Things aren’t as bad here as you imagine. The Quinn family is helping.”

“ARt might be a new design company, but we don’t know their background. Approaching them directly might play into their hands, making the situation even worse.”

I couldn’t hear Ryan’s response, but whatever he said made her smile—a radiant, genuine smile that pierced my heart like a blade. When she hung up, she finally noticed me standing in the doorway.

“Cedric, I’m fine. You don’t need to stay,” she said, surprise evident in her voice when she saw the fruit I’d brought.

I sat down beside her bed, trying to keep my expression neutral. “Serena, you shouldn’t worry about anything for the next couple of days. It’s better for your recovery.”

She nodded. “I know my own body.”

“Thank you, Cedric,” she added after a pause, “for bringing me to the hospital so quickly.”

Her formal tone of gratitude stung more than it should have. After all these years, after everything, I was still just an acquaintance to her. The realization twisted in my chest.

“Serena,” I began, unable to contain myself any longer, “you must know how I feel about you.”

I leaned forward, my voice dropping. “We’ve known each other for so many years. When you disappeared, I never stopped looking for you. I just never imagined that when I found you, you would be married with a child.”

Her expression froze, clearly taken aback by my sudden confession. “Cedric, you—”

“I’ve loved you since we met,” I continued, the words spilling out after years of restraint. “I’ve been by your side all this time. Does our history really mean nothing compared to the three years you’ve known Ryan?”

My emotions got the better of me. I reached for her hand, gripping it tightly, feeling the sting of tears threatening to form. All the years of waiting, hoping, watching from the sidelines—it all came rushing to the surface.

Serena took a deep breath and pulled her hand away from mine with unmistakable finality. Her expression hardened.

“I’m sorry, Cedric, but I don’t have feelings for you,” she said, her voice clear and firm.

“I have a family now. You should understand that Ryan is the only one in my heart.”

Her rejection was swift and absolute—exactly as I had imagined it would be in my darkest thoughts. Yet despite having prepared for this moment countless times in my mind, the reality was still unbearable.

“Why?” The single word escaped my lips before I could stop it.

Serena pressed her lips together, sympathy flickering briefly across her face. I didn’t want her pity. I wanted her love.

“Cedric, liking someone doesn’t need a reason, and not liking someone doesn’t need one either,” she said gently. “Instead of asking why, perhaps you should let go of this obsession.”

“Maybe the person you love is the Serena from before, not who I am now.”

I laughed bitterly. “What’s the difference?”

I couldn’t stop myself from adding, “Ryan hurt you before. Why did you choose to forgive him?”

The question burned inside me. How could she forgive him when his love for her couldn’t possibly match a fraction of mine?

Serena shook her head firmly. “Cedric, stop deluding yourself. There can never be anything between us.”

Her next words were a dismissal: “Thank you for the fruit. You should go now.”

I felt my face freeze, my rejected hand hanging awkwardly between us. One final, desperate question escaped me.

“Serena, did your heart ever flutter for me? Even once?”

Her sigh was answer enough, but she spoke anyway: “No. Not once.”

The truth hit me like a physical blow. Despite all my hopes and dreams, despite years of devotion, I’d never moved her heart even slightly.

After all this time, I had my answer. I would never have what I wanted most.

I stood slowly, dignity the only thing I had left. I couldn’t even pretend to be just her friend anymore—not after this.

After a moment of painful silence, I finally turned and walked away, feeling the weight of finality in every step.

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Ryan’s POV

I stare at my phone wallpaper—a family photo of Serena, Vivian, and me.

“Mr. Blackwood, it’s time to board,” Simon informs me.

I nod briefly, pocketing my phone and rising from the VIP lounge. My team has already made contact with ARt company—this trip to Canada should be quick and dirty.

After landing, I’m met by a group of men in suits at the airport exit.

“Mr. Blackwood, we’ve been sent by Mr. Anderson to escort you. Your hotel accommodations are prepared.”

I scan them with arctic coldness. David Anderson—ARt’s CEO and my scheduled meeting—couldn’t even be bothered to show his face personally. Typical power play from someone who doesn’t understand who they’re dealing with.

“That won’t be necessary,” I reply flatly.

Simon steps forward, smoothly intercepting Anderson’s lackeys. “Mr. Blackwood requires rest. You can see yourselves out. As for the meeting, it will happen when Mr. Blackwood is ready.”

Without another word, I stride to the waiting car Simon arranged. If Anderson thinks he can flex on me with these amateur-hour tactics, he’s sorely mistaken.

“Have our people continue monitoring David Anderson’s movements,” I instruct Simon once we’re settled in the hotel suite. “I assume Chairman Anderson has gotten wind of my arrival?”

“Yes, sir. Would you like to meet with him this afternoon?”

I consider this for a moment. “Not yet. Let him see how his incompetent son treats potential business partners. The impact might be more devastating that way.”

I didn’t come to Canada to babysit someone’s spoiled heir. That’s daddy’s job.

Author’s POV

Just as David Anderson was smugly plotting his next move against Ryan, his father Mr. Anderson stormed into ARt Design Company like a man on a mission.

David looked up and immediately felt his blood run cold.

Mr. Anderson was never one for small talk, but his face looked like a thundercloud—clearly he was here to raise hell.

“Dad, you’re here,” David said weakly.

Mr. Anderson shot his assistant a look, and the guy practically sprinted out of the room, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

“Dad, you could’ve just called if you needed something. Why make the trip yourself?”

Mr. Anderson stared at his son’s fake innocent act and let out a disgusted snort.

“You know damn well what you did.”

“ARt is way out of its league messing with the Blackwoods.”

David’s face went white as a sheet—he hadn’t expected word to travel this fast to his father.

That tone of voice was all too familiar. He was about to get his ass handed to him.

Had he really screwed up this badly?

“Dad, let me explain—Ryan came here about the LUXE situation, and I was just trying to squeeze out some extra leverage for ARt.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?!”

Mr. Anderson’s sharp rebuke made David flinch like he’d been slapped.

“You want more leverage, so you resort to these sleazy tactics? You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

David looked genuinely confused.

Ryan was the one who needed something from them—why should they kiss his ass?

But seeing his father's murderous expression, he didn't dare ask questions.

"Dad, I was wrong."

"If you know you screwed up, then fix it. Go to his hotel yourself and invite Ryan to dinner. Show some goddamn respect."

David's face twisted with reluctance.

"Dad, me going personally seems a bit... excessive."

Mr. Anderson glared daggers at him. "Still running your mouth? Fine, don't go. I'll hand this whole thing over to Dino."

Dino was his younger brother, and David sure as hell wasn't about to hand over any opportunities on a silver platter.

"Dad, don't be pissed—I'll have someone reach out to Ryan right now. I'll make sure we meet today."

"I'll handle the partnership negotiations properly. Ryan won't find anything to complain about."

Mr. Anderson finally looked satisfied. "You better not screw this up again."

With that, Mr. Anderson walked out, leaving David alone in his office.

David watched his father leave. Despite his resentment, David followed his father's orders to the letter.

Ryan's POV

My phone buzzes with an incoming call—David Anderson himself.

"I have prior commitments this evening," I reply to his dinner invitation, dismissing him like an afterthought.

His voice tightens with barely concealed frustration. "Mr. Blackwood, you've come all this way to Canada—a welcome dinner is the least we can do. If tonight doesn't work, perhaps I could swing by your hotel this afternoon?"

I let the silence stretch just long enough to make him sweat. "Two o'clock, then."

I don't ask if the time works for him. I don't need to. The power dynamic has already flipped exactly as I intended.

After ending the call, I walk to the window, gazing out at the Canadian skyline. Somewhere in this city, Sophie is likely plotting her next move. The thought of her trying to destroy Serena's reputation ignites ice-cold fury in my chest. I've been too lenient in the past, allowed too much sentiment to cloud my judgment.

Not this time.

My phone rings again—Serena. Her name on my screen instantly shifts something fundamental in me, softening edges I keep razor-sharp for everyone else.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, my entire demeanor changing without conscious effort.

"Better," she says, though something in her tone doesn't sit right with me. "The doctor says I just need rest."

My grip on the phone tightens. "You're still at the hospital?" Concern cuts through me like a blade. "What aren't you telling me, Serena?"

"It's nothing serious," she insists. "Just exhaustion. Focus on your meetings there."

I want to push harder, demand the whole truth, but I can hear the fatigue in her voice. "I'll wrap things up here fast," I promise instead. "Then I'm coming back. No arguments."

After we disconnect, I stare at the phone for a long moment. There's something she's holding back—I can feel it in my gut. But first, I need to neutralize the immediate threat.

I check my watch. An hour until Anderson shows up. Just enough time to review the intel Simon compiled on him and his little empire.

Anderson thinks he's got me over a barrel, that I've come crawling to beg for mercy regarding LUXE. By the time I'm done with him, he'll know exactly who he tried to mess with.

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Author's POV

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the opulent dining area of the Dynasty Hotel as David Anderson and his wife Sophie arrived right on the dot at two o'clock. The restaurant, with its crystal chandeliers and white linen tablecloths, seemed to perfectly frame the power play about to unfold.

David kept checking his watch nervously as they sat at the reserved table. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Twenty. Sophie kept her game face on, but the slight tapping of her manicured fingernails against her water glass gave away her nerves.

“He’s playing mind games with us,” David muttered, adjusting his Italian silk tie.

When Ryan Blackwood finally appeared at the entrance, the entire restaurant seemed to hold its breath. Conversations dimmed. Waiters straightened their posture. He moved like a predator who owned the place, his tailored charcoal suit emphasizing his commanding presence.

Sophie’s breath hitched in her throat. Her eyes locked onto him with laser intensity. Ryan still radiated that cold, untouchable aura that had once drawn her to him like a moth to a deadly flame.

Ryan’s gaze swept the restaurant like a scanner until it landed on their table. The flash of recognition in his steel-blue eyes when he spotted Sophie was immediately replaced by something darker—something lethal. His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

“Well, well,” he thought, connecting the dots between Sophie’s presence and the plagiarism allegations against Serena. The timing was way too convenient to be coincidence.

David jumped to his feet, extending his hand with forced enthusiasm. “Mr. Blackwood, great to finally meet face-to-face.”

Ryan looked at David’s outstretched hand like it was contaminated before coolly taking his seat without shaking it. The deliberate diss made David’s smile crack.

Sophie, ever the professional manipulator, swooped in to defuse the tension. She placed her hand on David’s arm with practiced sweetness, guiding him back to his chair.

“Mr. Blackwood,” she purred, her voice honey-sweet, “it’s been ages.”

David’s head whipped toward his wife, his brow furrowing. “You two have history?” The question dropped like a bomb.

Ryan completely iced her out, focusing his arctic gaze on David instead. “Let’s cut to the chase. We’re here to discuss business.”

Sophie’s smile stayed plastered on, but her hands betrayed her with a slight tremor. After all these years, Ryan could still make her feel like dirt with just a look. She shot David a meaningful glance—a silent signal to take the wheel.

David cleared his throat. “About our potential partnership, Mr. Blackwood. ART can offer you the deal of a lifetime. The question is—what’s your value proposition?”

Ryan leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping to a tone that could freeze hell over.

“My wife has been dragged through the mud with false plagiarism accusations, and ART just happens to have the magic wand to clear her name.” His eyes narrowed to deadly slits. “Before we talk business, I want an explanation for that remarkable coincidence.”

The temperature in the room seemed to plummet. Sophie's knuckles turned white beneath the table as she clenched her fists.

"He's still obsessed with that bitch," she seethed internally. "After everything, he's willing to torch business deals just to protect her."

David maintained his composure, though his confident smile had developed some serious cracks. "No need to get hostile, Mr. Blackwood. If ART needs to step in on this unfortunate plagiarism matter, I'm happy to help out." He spread his hands in mock generosity. "But first, I'd prefer we establish some mutual trust. I only go to bat for friends, you understand."

The naked quid pro quo hung between them like a gauntlet.

Ryan's lips curved into something that might charitably be called a smile, but his eyes stayed ice-cold. His attention pivoted to Sophie with deliberate slowness.

"And who exactly is this crashing our business meeting?" The dismissive tone could have cut glass.

David turned toward his wife, catching her staring at Ryan like she wanted to devour him. The air crackled with unspoken history.

Sophie recovered quickly, her social training kicking into overdrive. "I'm David's wife, Sophie Anderson. We may have crossed paths in New York some years ago, though I imagine someone of your stature meets countless people..." She let the implication of his forgetfulness hang, a small revenge for his brush-off.

Ryan let out a short, brutal laugh. "I wasn't aware CEOs needed their wives as wingmen for business discussions."

David's face went beet red. "Watch your mouth, Blackwood. Sophie isn't just my wife—she's ART's General Manager and one of our star players. Her presence here is completely appropriate."

"Is that right?" Ryan's voice dripped with sarcasm.

Sophie kept her poker face, but inside she was burning up. Once, this man had looked at her with desire. Now there was nothing but pure contempt.

"If we're done with the introductions," Ryan continued, his voice shifting to ice-cold efficiency, "then here are my terms: ART publicly clears my wife's name of these plagiarism allegations—with hard evidence—and only then will I consider any partnership."

He stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the hardwood like nails on a chalkboard. "Until that happens, we have nothing to discuss."

Without waiting for a response, Ryan strode away like he owned the world, leaving conversations to bloom in his wake.

"Arrogant son of a bitch!" David slammed his fist on the table, causing the silverware to jump and nearby diners to gawk. "Who the hell does he think he is?"

Sophie placed a strategic hand on his arm, though her own pulse was going haywire. “David, sweetheart, don’t let him push your buttons. That’s exactly what he wants.”

David turned to her, suspicion suddenly darkening his features. “There’s definitely something between you two, isn’t there? The way he looked at you... it wasn’t just dislike. It was personal as hell.”

For all his business blind spots, David could be surprisingly sharp about reading people. Sophie hadn’t anticipated this complication.

“You’re reading too much into this, David,” she said soothingly, her mind racing for damage control. “He’s just trying to mess with your head through me. I’m your wife—showing contempt for me is just another way to disrespect you.”

David seemed partially convinced, but doubt still lingered in his eyes.

Sophie smiled reassuringly, even as rage and humiliation burned through her like acid. Ryan Blackwood had dismissed her—again. But this time, she wouldn’t cry over him. This time, she would make him burn.