

CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 331

Serena's POV

I stood there for a moment, stunned, half-convinced the child was simply saying something sweet and nonsensical—as children often did.

I forced a gentle smile. “Then your mommy must be very beautiful,” I said softly. “I hope I’ll get to meet her someday.”

Vivian’s expression changed.

Her small shoulders drooped, and the brightness in her eyes dimmed, as if someone had quietly turned down a light.

“My mommy’s not home,” she said. Not dramatic. Not tearful. Just honest.

“She’s gone.”

The word sat heavily between us.

“Daddy says she’s missing,” Vivian continued, her voice calm in that unsettling way only children could manage. “He’s been looking for her for a really long time. But he still can’t find her.”

Something twisted sharply in my chest, catching me completely off guard. I didn’t know this child. And yet her quiet sadness settled into me as if it belonged there.

Before I could say anything, Rancy reached out.

Her little fingers wrapped around Vivian’s hand in a clumsy but earnest grip.

“It’s okay,” Rancy said seriously. “Mommy always comes back.”

She nodded to herself, as if stating a simple, unbreakable truth. Then her face brightened.

“You can borrow my mommy for now!”

I bit my lip, warmth spreading through my chest despite the ache tightening beneath it.

Vivian blinked, clearly caught off guard.

Slowly, the corners of her mouth lifted—not quite a smile, but close.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Miss Vivian, it’s time to go.”

A man in a crisp, tailored suit stepped forward from behind her. He didn’t look like a father rushing home after work. More like a driver—or a guardian accustomed to keeping his distance.

Rancy squeezed Vivian’s hand one last time before letting go.

“Tomorrow,” she said firmly. “You come tomorrow.”

She waved with both hands until Vivian was guided into the waiting car and it pulled away from the curb.

“I’m impressed,” I said as we walked toward our own car. “First day, and you already made a friend.”

Rancy puffed up with pride, skipping beside me.

“I know her,” she said seriously. “She’s quiet. But she likes me.”

“She does?”

Rancy nodded. “She doesn’t play with other kids. Just me.”

Then she added, pleased, “She says I’m cute.”

I laughed softly. “Well, she’s not wrong.”

The entire drive home, Rancy chattered happily—about snacks, about sitting next to Vivian, about how Vivian held her hand during nap time. I listened, smiling, but my thoughts kept drifting back to that small, solemn face.

When we arrived at Cedric’s estate, dinner was already waiting. Cedric himself was nowhere to be seen—no doubt still sulking after our earlier argument.

“Go wash your hands,” I told Rancy, helping her out of her coat. “You can eat while Mommy finishes a little work.”

“Okay!”

She threw her arms around my neck and pressed a noisy kiss to my cheek.

“Don’t be long,” she reminded me earnestly. “Story time.”

“I promise,” I said, holding her close. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

After she disappeared down the hall with the housekeeper, I headed for the guest study Cedric had assigned me.

The room was immaculate. Elegant. And utterly impersonal.

Cedric insisted we had once shared this house—this life. And yet there was no trace of me anywhere. No photographs. No keepsakes. No evidence that I had ever belonged.

I sat down at the desk and opened my laptop.

An email from Maya, head of LUXE's design department, stared back at me—drowning in apologies and requests for another meeting.

“Now you’re sorry?” I muttered, deleting it without hesitation.

My phone rang. Sally.

Several studios had already reached out, eager to replace LUXE.

“Vet everything,” I told her. “Portfolios. Finances. Reputations. I won’t waste time on amateurs.”

After the call ended, something Maya had said earlier came back to me—about LUXE’s original founder being falsely accused years ago.

Curious despite myself, I searched.

Nothing.

No interviews. No archived work. No trace at all.

“Erased,” I murmured. “Completely.”

I closed the browser, shaking my head. “Not my problem anymore.”

Still, the absence lingered like an unfinished thought.

An hour later, a soft knock broke my concentration.

“Mommy?”

Rancy stood in the doorway in her pajamas. “Big hand eight. Little hand seven.”

She smiled proudly. “Story.”

I glanced at the clock—and laughed. “You’re right. I promised.”

That night, after the story and the goodnight kisses, I lingered by Rancy's bed.

Vivian's face drifted back into my thoughts.

"Mommy?" Rancy murmured sleepily.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Can Vivian come play?" she asked. "She is sad. But she smiles with me."

I brushed her hair back gently. "Maybe. We'll see."

"Okay..."

Watching my daughter's peaceful face, I felt a pang of empathy for Vivian and the absent mother she so desperately missed. I knew what it was like to grow up with pieces missing—though in my case, it was memories rather than people.

The next morning, I woke to the persistent buzzing of my phone. Squinting at the screen through sleep-blurred eyes, I saw another email from Maya. This woman just wouldn't quit.

"Ms. Quinn," it began formally, "I understand your reluctance to reconsider our partnership, but before you make your final decision, Mr. Ryan Blackwood himself has requested to speak with you directly. As CEO of Blackwood Enterprises, his interest in your work represents an unprecedented opportunity. Please call this number at your earliest convenience."

I snorted, tossing the phone aside. The nerve of these people—first they bail on me without explanation, now they're trying to dangle their CEO like some prize carrot? I had better things to do than chase after corporate validation.

But as I showered and dressed, a nagging curiosity took hold. Blackwood Enterprises wasn't just any company—it was an empire with tentacles in everything from real estate to cutting-edge technology. Their interest could catapult Elegant Realm into entirely new markets.

"This is strictly business," I told my reflection as I applied a touch of lipstick. "Nothing more."

After dropping Rancy at school (with an extra long hug when I spotted Vivian across the playground), I sat in my car and stared at the number Maya had provided. My finger hovered over the call button for several seconds before I finally pressed it.

The phone rang exactly twice before a deep, resonant voice answered. "Ryan Blackwood speaking."

Something about his voice—its cadence, its timber—sent an inexplicable shiver down my spine.

“This is Serena Lancaster,” I said, keeping my tone strictly professional. “I understand you wanted to speak with me regarding a potential collaboration.”

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end, followed by several seconds of silence. I was about to check if the call had dropped when he finally spoke again.

“Serena.” Just my name, spoken with such... intensity. The hair on my arms stood on end.

“Yes, that’s me,” I replied, slightly unnerved. “I received an email suggesting you wanted to discuss business opportunities.”

“Your voice...” he began, then cleared his throat. “Forgive me. Yes, business. Of course.”

What followed was the most generous offer I’d ever received—exclusive distribution rights for Elegant Realm throughout North America, a featured showcase at Blackwood’s annual charity gala, and financial backing that would make our London expansion virtually risk-free. All he asked in return was the right of first refusal on my newest designs.

It was too good to be true. And in my experience, that usually meant it was.

“Why?” I asked bluntly. “Why such interest in my studio? We’re successful, yes, but hardly in Blackwood’s league.”

There was another pause, longer this time. “Your aesthetic...” he finally said, his voice strangely strained. “It reminds me of someone I once knew.”

“I see.” That explained nothing. “Well, Mr. Blackwood, your offer is certainly generous, but I’ll need time to consider it. This isn’t a decision I can make on the spot.”

“Of course,” he replied quickly. “Take all the time you need. But may I ask you something personal, Ms. Quinn?”

Warning bells rang in my head. “That depends on the question.”

“It’s just—” he hesitated, then continued in a rush, “—your name is Serena. That’s... that’s my wife’s name too. My missing wife. And your voice sounds remarkably similar to hers.”

My professional demeanor instantly evaporated. Was this some kind of sick joke? A wealthy businessman using a business call to hit on me with the lamest pickup line imaginable?

“Mr. Blackwood,” I said coldly, “I appreciate the business offer, but I should inform you that I’m married. If your interest extends beyond professional boundaries, I’m afraid I’ll have to decline regardless of the terms.”

“No, wait—that’s not what I—”

But I'd already ended the call, my heart pounding with indignation. The absolute audacity of some men. Even ones worth billions.

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Serena's POV

I tossed and turned all night, Ryan Blackwood's strange call running through my mind on repeat. His offer was extraordinary—the kind most designers would kill for—but something about our interaction left me deeply unsettled.

By morning, I'd convinced myself to at least talk to Sally before making any decision. If anyone could give me an honest perspective on this LUXE situation, it would be her.

"You look like hell," Sally greeted me when I walked into the office, pushing a cup of coffee across her desk. "Bad night?"

I sank into the chair opposite her, gratefully accepting the caffeine. "You could say that."

After taking a long sip, I cut straight to the point. "What do you know about LUXE? And specifically about this designer they keep mentioning—Lazuli?"

Sally's eyes lit up instantly. "Lazuli? She was a legend at my Academy."

"So you're familiar with her work?" I pressed.

"Familiar?" Sally laughed, spinning in her chair to pull a worn portfolio book from her shelf. "She was my absolute idol. The reason I got into jewelry design in the first place."

She flipped open the book, revealing meticulously collected magazine clippings and photographs. "Look at this piece—the Midnight Cascade. The way she integrated those raw sapphires with the platinum weave? Nobody was doing anything remotely close to this ten years ago."

I leaned closer, studying the designs. There was something hauntingly familiar about them—almost like *déjà vu*.

"And you're sure she wasn't just ripping off someone else's style?" I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral.

Sally looked genuinely offended. "Absolutely not. Lazuli was an innovator, not a copycat. Her work was too... personal. Too distinctive." She shook her head firmly. "Those accusations were complete garbage, if you ask me."

The conviction in her voice gave me pause. Sally wasn't easily impressed, and she had impeccable taste. If Lazuli was her design hero...

"What happened to her?" I asked quietly.

Sally's expression darkened. "Nobody really knows. She just... disappeared. Some say she was forced out by competitors. Others think she had some kind of breakdown." She shrugged. "The design world lost a genius, that's all I know."

I sat back, processing this information. LUXE's eagerness to work with me—could it be they saw something of Lazuli in my work? Was that what Ryan Blackwood meant when he said my aesthetic reminded him of someone?

"I got a call from Blackwood Enterprises yesterday," I admitted finally. "They want to distribute Elegant Realm across North America."

Sally nearly spit out her coffee. "Ryan Blackwood himself called you? Holy shit, Serena!"

"So you think I should accept?"

"Are you seriously asking me that?" She stared at me like I'd lost my mind. "This is the opportunity of a lifetime. Blackwood's endorsement would put us on the map in ways we couldn't achieve in ten years of grinding."

She was right, and I knew it. Business was business, and my personal discomfort with Ryan Blackwood shouldn't override what was clearly best for my brand.

After finishing with Sally, I went back to my office and picked up my phone. My finger hovered over Maya's number for a long moment before I finally pressed call.

"Serena!" she answered immediately, hope evident in her voice. "I'm so glad to hear from you."

"I'm calling about Mr. Blackwood's proposal," I said, keeping my tone strictly professional. "I've decided to accept his offer, with conditions."

"Of course," Maya said quickly. "Anything."

"First, I only deal with you—not Mr. Blackwood. Second, no contracts will be signed until after my London studio launches successfully. And third," I added, feeling suddenly protective of my work, "I maintain full creative control over all designs. Non-negotiable."

I could practically hear Maya's smile through the phone. "Those terms are completely acceptable. Mr. Blackwood will be thrilled."

"Great," I said, feeling oddly hollow despite securing such an incredible deal. "Send over the preliminary paperwork, and we'll move forward."

After ending the call, I sat staring at my computer screen, wondering why success suddenly felt so complicated.

I was reviewing the budget for our London location when Cedric burst through my office door without knocking. One look at his flushed face told me everything I needed to know—word traveled fast.

“LUXE?” he demanded, slamming both hands on my desk. “After everything I told you, you’re working with LUXE?”

I deliberately took my time closing my laptop before meeting his gaze. “I’m working with Blackwood Enterprises, which happens to have connections to LUXE. It’s a business decision, Cedric.”

“BLACKWOOD?” He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up in frustration. “We need to leave, Serena. Come back to Thailand with me—with Rancy. Today. It’s not safe here anymore.”

I stood up slowly. “Not safe? What exactly are you afraid of, Cedric?”

“You can’t know yet, Serena,” Cedric’s expression shifted, softening into concern that felt calculated rather than genuine. “I’m trying to protect you, Serena. And Rancy too.”

“By keeping me in the dark? By controlling every aspect of my life?” I shook my head. “That’s not protection, Cedric. That’s imprisonment. Sometimes I even wonder if we’re really husband and wife. You’ve never given me enough trust.”

Something flashed in his eyes—anger, perhaps, or fear—before he carefully composed his features.

“You’re right,” he said, his voice suddenly gentle. “I’ve been... overbearing. I just worry about you.”

The abrupt shift in his demeanor only raised more red flags. This wasn’t the first time Cedric had switched tactics when confrontation failed.

“Listen,” he continued, perching on the edge of my desk with practiced casualness. “I respect your decision about Blackwood and LUXE. Just... be careful around anyone connected to the Quinn and Blackwood family. Especially Ryan Blackwood—he’s a notorious playboy who abandoned his wife for his first love, only to start pursuing her again after discovering his ex-wife was heir to the Quinn family fortune.”

Thinking about Blackwood’s conversation with me, I couldn’t help but frown. “I understand. I won’t show up for this collaboration—I’ll have Sally handle the contract signing instead.”

He studied me for a long moment, clearly not believing me but choosing not to push. “Just watch your back, okay? And remember—I’m only ever looking out for your best interests.”

As I watched him leave, his parting words echoed in my head. If Cedric was truly looking out for my best interests, why did I feel increasingly like a pawn in a game I didn't understand?

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Author's POV

The afternoon sun cast long, golden streaks across the playground of Bright Horizons Preschool, illuminating the bright plastic slides and the colorful murals painted along the outer walls. Most of the children had already been collected by their parents, their laughter fading down the street one by one, leaving behind a peaceful, unhurried atmosphere.

Only a handful remained.

Rancy was one of them.

Barely two years old, she sat in the sandbox with her legs stretched out in front of her, white socks now thoroughly baptized in gray sand. Her small hands patted at a lopsided mound she had been working on with the intense focus only toddlers possess. Whatever it was meant to be, the shape had long since surrendered under her enthusiastic efforts.

“Ba!” she giggled, clapping her sandy hands together proudly.

Sand exploded in all directions.

Beside her crouched another little girl—older, steadier, her movements deliberate. Dark curls bounced around her shoulders as she carefully picked up a fallen leaf and placed it atop the mound like she was crowning royalty.

“It’s a princess castle,” the girl declared with absolute authority.

The teachers watched these two adorable children play, chatting amongst themselves until a tall figure approached the playground.

“Oh my God, is that him again?” whispered Ms. Sarah, the lead teacher, practically swooning as she spotted the approaching man.

“Ethan Quinn,” sighed Ms. Jennifer, her hand fluttering to her hair. “London’s most gorgeous CEO. What I wouldn’t give...”

“Too bad he’s married,” Ms. Sarah muttered, though her eyes remained glued to him. “That lucky wife of his doesn’t know how good she has it.”

“Did you see that article in London Business Weekly? They called him the city’s most eligible bachelor before he got hitched,” Ms. Jennifer added with a dreamy expression. “Those cheekbones could cut glass.”

The teachers quickly tried to compose themselves, smoothing down their uniforms and checking their makeup as he drew closer.

He stood out immediately. Dressed in a dark, impeccably tailored suit, his Italian leather shoes looked almost comically out of place against the rubberized ground scattered with toy trucks and plastic shovels. He moved like someone who owned every room he entered, unhurried, his piercing gaze already scanning for someone specific.

Ms. Sarah practically melted as he approached their group. “Good afternoon, Mr. Quinn,” she said, her voice pitched slightly higher than usual. “Vivian’s been such an angel today, as always.”

Ethan’s entire demeanor shifted the moment his eyes found Vivian in the sandbox. The corporate mask slipped away, replaced by something warm and genuine—the transformation from CEO to devoted father happening in real time.

“There’s my little princess,” he said softly, his voice carrying a tenderness that made even the most professional teachers sigh inwardly. “Uncle!”

Vivian spotted him first.

She sprang to her feet, abandoning the sandbox without a second thought, and ran toward him, curls bouncing wildly.

Ethan Quinn bent down just in time to catch her, steadying her as she nearly collided with his legs.

“Careful,” he said with a smile, brushing a curl away from her eyes. “Did you have a good day, princess?”

Vivian nodded eagerly. “I made a castle.”

“I can see that,” Ethan replied, amused. “Did you make it all by yourself?”

She shook her head and pointed back toward the sandbox. “With her.”

Ethan followed the direction of her finger.

Rancy sat exactly where she had been left, now poking at the sand with a small blue shovel, humming to herself. When she noticed the two of them looking, she paused and stared back, eyes wide with open curiosity.

“That’s my friend,” Vivian added seriously.

“You made a friend?” Ethan asked.

Vivian nodded again, then hesitated, as if weighing her next words.

“Can she come see Mommy’s pictures?”

The question landed softly, but it stilled him all the same.

Ethan masked the pause quickly, his expression gentle as ever. “That’s very kind of you to invite her.”

Taking Vivian’s hand, he walked with her back toward the sandbox.

Rancy looked up as they approached, her head tilting slightly. She studied the unfamiliar man with the solemn intensity toddlers often reserved for strangers, as if committing his face to memory.

“Hi,” Vivian said, suddenly quieter now that they were closer. “Do you wanna come to my house?”

Rancy blinked.

“I show you Mommy,” Vivian added earnestly. “She pretty.”

Rancy frowned, her brows knitting together as she processed the unfamiliar words.

“Mama?” she asked, turning her head, scanning the playground instinctively.

“Is your mama coming soon?” Ethan asked gently, lowering himself into a crouch so they were eye level.

Rancy nodded with absolute certainty. “Mama come.”

“We could wait and ask her,” Ethan suggested.

Rancy shook her head hard, curls bouncing wildly.

“Fwies!” she protested. “Mama pwomise fwies!”

She raised two fingers, though they didn’t quite separate properly.

Ethan chuckled, the sound low and warm. “I see. Promises are important.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a business card, its edges crisp and clean. Holding it between his fingers, he extended it toward Rancy.

“Can you give this to your mama for me?”

Rancy stared at it as if it were something magical.

Then she grabbed it with both hands.

“Card!” she declared triumphantly.

“That’s right,” Ethan said, rising to his feet. “Tell your mama to call me. We can talk about a playdate.”

“Bye-bye!” Vivian waved enthusiastically.

“Bye-bye!” Rancy echoed, clutching the card like treasure.

Serena arrived twenty minutes later.

She practically flew through the kindergarten gates, heels clicking like gunshots against the pavement, still catching her breath from traffic and an overlong meeting.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” she said the moment she reached her daughter, scooping Rancy up into her arms. “Mama got held up.”

Rancy didn’t cry.

Instead, she beamed like sunshine and thrust something forward.

“Mama! Card!”

Serena shifted her onto one hip and took the card automatically.

Then she went completely still.

The elegant cream-colored paper bore a name that made her blood freeze.

ETHAN QUINN

Chief Executive Officer

LUXE Jewelry Design & Manufacturing

Her heart stopped.

“Friend house,” Rancy said happily. “Vivi mama picture.”

Serena stared at her daughter, her mind spinning like a tornado.

Vivian.

LUXE.

Ryan Blackwood.

Could Vivian be the child born to Ryan Blackwood’s supposedly abandoned wife? The one who was handed over to the Quinn family to raise?

The pieces were starting to click together in a way that made her skin crawl. If the rumors were true, if Ryan had really walked away from his pregnant wife, then Vivian would be living proof of his darkest secret. And the Quinns—they would be the cleanup crew, taking in the inconvenient evidence of his past.

But that would mean...

Serena’s mind raced as she stared at the business card.

“We’ll see about that, baby,” she murmured. “But Mama promised you some fries, didn’t she?”

“Fwies!” Rancy cheered instantly.

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Serena’s POV

I clutched Rancy’s tiny hand as we stepped into my favorite diner—a small, no-frills place with the best french fries in the city. The card from Ethan Quinn felt like it was practically searing through my pocket. LUXE Jewelry. The coincidence was way too clean, way too unsettling.

“Fwies! Fwies!” Rancy chanted, practically vibrating with excitement as we slid into our regular booth by the window.

“Yes, sweetheart, french fries coming right up,” I said, plastering on a smile as I helped her onto the booster seat.

“What you want, Mama?” Rancy asked, already attacking the kiddie menu with the crayons our waitress had dropped off.

“Just coffee, baby,” I replied.

The waitress materialized with Rancy’s chocolate milk and my coffee. “The usual for our little princess?” she asked with a wink.

“Yes, please,” I nodded. “Kid’s fries and nuggets.”

As the waitress walked away, I pulled out Ethan Quinn’s business card again, turning it over like it might reveal hidden secrets. Was this just a normal playdate invitation, or something more? Could Ethan possibly know who I really was?

“Vivi nice,” Rancy said suddenly, making me nearly jump out of my skin. She pointed at the card in my hand. “Play dolls?”

“You want to have a playdate with Vivian?” I asked, searching my daughter’s innocent face.

She nodded like a bobblehead. “Big dolls. Pretty dresses.”

I sighed, shoving the card back into my pocket. Maybe I was losing my mind with paranoia. Maybe this really was just about two little girls who wanted to play together. But with LUXE suddenly popping up everywhere I turned, I couldn’t shake the feeling that my carefully built life was about to come crashing down.

“We’ll see, sweetheart,” I said, reaching across to tame her wild curls. “Mama needs to think about it.”

“Think fast!” Rancy giggled, completely oblivious to my internal crisis.

When our food arrived, I watched my daughter happily destroy her fries with ketchup, making a disaster but enjoying every second. Her world was so pure, so uncomplicated. I envied that.

In three days, the signing ceremony and grand opening were scheduled to take place.

I stared at my phone screen, my stomach dropping at the fifteen missed calls from Sally. The morning that should’ve been all about final prep for the signing ceremony had turned into a living nightmare when I discovered Rancy burning up with fever.

“Look at Mama, baby,” I whispered, gently pressing my palm against her forehead. The heat radiating from her tiny body sent pure terror shooting through my veins. “Oh God, you’re on fire.”

My daughter’s normally bright eyes were glassy and distant. “Mama,” she whimpered, her little arms reaching for me like she was drowning. “Hurts.”

That single broken word obliterated any thought about the ceremony. I scooped her up, blanket and all, not giving a damn that I was still in my silk pajamas.

“Mrs. Lancaster, your gown is ready and—” My housekeeper froze in the doorway, her eyes widening at the sight of Rancy’s flushed face.

“Call Sally right now,” I ordered, already flying down the stairs. “Tell her Rancy’s sick and I’m rushing her to the hospital.”

“But the ceremony—it’s in three hours! The LUXE executives are already in town!”

I didn’t even break stride. “Sally will handle it. End of discussion.”

Twenty minutes later, while a nurse was taking Rancy’s vitals in the emergency room, Sally burst through the hospital doors like a hurricane, already dressed in her formal business attire.

“What the hell happened?” she demanded, her eyes ping-ponging between me and my daughter, who was whimpering softly against my chest.

“High fever. Probably from that damn ice cream the nanny let her have last night.” I couldn’t keep the fury from my voice. “Who in their right mind gives a two-year-old ice cream at bedtime in this weather?”

Sally hesitated, glancing at her watch like it was a ticking bomb. “Serena, I get that you’re scared, but this signing ceremony… LUXE’s representatives are expecting you personally.”

“I’m not leaving her side, Sally.” I stroked Rancy’s damp curls, feeling her little body shake despite the fever. “Nothing on this earth is more important than this little girl. Nothing.”

“But your business—”

“Is just business.” I cut her off with steel in my voice. “You know the contract inside and out. You helped me write every single clause. You can handle this.”

Sally looked like I’d asked her to perform surgery. “The LUXE people specifically requested to meet with you. This Ethan Quinn—”

“Then they’ll have to deal with disappointment.” I met Sally’s gaze without flinching. “You’re my right hand for a reason. I trust you with my life. Take the ceremonial scissors, smile for the cameras, sign where necessary, and make sure our new branch opens with the class it deserves.”

Sally exhaled like she was deflating, then squared her shoulders. “Alright. I’ll do it. But you know they’ll ask questions.”

“Tell them family emergency. It’s the truth.” I looked down at my daughter, who had finally closed her eyes, completely drained from fighting the fever. “This is everything that matters to me.”

Sally nodded, her expression going soft. “I get it. I’ll take care of everything.”

As she turned to leave, I called after her: “Sally? Thank you.”

She flashed me a smile that said ‘don’t even worry about it’. “Just focus on getting that little angel better. Business will still be there when you get back.”

After Sally left, a doctor finally appeared to examine Rancy. I held my breath like my life depended on it as he checked her over, my heart hammering so loud I could barely hear his questions.

“It’s a viral infection,” he finally confirmed, scribbling notes on his chart. “Pretty common in kids her age, especially with these crazy weather changes. We’ll get her on IV fluids and fever reducers.”

“Is she going to be okay?” My voice cracked like I was thirteen again.

The doctor’s whole demeanor softened. “With proper care and rest, she should bounce back completely. I’d like to keep her here 24 to 48 hours for monitoring.”

Relief hit me like a freight train, so intense that my legs turned to jelly. I collapsed into the chair beside Rancy’s bed, watching as a nurse gently worked an IV into my daughter’s tiny arm. She whimpered and tried to pull away, but I held her other hand, whispering every soothing word I knew.

“Mama’s here, baby. Mama’s not going anywhere.”

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Author’s POV

Meanwhile at Quinn Estate...

The dining room of Quinn Estate radiated old money sophistication—crystal chandeliers casting warm light over the antique mahogany table where Ryan Blackwood sat opposite Ethan Quinn. Maya Carter, Ryan’s closest friend and business partner, completed their unlikely dinner trio.

“These oysters are incredible,” Maya remarked, sipping her white wine. “Almost good enough to make me forget I had to handle the entire west wing setup solo today.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “Issues with the new branch opening?”

“Not issues exactly,” Maya replied carefully, setting down her fork with deliberate precision. “Just some last-minute curveballs. The signing ceremony went smoothly, but our star designer was a no-show.”

Ethan’s fork froze halfway to his mouth. “Star designer? You mean—”

“Serena Lancaster,” Maya confirmed. “Her assistant—Sally, right?—covered everything, but you could tell she was rattled.”

Ryan’s expression didn’t change, but his grip on his wine glass tightened almost imperceptibly. “What was the excuse this time?”

Maya’s eyebrows shot up. “This time? Ryan, it was a genuine emergency. Her daughter Rancy came down with a sudden high fever that spiked to 104 degrees. Had to rush her to the ER this morning.”

At the mention of “Rancy,” little Vivian Blackwood, who had been quietly coloring at her own small table nearby, dropped her crayon and spun around.

“Rancy sick?” Vivian’s big eyes widened with genuine panic. “My friend Rancy? “

Ethan and Maya exchanged a loaded glance that didn’t escape Ryan’s notice.

“You know this child?” Ryan asked, his tone suddenly sharp enough to cut glass.

Ethan shifted uncomfortably. “They’re in the same preschool class. I’ve seen them together during pickup.”

“Together how?” Ryan’s interrogation mode had fully activated.

“Playing. Laughing. You know, normal kid stuff.” Ethan was clearly trying to downplay it. “Rancy’s about a year younger than Vivian, but they’ve bonded. It’s actually quite sweet—”

“Sweet?” Vivian practically bounced in her chair. “Rancy is my bestest friend in the whole world! She makes the best sand castles and she shares her animal crackers and her mama is so pretty and nice and—”

“Vivian, breathe,” Ryan interrupted, but his daughter was on a roll.

“And Rancy’s mama always smells like flowers and she has the most beautiful smile and she never gets mad when we get messy and she always remembers to pack extra juice boxes for me because she knows I get thirsty and—”

“Enough.” Ryan’s voice was firm but not harsh. “Eat your dinner.”

But Vivian was having none of it. She scrambled onto her father's lap without asking—something she rarely did in company. "Daddy, we have to go see Rancy right now! She's sick and scared and she needs me!"

Ryan gently but firmly lifted his daughter back to her feet. "No, princess. If Rancy is sick, she needs to rest and get better. Hospitals aren't places for little girls to visit."

"But Daddy!" Vivian's voice cracked with emotion. "What if she thinks I don't care? What if she's crying for me? What if she's all alone and scared?"

Maya's heart visibly melted. "Oh sweetheart, I'm sure Rancy knows you care—"

"Maya." Ryan's warning was crystal clear.

But Maya completely ignored him. "You know what, Vivian? Maybe we could make Rancy a get-well card tomorrow. Would you like that?"

Vivian's face lit up like Christmas morning. "Yes! With sparkles and rainbows and a unicorn because Rancy loves unicorns and maybe we could put stickers on it and—"

"Absolutely not." Ryan's voice cut through the excitement like a blade.

The room went dead silent. Even the grandfather clock seemed to stop ticking.

Vivian's face crumpled instantly. "But... but why, Daddy?"

"Because I said so." Ryan's tone carried that unmistakable parental finality. "You're too young to be worrying about sick children or visiting hospitals. And you certainly don't need to be getting attached to random classmates."

"Random?" Vivian's voice was barely a whisper, but the hurt was deafening. "Rancy's not random! She's my friend!"

"She's a child you play with at school sometimes. That's different."

Tears started streaming down Vivian's cheeks. "That's not true! Rancy is special! She makes me happy! She—"

"Vivian, enough. You're being dramatic."

That was apparently the last straw. Without another word, Vivian ran from the dining room, her sobs echoing down the hallway like a soundtrack of heartbreak.

"Margaret," Ryan called, and the nanny appeared immediately. "Please get Vivian calmed down and ready for bed."

After Margaret hurried after the distraught child, the silence in the dining room was thick enough to choke on.

Maya was the first to break it. “What the hell was that, Ryan?”

“That was parenting.” Ryan continued cutting his steak like nothing had happened.

“That was emotional terrorism.” Maya’s voice was dangerously low. “She’s three years old and worried about her friend. That’s called having a heart.”

Ethan cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Maybe we could find a middle ground here. The children clearly care about each other—”

“The children are three years old. They’ll forget about each other by next week.”

Maya slammed her wine glass down so hard the crystal rang. “Jesus Christ, Ryan! Do you even hear yourself?”

“Watch your tone, Maya.”

“Or what? You’ll cut me out of your life too?” Maya was on fire now. “Because that seems to be your specialty—burning bridges and pretending emotions don’t exist.”

Ryan’s jaw was ticking dangerously. “This has nothing to do with—”

“This has everything to do with her!” Maya’s voice cracked with frustration. “Serena would have handled this completely differently. She would have validated Vivian’s feelings, maybe explained why they couldn’t visit today but promised to send a card or a drawing. She would have turned this into a teachable moment about compassion instead of crushing a little girl’s heart.”

The name hung in the air like a toxic cloud.

Ryan set down his knife and fork with surgical precision. “Serena isn’t here.”

Ethan looked like he wanted to disappear into his chair. “Maybe we should change the subject—”

“No.” Maya was relentless now. “He needs to hear this. That little girl upstairs is crying herself to sleep because her father can’t stand the thought of her showing basic human empathy. And you know why? Because it reminds you of everything you threw away.”

Finally, Ryan’s voice came out like gravel. “Vivian is my daughter. How I raise her is my business.”

“And when she grows up wondering why Daddy never let her feel anything? When she can’t form healthy relationships because her father taught her that caring about people is weakness?” Maya’s voice was breaking now. “What then, Ryan? What then?”

Without another word, Ryan walked out of the dining room, leaving Maya and Ethan sitting in the wreckage of what had started as a simple dinner party.

Maya buried her face in her hands. “God, Ethan. Sometimes I look at him and wonder where the man I used to know went.”

Ethan reached across and squeezed her shoulder gently. “He’s still in there, Maya. Just... buried under a lot of pain.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not the only one who’s hurting.” Maya’s voice was muffled by her hands. “And now that little girl upstairs is paying the price for his inability to deal with his own demons.”

Upstairs, the sound of Vivian’s muffled sobs could still be heard through the walls.