

# CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 266

Serena's POV

I checked the time nervously, smoothing down my navy silk dress as I entered The Pierre's elegant restaurant. The maître d' guided me to a quiet corner table where Cedric was already waiting, his familiar smile widening as he spotted me.

"Serena," he said, standing to greet me with a warm embrace. His eyes traveled appreciatively over my appearance. "It's been far too long."

I smiled, feeling a strange mix of nostalgia and awkwardness. "Indeed it has. I don't think I even saw you during my last London trip."

Something flickered in his expression. "Your birthday celebration, yes." He lowered his gaze briefly. "I was actually there, but..."

I remembered then—the night Ryan had surprised everyone with his dramatic proposal. The night that had changed everything.

"I heard about your daughter," Cedric continued, his voice softening. "I've been meaning to visit sooner, but work's been relentless. You don't hold it against me, do you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I waved dismissively. "If anything, I should be thanking you properly for that surveillance footage. It changed everything."

Cedric nodded, his expression turning serious. "Was it really Olivia behind it all? I could hardly believe it when I heard."

"Yes," I sighed, feeling that familiar ache of betrayal. "Given our history, I didn't push for the harshest penalties, but she'll face legal consequences regardless."

"It must be difficult," he said gently. "You truly considered her a friend."

"I still don't understand her motives," I admitted, shaking my head. "But let's not dwell on unpleasantness."

Cedric brightened. "You're right. Actually, I brought a few things." He gestured to his assistant, who approached with several elegantly wrapped packages. "Just some small tokens."

My eyes widened as gift after gift appeared on our table—luxury wellness products for me, designer toys for Vivian, and more. "Cedric, this is too much! Your visit alone is gift enough."

His expression grew earnest, almost desperate. “Serena, you disappeared for three years. After everything—” He paused, a hint of jealousy coloring his tone. “Don’t tell me marriage has made you forget old friends?”

“Of course not!” I protested, laughing. “You’ve always been there for me since university. How could I forget you?”

His smile returned, relief evident. “Well then, as your just-arrived British friend, don’t I deserve a proper welcome dinner?”

“Absolutely,” I agreed. “Anywhere specific you’d like to go?”

“I trust your judgment completely.”

I was about to suggest my favorite bistro when I felt a familiar presence. Looking up, I saw Ryan approaching our table, his expression carefully controlled but his eyes scanning Cedric like a threat assessment.

“Sorry I’m late,” Ryan said, his voice deceptively casual as he slid into the seat beside me, his hand immediately finding mine on the table. “Traffic was brutal.”

I squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Ryan, this is Cedric Lancaster, my friend from university I mentioned. Cedric, my husband, Ryan Blackwood.”

The two men sized each other up like circling wolves, their handshake lasting a beat too long.

“Pleasure,” Ryan said, his tone suggesting it was anything but.

Cedric’s smile remained fixed. “Likewise. Serena and I were just catching up on old times.”

“Were you?” Ryan’s thumb stroked the back of my hand possessively. “I’d love to hear these stories.”

Cedric’s eyes flickered to our joined hands. “Well, Serena and I go way back. Practically childhood friends, really. We’ve known each other since prep school before university.”

I frowned slightly. That was stretching the truth—we’d met at a summer program before university, hardly childhood friends.

“Is that so?” Ryan’s eyebrow arched perfectly. “Interesting how Serena’s never mentioned that particular detail.”

“Well, a woman’s entitled to her secrets, isn’t she?” Cedric replied smoothly.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Was this really happening?

“So, Mr. Lancaster,” Ryan continued, his voice dangerously polite, “what brings you all the way to New York? Business or... pleasure?”

“Purely personal,” Cedric answered, looking directly at me. “When I heard Serena had resurfaced after all this time, I had to see for myself.”

Ryan’s hand tightened almost imperceptibly around mine. “How considerate. And how long do you plan to stay?”

“Open-ended, actually,” Cedric replied. “I might have some business opportunities developing here.”

The waiter arrived with menus, providing a brief respite from the testosterone-laden atmosphere.

“I hear congratulations are in order,” Cedric said after we ordered. “Though I understand you two haven’t actually had a proper wedding ceremony yet? Second time’s the charm, I suppose?”

I nearly choked on my water. Ryan’s jaw tightened, but his expression remained coolly composed.

“Actually,” Ryan replied, his voice like silk over steel, “we’re planning an intimate ceremony this winter. Just family and close friends.” The emphasis on ‘close’ was subtle but unmistakable.

Cedric’s smile faltered slightly. “How lovely. I do hope my invitation isn’t lost in the mail.”

“Depends on how long you stay in New York,” Ryan countered. “We wouldn’t want to inconvenience you with transatlantic travel for something so... intimate.”

I cleared my throat loudly. “The sea bass here is exceptional. Cedric, you should try it.”

Neither man seemed to hear me.

“I’ve always made time for Serena’s important moments,” Cedric said, his eyes challenging. “Even when others didn’t.”

Ryan’s expression darkened. “Is that right? And yet, where were you during those three years she was missing?”

“Remember that weekend in Brighton?” Cedric asked, his eyes twinkling mischievously. “After finals?”

I frowned slightly. “That was a group trip with at least eight people, Cedric.”

“But we ended up watching the sunrise together on the beach,” he pressed.

“Because everyone else was too hungover,” I clarified, feeling Ryan stiffen beside me.

“Still magical though, wasn’t it?” Cedric persisted.

Ryan set down his wine glass with deliberate care. “Serena and I watched the sunrise in Santorini last month. Just the two of us. Magical doesn’t begin to describe it.”

I bit back a sigh. This dinner was turning into a ridiculous competition, and I was apparently the prize.

When dessert arrived, Cedric leaned forward conspiratorially. “So Serena, I hear you had quite the dramatic reconciliation with Ryan. After the divorce and everything.”

The temperature at our table seemed to drop ten degrees.

“I’m not sure that’s appropriate dinner conversation,” I said carefully.

“Just curious,” Cedric continued blithely. “I heard something about a previous girlfriend?”

The words hung in the air like a grenade with its pin pulled. Ryan’s entire body tensed beside me, and I felt a flash of genuine anger at Cedric for deliberately bringing up Sophie.

“Cedric,” I said firmly, “that’s enough.”

Ryan’s hand covered mine.

“Mr. Lancaster,” he said, voice dangerously soft, “while I appreciate your concern for Serena’s happiness, our relationship—past and present—is not up for discussion. Especially with someone who’s been absent from her life for years, only to reappear the moment she’s in the spotlight again.”

Cedric’s face flushed. “I’ve always cared about Serena’s welfare—”

“As evidenced by your extensive search efforts when she disappeared?” Ryan cut in smoothly.

“Ryan,” I murmured in warning, though part of me was secretly impressed by his restraint.

Cedric rallied quickly. “At least I never broke her heart.”

I’d had enough. “Stop it, both of you.” I set my napkin on the table and stood. “I need some air.”

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I walked back inside after clearing my head to find both men looking properly chastised. The testosterone levels had thankfully dropped to bearable levels, and we somehow managed to finish dinner with forced politeness. Still, I couldn't miss Ryan's tightly controlled expression throughout the rest of the meal.

The moment we got into the car, his face turned to stone. The jealousy was practically radiating off him in waves.

My dear husband was eaten up with jealousy. But Cedric's deliberate mention of Sophie had stung me too, so I let out a cold huff.

That sound made Ryan glance over, his expression softening into something more uncertain.

"Are you angry?" he asked carefully.

I responded with two more pointed huffs, turning my body away from him. If he could be jealous, so could I. Fight fire with fire, right?

That finally seemed to rattle him. His hand reached out, gently but firmly turning me by the shoulder to face him.

"Serena," he said, his voice low, "didn't we agree not to bring up the past anymore?"

"Cedric was obviously trying to provoke you," he continued, frowning deeply. "He was deliberately trying to come between us. How could you fall for it?"

"Yes, yes, yes, it was all his evil manipulation," I said, rolling my eyes. "But everything he mentioned was true, wasn't it?"

"Are you feeling guilty about something, Ryan?" I challenged.

"What would I have to feel guilty about?" His eyes narrowed. "Why are you defending Cedric so much?"

The tension between us crackled dangerously, like electricity before a storm.

I raised an eyebrow at him, then suddenly couldn't help bursting into laughter.

"When did I defend Cedric? He's just a friend, nothing more. You're always so quick to get jealous!"

Ryan's expression relaxed slightly, though his tone remained petulant. "You two seemed to be having such a wonderful time reminiscing."

"So many shared memories," he added pointedly.

I couldn't hold back my amusement, reaching over to pinch the soft flesh at his waist.

"He's a guest! Why are you being like this?" I teased. "When did you become so petty?"

Ryan winced slightly but didn't pull away, allowing me to continue my affectionate assault.

"Let me take you home, Serena," he said finally.

I shook my head. "I need to back to the studio. "

"Maya's already started preparations for the London branch," I added. "I need to help her."

Ryan's expression darkened instantly. "You're going to London? So soon? Can't the work wait a while longer?"

I could hear the concern beneath his words and softened my tone.

"Ryan, I promise I'll take care of myself," I reassured him. "The London Fashion Week is coming up – it's the perfect opportunity, and I don't want to miss it."

He let out a resigned sigh, his features gradually relaxing.

"Alright, but remember your promise. Don't overwork yourself."

"I won't," I nodded. "If you don't trust me, you can always call my sisters to check up on me. They'll keep me in line."

The thought clearly brought him some comfort – London was my family's territory, and the Quinn family would never let me work myself to exhaustion.

Ryan visibly relaxed. "Fine. Once I've handled things at the company, I'll fly over to see you."

"But don't expect advance notice," he added with a hint of mischief.

I smiled, biting my lip. "Feel free to check up on me anytime!"

"Then let me take you to the studio now. You can discuss everything with Maya."

"Perfect."

Ryan gave instructions to the driver, who promptly changed direction toward Dreamland Studio. He waited until I was safely inside before his car pulled away.

Maya's eyes widened when she saw me walk in. "Well, well! Look who's already back to the grind."

“I was going stir-crazy,” I admitted, collapsing into my favorite chair. “And besides, we have London to prepare for.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Maya hummed knowingly, passing me a cup of tea. “And I assume that’s why you’re here, not because you needed an escape from some testosterone-fueled showdown I heard about? God, I wish I’d been there to see Ryan Blackwood marking his territory!”

“It wasn’t funny!” I protested, though I couldn’t keep my lips from twitching. “Cedric deliberately provoked him, and Ryan nearly crushed my hand under the table.”

Maya threw her head back laughing. “The mighty Ryan Blackwood, jealous over a blast from your past! Please tell me there was chest-pounding involved.”

“Metaphorically, yes. At one point I thought they might start comparing their watches and bank accounts.”

“Men,” Maya sighed dramatically. “Speaking of which, how’s your brother doing? Still pretending he doesn’t get flustered every time I call him?”

I smirked. “Ethan asked about you three times during our last call, all very ‘casual’ inquiries, of course. When are you two going to stop dancing around each other?”

“When he admits he can’t live without me,” Maya replied airily, though I caught the faint blush on her cheeks. “Can we please focus on work?”

I decided to show mercy. “Actually, that’s why I’m here. I’ve decided to go to London myself to oversee the expansion.”

Maya’s expression shifted to surprise. “Really? Are you sure you’re ready? It’s only been a few weeks since—”

“I’m fine,” I insisted. “Besides, London Fashion Week is coming up. It’s the perfect opportunity to make our presence known in the European market.”

Maya’s eyes lit up with excitement despite her concern. “We could showcase the Celestial collection! The timing would be perfect.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.” I nodded eagerly. “The European fashion editors would go crazy for it.”

We spent the next hour brainstorming, energy building as we outlined our vision for Dreamland’s London debut. Maya pulled up the preliminary designs for our London boutique while I sketched modifications to adapt our signature pieces for the European market.

“This could be huge for us,” Maya said, her eyes shining. “If we nail London Fashion Week, Paris and Milan will be next.”

“We’re not just going to nail it,” I replied, feeling that familiar fire of ambition burning in my chest. “We’re going to redefine it. Dreamland isn’t just expanding to London—we’re going to make London remember why British design innovation used to rule the world.”

Maya grinned, her excitement matching mine. “The Quinn legacy combined with Dreamland’s fresh perspective? They won’t know what hit them.”

“That’s exactly what I’m counting on.” I smiled, feeling more alive than I had in weeks. “The European fashion world thinks they know what to expect from an American design house. We’re going to prove them gloriously wrong.”

“To conquering London,” Maya lifted her coffee mug in a toast.

I clinked my mug against hers. “And then the world.”

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Serena’s POV

I closed the door to Vivian’s room quietly, my heart still full from those precious moments with our daughter. Her tiny fingers had wrapped around mine as I sang her favorite lullaby. Those little moments made everything worth it.

“Did she finally fall asleep?” Ryan asked, leaning against the hallway wall with that devastatingly handsome smirk of his.

“Out like a light,” I whispered, walking toward him. “I reminded Mrs. Patterson about her feeding schedule. She needs the organic formula I prepared, not the store-bought one.”

Ryan pulled me into his arms, his scent enveloping me like a warm blanket. “You’ve already told her three times today,” he murmured against my hair.

“I just want to make sure everything’s perfect while I’m gone,” I sighed, leaning into his chest.

“Come with me,” he said suddenly, taking my hand and leading me toward our bedroom. The intensity in his eyes made my stomach flutter.

The moment our bedroom door closed, Ryan’s lips crashed against mine, hungry and desperate. My back hit the wall as his hands roamed my body possessively.

“I’m going to miss you so damn much,” he growled against my neck. “Every morning. Every night.”

I gasped as his teeth grazed my sensitive skin. "It's just for a few weeks," I managed to say, my fingers already working on his shirt buttons.

"Too long," he insisted, lifting me effortlessly. My legs wrapped around his waist as he carried me to our bed. "Way too fucking long."

His hands slid under my dress, leaving trails of fire across my skin. "I need you," he whispered, his voice rough with desire. "Need to feel you. All of you."

"Then take me," I challenged, pulling him down for another kiss.

Our clothes disappeared in a frantic blur of hands and desperate kisses. Ryan's eyes darkened as he took in the sight of me beneath him.

"God, you're beautiful," he breathed, tracing my curves with reverent fingers. "How did I get so lucky?"

I reached up to cup his face. "I ask myself the same question every day."

His lips found mine again, more tender this time but no less passionate. Every touch, every kiss felt like he was memorizing me, storing the sensations for the lonely nights ahead.

"Ryan," I moaned as his mouth traveled down my body, lingering at my most sensitive spots. "Please..."

"Patience, love," he teased, his breath hot against my inner thigh. "I want to savor every inch of you before you leave."

My back arched as his tongue found my center, pleasure shooting through me like lightning. His hands held my hips firmly as I writhed beneath his skilled mouth.

"Ryan, I need you now," I gasped, tugging at his hair.

He moved up my body, positioning himself between my legs. Our eyes locked as he pushed inside me, both of us moaning at the perfect connection.

"I love you," he whispered fiercely, beginning to move. "Never forget that while you're gone."

"Never," I promised, meeting his thrusts with my own.

Our bodies moved together in perfect rhythm, the way they always had. Despite everything we'd been through, this connection had never dimmed. If anything, it had grown stronger, more intense with each reunion and separation.

"Serena," he groaned, his movements becoming more urgent. "Come with me, baby."

His fingers found where we were joined, circling expertly until I was crying out his name, waves of pleasure crashing over me. He followed moments later, his face buried in my neck as he shuddered above me.

We lay tangled together afterward, my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat slow to normal. His fingers traced lazy patterns on my bare back.

“London won’t know what hit them,” he murmured into the quiet room.

I propped myself up to look at him. “What do you mean?”

His eyes were filled with pride as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Dreamland Studio, bursting onto the scene at London Fashion Week with my brilliant wife at the helm? They’re going to be blown away.”

“You really think so?” I asked, suddenly feeling vulnerable despite my confidence earlier with Maya.

“I know so,” he said firmly. “You’re extraordinary, Serena. Everything you touch turns to gold. Your vision, your talent... it’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

I felt tears prick at my eyes. After everything we’d been through, his faith in me meant more than any business success.

“I’m going to make you proud,” I promised.

“You already do,” he replied, pulling me back against his chest. “Every single day.”

We lay there in comfortable silence for a while, just breathing together.

“Maybe I should come with you,” Ryan suggested suddenly. “I could reschedule some meetings...”

I laughed softly against his skin. “And who would take care of Blackwood Industries? Not to mention Vivian needs at least one of us here.”

He sighed dramatically. “Fine. But I’m coming to London as soon as I can.”

“I’m counting on it,” I said, pressing a kiss to his chest. “Besides, I need someone to celebrate with when Dreamland takes London by storm.”

“That’s a given,” he murmured sleepily, his arms tightening around me. “Just promise me one thing?”

“Anything.”

“No late nights with charming British investors,” he said, only half-joking.

I poked his ribs playfully. “Jealous already and I haven’t even left yet?”

“Always,” he admitted shamelessly. “When it comes to you, always.”

I kissed him softly, pouring all my love into it. “You have nothing to worry about. My heart is firmly taken.”

As we drifted toward sleep, wrapped in each other’s arms, I couldn’t help feeling that strange mix of excitement and apprehension about London. It was a homecoming of sorts, though Ryan didn’t know that yet. My past and future were about to collide in ways I couldn’t begin to imagine.

But for tonight, I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the warmth of my husband’s arms around me, storing up these precious moments to carry with me across the ocean.

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Serena’s POV

The London branch location had been secured weeks ago, and I wasn’t flying solo. Several of Dreamland Studio’s core designers joined me on this conquest across the pond, all of us brimming with excitement and determination. We were ready to plant our flag in European soil.

“I’m loving the natural light in this space,” Maya commented, running her fingers along the edge of a drafting table as we walked through our newly rented studio. “Definitely gives off the creative vibes we need.”

“Right? That was exactly why I chose it,” I replied, mentally checking off items on my never-ending to-do list. We’d only been in London for two days, but it already felt like we’d been running nonstop.

After handling the basic setup – equipment installation, workspace arrangements, and team assignments – I finally had time to focus on the real reason we were here.

“Lucy, have you heard back from the Fashion Week organizers yet?” I called to my assistant, who was busy unpacking a box of sample fabrics.

She glanced up, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “They emailed fifteen minutes ago. They’re willing to meet tomorrow at 2 PM.”

I felt a flutter of excitement in my stomach. “Perfect.”

Maya sidled up next to me, her voice low. “You know, you could just make one call to Quinn Enterprises and be automatically listed as a headliner.”

I shook my head firmly. “That’s not how I want this to happen. Dreamland needs to earn its spot on its own merits.”

“Just saying, having that ace up your sleeve wouldn’t hurt,” she teased.

“And it’s staying up my sleeve,” I insisted. “We’ve made our name in New York on talent alone. London won’t be any different.”

Maya shrugged but smiled approvingly. “Boss lady with principles. That’s why we follow you into battle.”

The entire team was buzzing with energy as we set up the space. The London studio wasn’t as lavish as our New York headquarters, but I preferred its clean, minimalist aesthetic. High ceilings, exposed brick walls, and massive windows letting in that rare London sunshine – it felt like a fresh start.

I was reviewing some preliminary sketches when Lucy’s voice cut through my concentration.

“Ma’am, there’s someone here to see you, but he doesn’t have an appointment.”

Cedric stood in my doorway, looking jet-lagged but pleased with himself.

“Cedric? What are you doing here? I thought you were still in New York!” I exclaimed, genuinely surprised but happy to see a familiar face.

He smiled that warm, gentle smile that always put me at ease. “Wrapped things up early and flew back as soon as I heard about your London adventure. Had to see this place for myself.”

Our London office was minimalist compared to the New York headquarters—black and white color scheme instead of our usual warm tones—but it had a certain elegant simplicity I was growing to love.

“Come in, sit down,” I said, handing the sketches to my assistant with a few quick instructions before guiding Cedric into my office.

I poured him water myself, apologizing for the sparse accommodations. “We’re still getting things set up. It’s a bit bare-bones at the moment.”

“It’s perfect,” he said, studying me with that concerned look he often wore. “You look well, but are you pushing yourself too hard? This is a massive undertaking, Serena.”

“I’m fine, really,” I assured him, sitting across from him. “Yes, it’s hectic now, but once Fashion Week is behind us, things will settle into a rhythm.”

Cedric nodded, his eyes shrewd. “So you are targeting Fashion Week. Have you met with the organizers yet?”

“Tomorrow afternoon,” I confirmed. “Until then, I’m finalizing these designs. They need to be perfect.”

“You should know the competition is fierce,” he warned. “Those slots are coveted, and many established houses have standing reservations.”

His words added to the pressure building in my chest, but I refused to show it. “I’m well aware. But if we can make a splash at Fashion Week, Dreamland Studio will have officially arrived in London.”

Cedric’s lips curved into an admiring smile. “You’re as ambitious as ever. If there’s anything I can do to help—any connections I can leverage—just say the word.”

I nodded, assuming it was just a polite offer. “Thank you, I appreciate that.”

Before we could continue, my assistant knocked again, reminding me of my next meeting. Cedric took the hint and graciously excused himself, leaving me to dive back into the chaos.

Hours flew by in a blur of fabric swatches and design approvals. Before I knew it, darkness had fallen outside my window, and my phone buzzed with Ryan’s nightly check-in.

“Have you eaten dinner yet?” His deep voice filled my ear, and I immediately felt both guilty and comforted.

I glanced at the time and winced. “Of course I have,” I lied, terribly unconvincingly.

“Really?” His skepticism traveled clearly across the Atlantic.

I laughed, caught red-handed. “Is this an interrogation, Mr. Blackwood?”

“I knew it,” he sighed. “I called specifically to remind you to eat. You always forget when you’re working.”

His concern warmed me from the inside out. God, I missed him already. “Yes, sir. I’ll go eat right this minute.”

“That’s better,” he said, satisfaction evident in his voice. “Have you visited your family home yet?”

My smile faded slightly. “Not yet. I’ll go after things settle down a bit.”

“Hmm,” Ryan hummed knowingly. “Afraid they’ll clip your wings once you’re back in the Quinn nest?”

I sighed. “Must you always see right through me? Yes, alright? I’m enjoying this freedom, this feeling of building something with my own hands again. It’s been so long since I’ve felt this… alive.”

His voice softened. “Then enjoy it. Just promise me you’ll take care of yourself—proper meals, decent sleep. I need you coming back to me in one piece.”

“I promise,” I whispered, my heart aching with how much I missed him already.

After we hung up, I grabbed my coat, determined to keep my word about dinner. But when I reached the front door, I realized it was pouring rain outside, the wind whipping droplets against the windows.

“Ms. Quinn, would you like me to fetch dinner for you instead?” my assistant offered, always one step ahead.

Before I could answer, headlights flashed through the rain-streaked windows as a familiar car pulled up outside. Moments later, Cedric appeared at our door, umbrella in hand, his assistant behind him carrying what appeared to be bags of food.

“Serena, good evening,” he greeted me with perfect timing. “I thought you might be working late, so I brought dinner to you.”

I stared at him, completely caught off guard. He’d just been here this morning—what were the chances he’d show up again right when I needed food?

“Cedric,” I managed, the smell of whatever delicious food he’d brought making my stomach growl embarrassingly loud. “This is… unexpected.”

He smiled, looking pleased with himself. “Sometimes the best gestures are unexpected ones, wouldn’t you agree?”

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Serena’s POV

I stared at Cedric in surprise as I realized what he was holding. His assistant carried bags of what looked like—and smelled like—heaven after my long day.

“I was passing by and figured you’d be too busy to eat properly,” he explained with that easy smile of his. “So I brought dinner.”

“Thank you, but this is way too much food for just me,” I said, eyeing the multiple bags.

“The coffee and desserts are for your team,” he clarified smoothly. “Everyone’s been working so hard today. I thought they deserved a treat.”

My assistant’s face lit up immediately. “Thank you so much, Mr. Lancaster!”

“Why don’t you distribute those?” Cedric suggested to her before turning back to me. “It’s pretty windy outside, Serena. Let’s go in and talk.”

I nodded, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by his thoughtfulness. We walked back to my makeshift office space where he carefully arranged the takeout containers on my desk.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked, handing me chopsticks. “You should eat before it gets cold. This place has excellent food.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, taking a bite of the food. The familiar taste hit me instantly, and I froze mid-chew.

Cedric’s lips curved into a knowing smile. “Familiar flavor, isn’t it?”

I slowly looked up at him, realizing where this food was from. “This is from that restaurant near campus! The one we used to go to all the time during university!”

“It certainly is. The owner’s done well for himself—the place is twice the size it used to be.”

My eyes brightened, momentarily forgetting my initial reservations about Cedric’s attention. “Really? I definitely need to visit when I have time!”

He watched me eat with satisfaction, clearly pleased by my reaction. The brief dinner felt like a time capsule back to our university days, before everything got complicated. Unfortunately, I couldn’t eat much despite the nostalgic flavors, and our dinner ended all too quickly.

“Thanks again for tonight, Cedric,” I said as we finished.

“Don’t mention it,” he replied casually. “While you’re in London, anything you need—anything at all—just tell me. I’ll make it happen.”

The Lancaster family wielded considerable influence in London, making his offer more substantial than mere politeness. Still, I shook my head quickly.

“That’s very generous, but I can handle things myself,” I insisted.

Cedric nodded without pushing further and stood to leave. “It’s getting late. I should go. You should wrap up soon too, Serena.”

His respectful boundaries made the whole interaction surprisingly comfortable. “I will, just need to finish up a few things first.”

After he left, I returned to the main workspace where my team was enjoying the treats he'd brought.

"Everyone's been working so hard these past few days," I announced, pulling out my phone. "I just sent a bonus to the group chat—don't forget to claim it!"

"Thank you, Boss!" They cheered, their energy visibly renewed.

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The next day, I met with Mr. Sterling from the Fashion Week organizing committee at Time Light Café. After exchanging pleasantries, I got straight to business.

"These are the design sketches from Dreamland Studio," I said, sliding the portfolio across the table. "I understand the competition for the Fall Fashion Week is fierce, especially for newcomers like us in London. We're genuinely grateful for this opportunity."

Sterling accepted the portfolio but barely glanced at it before closing it again. His expression made my stomach sink.

"Mrs. Blackwood," he began, using my married name despite the fact I'd introduced myself as Serena Quinn. "I've heard of Dreamland Studio. You've made quite a name for yourself back in the States."

He paused, clearly uncomfortable. "But I'm afraid you've come too late. The Fashion Week participant list has already been finalized."

My expression faltered. When I'd originally contacted him, he'd given no indication the list was already set. How could everything be locked in after just one day?

"Mr. Sterling," I pressed, "as I mentioned, we're willing to accommodate any requirements you might have. This opportunity means a great deal to us."

He sighed, looking genuinely apologetic. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Blackwood, but the list isn't solely my decision. The planning started a month ago, and we just confirmed the final participants this week."

"I came today specifically to apologize in person. I hope we can work together next time."

I took a deep breath, unwilling to give up so easily. "Mr. Sterling, I understand the significance of Fall Fashion Week. Is there any possibility of adding just one more slot?"

"I truly am sorry, Mrs. Quinn." His expression shifted slightly. "Perhaps you might want to contact my supervisor? There's a chance things could change."

I could read between the lines. He didn't want to offend me, knowing Dreamland was backed by Blackwood Group. But he had his own relationships to maintain with local studios who had connections with his bosses.

"I see. Thank you for the suggestion," I said, biting my lip.

Sterling nodded, visibly relieved, and quickly found an excuse to leave.

I sat there flipping through our meticulously prepared sketches, disappointment settling heavy in my chest.

"What's wrong?"

I looked up to find Cedric standing before me, casually taking the seat across from mine.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, surprised.

"I had a client meeting here. What a coincidence finding you here too." Seeing my downcast expression, he ventured, "Let me guess—the committee rejected your application?"

I nodded. "I should've come to London earlier to handle all this properly."

"Don't get discouraged," he said gently. "Fashion Week doesn't start for another week. I could help you with this."

I shook my head immediately. "No need. I'll figure something out myself. I'm determined to be part of this Fashion Week, one way or another."

Hearing my refusal, Cedric seemed to want to say more but held back. "At least let me drive you back."

"Thanks, but my assistant is waiting in the car. It's getting late—I won't keep you from your work."

As I slid into my car, a new idea formed. The head of the organizing committee was Orion Nelson. Perhaps there was still a chance if I approached him directly.