

# CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 271

Serena's POV

I collapsed onto the hotel bed after another exhausting day, immediately grabbing my phone to check for messages. A smile spread across my face when I saw Ryan's request for a video call. Despite the time difference between London and the States, we'd been trying to connect whenever possible.

"Hey there," I said softly as his face appeared on my screen. Even through the pixelated video, his eyes made my heart skip.

"You look tired," Ryan noticed immediately, his brows furrowing with concern. "Working late again?"

I nodded, shifting to get more comfortable. "Fashion Week preparations are killing me. How's everything back home?"

"Missing you," he answered simply, making me blush.

"I miss you both so much," I admitted, feeling a familiar ache in my chest.

Ryan's expression shifted slightly. "I heard Cedric Lancaster is back in London."

I tensed momentarily, wondering how he knew. "Yes, we ran into each other yesterday. He brought dinner for my team."

"Just dinner?" Ryan asked, his tone casual but I could detect the undertone of jealousy.

"Ryan Blackwood, are you actually jealous?" I teased, but then softened. "He's an old friend who's being helpful while I'm in his city. Nothing more."

Ryan ran a hand through his hair. "I trust you, Serena. I just don't trust him."

His words warmed me unexpectedly. The old Ryan would have issued commands or arranged surveillance. This trust was new between us.

"Thank you for that," I said sincerely. "It means a lot that you're trusting me to handle this."

"So how's the Fashion Week preparation going?" he changed subjects, clearly making an effort.

My face fell. "Not great, actually. They've closed the participant list and I was too late. I'm going to try approaching the committee head directly."

"I could make a call," Ryan offered immediately. "Blackwood has connections with—"

“No,” I cut him off firmly. “I need to do this myself, Ryan. This is my studio, my career. I can’t always rely on the Blackwood name to open doors.”

He looked surprised but nodded. “What about your parents? LUXE has influence in European fashion circles.”

I shook my head again. “Same reason. I left that life behind, remember? I want to succeed as Serena Quinn, not as anyone’s daughter or wife.”

Ryan’s expression softened with understanding and something like pride. “You’re remarkable, you know that? Most people would use every advantage available.”

“I’m stubborn,” I corrected with a small smile.

“Determined,” he countered. “And I believe in you.”

Our conversation shifted to lighter topics. Ryan promised he’d try to arrange a quick trip to London if my show made it into Fashion Week. By the time Ryan appeared on screen holding Vivian in her soft pink onesie, I felt rejuvenated despite my exhaustion.

“Say hi to mommy, sweetheart,” Ryan cooed gently, angling six-month-old Vivian toward the camera.

My daughter’s bright eyes widened at the screen, her tiny fist waving in the air as she made soft babbling sounds. When she heard my voice saying “Hi, baby girl,” her face broke into the most beautiful gummy smile that made my heart ache with longing.

“She’s been reaching for your photo all day,” Ryan said softly, bouncing her gently as she started to fuss. “I think she misses you.”

Vivian suddenly let out a little squeal of delight, as if she recognized something about my voice, then promptly tried to grab at the phone screen with her chubby fingers.

“Mommy loves you so much, little one,” I whispered, wishing I could reach through the screen and hold her tiny warm body against me.

She gurgled happily in response before Ryan had to pull her away from the camera as she began to get sleepy and cranky.

After we ended the call, I fell asleep with a smile on my face, determined to overcome tomorrow’s challenges.

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The next morning, I wasted no time contacting Orion Nelson, head of the Fashion Week organizing committee. My heart pounded as I waited for him to pick up.

“Mr. Nelson? This is Serena Quinn from Dreamland Studio. I was hoping we could meet to discuss the upcoming Fashion Week.”

“Mrs. Quinn, a meeting won’t be necessary,” he replied, his British accent crisp and formal.

My heart sank until he continued, “I’ve already added Dreamland Studio to the participants list.”

I froze, certain I’d misheard. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Orion chuckled lightly. “I said your studio has already been added to the list, Mrs. Quinn. I wasn’t aware you were a friend of Cedric Lancaster’s, otherwise this... misunderstanding wouldn’t have happened.”

The pieces clicked into place immediately. Cedric had intervened despite my refusal.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Orion continued, oblivious to my mixed emotions. “The committee is quite looking forward to seeing what Dreamland Studio brings to London.”

I recovered quickly, forcing professionalism into my voice. “Thank you, Mr. Nelson. We won’t disappoint you.”

After ending the call, I immediately dialed Cedric’s number.

“Cedric,” I said the moment he answered, “about the Fashion Week spot—thank you for helping, even though I told you not to.”

“Congratulations, Serena,” he replied smoothly, avoiding taking direct credit. “If you really want to thank me, perhaps you could join me for dinner sometime.”

I couldn’t help smiling at his familiar persistence. “Fine. When are you free?”

“For dinner with you? Any time. I know you’re busy setting up your London branch.”

His consideration touched me, though I felt conflicted about accepting his help after specifically refusing it.

“I can always make time to thank someone who’s helped me,” I replied. “How about this weekend?”

“Perfect,” he agreed.

After hanging up, I stared thoughtfully at my phone. I had mixed feelings about Cedric’s intervention, but I couldn’t deny I was relieved to have secured the spot. Now I had mere days to prepare something spectacular for London Fashion Week.

I immediately called my team together. We had a mountain of work ahead and no time to waste.

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Ryan's POV

I collapsed into my office chair, running a hand through my hair. Another long day at Blackwood Group, and all I could think about was how quickly I could get home.

“Mr. Blackwood, the quarterly projections are ready for your review,” Simon said, placing a folder on my desk.

“Leave them. I’ll look at them tomorrow,” I replied, already reaching for my coat. “Anything urgent?”

“Nothing that can’t wait until morning, sir.”

I nodded and headed for the elevator. The drive home felt longer than usual tonight. Serena had only been gone a few days for her London trip, but the emptiness I felt was becoming unbearable. I never thought I’d become this dependent on someone’s presence.

When I finally walked through the front door of our home, the quietness hit me immediately.

“Vivian?” I called out, looking around for my daughter.

The nanny appeared from the kitchen. “Mr. Blackwood, Vivian just had her bottle and has fallen asleep. Her temperature has remained normal, and she’s been in good spirits all day.”

I nodded, trying not to show my disappointment. Even my six-month-old daughter seemed to be handling her mother’s absence better than I was.

“Dinner is ready whenever you’d like to eat, sir,” the nanny added.

“I know, I’ll eat in a bit,” I muttered, loosening my tie and pulling out my phone.

I sent Serena a quick message, asking how the preparations were going. No immediate response. She was probably busy with her Fashion Week preparations. The thought of her working late in London, possibly with Cedric Lancaster hovering nearby, made my jaw clench involuntarily.

After staring at my phone for another minute, I made a decision and dialed Simon.

“Book me on a flight to London for tomorrow,” I said when he answered.

“Tomorrow?” Simon sounded surprised. “But sir, you have the investors meeting at—”

“Reschedule it,” I cut him off, then softened my tone. “I’ll be back the following morning. It’s just a quick trip.”

“I’ll make the arrangements immediately, Mr. Blackwood.”

After hanging up, I felt lighter somehow. The prospect of seeing Serena tomorrow lifted my spirits considerably. I suddenly realized I was starving.

Just as I was heading to the dining room, a wail echoed from upstairs. I took the stairs two at a time, finding Vivian awake and crying in her crib.

“Hey there, princess,” I murmured, carefully lifting her tiny body. Her crying subsided almost immediately as I cradled her against my chest. “Did you have a bad dream?”

I paced around her nursery, gently bouncing her. “Guess what? I’m going to see Mommy tomorrow,” I whispered, brushing a kiss against her forehead. “I’d take you with me, but it’s a quick trip. You’ll have to stay here and be a good girl, okay?”

As if she understood, Vivian’s tiny mouth curved into a smile, her eyes—identical to Serena’s—looking up at me trustingly.

“That’s my girl,” I said, gently stroking her cheek. “You’re so much better at this than Daddy is. I’m still learning how to be patient when I miss someone.”

I continued rocking her until her eyelids grew heavy again. Even after she fell asleep, I held her a little longer, studying her features that were so much like her mother’s.

“Your mom is making quite a name for herself,” I whispered. “And she’s doing it all on her own, without the Blackwood name opening doors. She’s the strongest person I know.”

Finally placing Vivian back in her crib, I headed to my study. I needed to review some documents before my impromptu trip tomorrow. As I worked, I couldn’t help checking my phone every few minutes, hoping for a message from Serena.

When my phone finally buzzed, I practically lunged for it, only to find it was just Simon confirming my flight details. My disappointment was almost comical. Since when had Ryan Blackwood become so desperate for a text message?

Since falling in love with his wife, apparently.

I looked at the framed photo on my desk—Serena holding Vivian on the day we brought her home from the hospital. My family. The most important thing in my world.

“Just one more night,” I muttered to myself, returning to my work with renewed focus. Tomorrow, I’d be in London.

### Serena's POV

I looked up from the sketches, completely lost in my work until I heard a familiar voice.

“Serena, still busy?”

It was Cedric standing in my doorway, looking casually elegant as always in his tailored suit. I felt a small pang of guilt immediately.

“Cedric, you’re here,” I said, setting my pencil down.

“Did you forget about that lunch you promised me?” His tone was light, but I could see the expectation in his eyes.

I laughed awkwardly. “I’ve been so swamped these past few days, I completely forgot.”

“Then how about right now?” he suggested without hesitation.

I froze for a moment. He’d put me on the spot, and refusing would seem incredibly rude after he’d helped me so much with the Fashion Week arrangements.

“Alright,” I finally said. “Let me just hand off a few things, and we can go.”

“Take your time. I’ll wait right here.” Cedric made himself comfortable in the chair across from my desk, watching me with that same patient smile he’d had since university.

I quickly gathered the sketches that needed revisions and distributed them to my design team, giving brief instructions on the changes I wanted. All the while, I could feel Cedric’s eyes on me. There was something comforting yet unsettling about his presence—a reminder of a simpler time, before Ryan, before Vivian, before Dreamland Studio had become my lifeline.

“Where would you like to eat?” I asked once I’d grabbed my purse.

“How about near our old university? There are several new restaurants there. It would be nice to revisit old haunts.”

The suggestion made perfect sense—nostalgic, but not overly intimate. “Sounds good.”

During the drive, conversation flowed easily between us. We talked about industry gossip, mutual friends, and the upcoming Fashion Week.

The restaurant Cedric chose was bustling with students—their energy and optimism filling the air. We were seated by a window on the second floor, giving us a perfect view of the campus in the distance.

“This place hasn’t changed much,” I observed, taking in the familiar streets where I’d once walked as a student, full of dreams but uncertain about the future.

“No, it hasn’t. We’re the ones who’ve changed,” Cedric replied, his voice heavy with nostalgia.

“The years have gone by so quickly.” I sighed, memories washing over me—late nights in the design studio, group projects, dreams discussed over cheap coffee.

Cedric began reminiscing about specific moments from our university days—the time I’d fallen asleep in the library and he’d covered me with his jacket, the design competition we’d entered together, the graduation party where we’d promised to stay in touch.

“Remember Professor Harmon? He always said you’d be the one to watch,” Cedric said, leaning forward slightly. “He was right.”

I smiled, about to respond when the temperature in the room seemed to drop suddenly. Something made me turn toward the entrance.

My heart stopped.

Standing there, scanning the restaurant with those intense gray-blue eyes, was Ryan. My husband. In London. Unannounced.

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Serena’s POV

“Ryan?” I practically jumped out of my chair, heart racing at the sight of him standing there. God, I’d missed that face so much. “You’re here? In London?”

My mind was racing with a thousand questions, but my body just wanted to rush into his arms. Several days apart had felt like an eternity, and seeing him suddenly appear in front of me sent waves of happiness coursing through me.

Cedric’s expression darkened beside me, his previously relaxed demeanor instantly vanishing. I could feel the tension radiating from him, but honestly, I barely registered it. My eyes were locked on Ryan.

Ryan’s jaw was tight, his eyes flickering between me and Cedric with barely contained displeasure. He took a controlled breath before speaking. “I came to take you for your medical follow-up.”

I bit my lip, suddenly remembering Cedric's presence. As much as I wanted to leave immediately with Ryan, I couldn't just abandon Cedric mid-lunch. After all, this meal was meant to thank him for his help with Fashion Week arrangements.

"Did you just land?" I asked, trying to find a compromise. "Why don't you join us for lunch first? We can go to the hospital afterward."

"Mr. Blackwood, please do join us," Cedric interjected smoothly, though his eyes betrayed his annoyance. "Serena and I were just commenting on how excellent the food is here. Consider it your welcome to London."

"How generous of you," Ryan replied with a thin smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I'd be delighted to join."

The sarcasm in his voice was unmistakable, but I was too happy seeing him to care about the obvious tension between the men. Ryan slid into the seat next to me, his thigh pressing against mine under the table.

"Ryan, how is Vivian? Is she okay? Who's looking after her?" The questions tumbled out of me as soon as he sat down. "I didn't expect you to come all this way."

"Everything's fine," Ryan said, his voice softening considerably when addressing me. His hand found mine under the table, our fingers intertwining instantly. "Vivian is perfect. Mrs. Patterson has everything under control."

I couldn't stop smiling, drinking in every detail of his face. God, I'd missed him more than I'd realized. It had only been a few days, but it felt like coming up for air after being underwater too long. The rest of the restaurant seemed to fade away—Cedric included.

Across the table, Cedric cleared his throat and lifted his cup. "Mr. Blackwood must be quite busy running Blackwood Group. When are you planning to return to New York?"

I hadn't even thought about Ryan leaving again, but Cedric's question brought me crashing back to reality. Ryan had just arrived, and already Cedric was asking about his departure.

"Are you that eager to see me leave, Mr. Lancaster?" Ryan asked, his voice deceptively casual but laced with ice.

Cedric took a slow sip of his tea. "Just making conversation."

The lunch that followed was nothing like the nostalgic trip down memory lane Cedric had probably envisioned. The conversation was strained, with Ryan's arm possessively around my waist and Cedric's increasingly forced smiles. I knew Cedric had planned to take me for a walk around our old university campus afterward, but those plans evaporated the moment Ryan mentioned the medical checkup.

I felt a twinge of guilt about leaving Cedric, but it was quickly overshadowed by my excitement to spend time with Ryan. My husband had flown across an ocean just to see me—the thought made my heart flutter ridiculously.

After lunch, Ryan whisked me away to the hospital for my checkup. In the taxi, my hand never left his.

“Have you been working too hard?” he asked, his thumb tracing circles on my palm. “You look tired.”

I shook my head, unable to stop smiling. “Not at all. Don’t worry—you heard the doctor, my recovery is right on track.”

“The doctor also said you need rest,” Ryan pointed out, his lips quirking into that half-smile that always made my stomach flip. “Which part of that didn’t register?”

“I heard every word, Mr. Blackwood,” I teased back. “I promise I’ll be back in New York as soon as Fashion Week is over and the studio is stable.”

He nodded, bringing my hand to his lips. “Good. Vivian and I will be waiting for you at home.”

“Home,” I repeated softly, loving how right that sounded.

Back at my temporary office, Ryan settled into the corner sofa while I tried to focus on work. It was nearly impossible with him there, his presence magnetic. I kept finding excuses to walk past him, to touch his shoulder, to ask his opinion on things he knew nothing about.

By sunset, I decided enough was enough and closed my laptop earlier than planned.

“Let’s go,” I said, grabbing my bag. “I’m taking you to dinner.”

Ryan stood, his hand automatically finding the small of my back. “Have you visited your family yet? Why don’t we go to the Quinn house tonight?”

I hesitated briefly. I’d been avoiding going home partly because I knew they’d insist I rest more. But now that Ryan was here, and most of the major Fashion Week decisions had been made, a visit seemed perfect.

We picked up gifts on the way—a bottle of my father’s favorite whiskey and flowers for my mother. When we arrived, only my mother Hazel was home; everyone else was still working.

“Serena!” My mother practically ran to the door, enveloping me in a tight hug. “Let me look at you properly.”

The concern in her eyes made me feel guilty for not visiting sooner. “Mom, I’m fine, really. We just came from a checkup.”

I pulled out the medical papers from my bag like a child bringing home a good report card. “See? Ryan was there too—he can confirm everything’s perfect.”

“Thank goodness,” Mom sighed, relief softening her features. “You’ve been through so much, sweetheart.”

“Where’s my granddaughter?” Mom asked, peering around us as if Vivian might be hiding somewhere.

“I’m actually here for work,” I admitted. “Opening the London branch of Dreamland. Ryan just flew in today to surprise me—he’s heading back tomorrow.”

Mom gave me an exasperated look. “Already working? And you,” she turned to Ryan, “why aren’t you making her rest?”

“Mom!” I protested, feeling like a teenager again. “This was my decision, not Ryan’s. Besides, didn’t you always say a woman should have her own career?”

She sighed in that way only mothers can, acknowledging defeat. “You Quinns are all the same—workaholics to the core. Sit down, both of you. I’ll call your father and sister and have dinner prepared.”

We settled into the familiar living room sofa, my head naturally finding its place on Ryan’s shoulder. Being home felt right—safe and comfortable in a way nowhere else could match.

Eleanor arrived first, sweeping into the room with her usual energy. “Serena! I can’t believe you’re already launching the London branch!”

I laughed, suddenly realizing how much I’d missed my sister. “Well, you’ve been back in London for ages now. I’m just catching up.”

“Always pushing yourself too hard,” she said, shaking her head, but her proud smile told me she understood. “At least you look healthy—so I’ll spare you the lecture.”

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Serena’s POV

I couldn’t help but smile as Mom fussed around the kitchen, warming up food for our impromptu family dinner.

“Where’s Ethan?” I asked, looking around for my brother. “Still working?”

Eleanor snorted, giving me a knowing look. “Working? Is that what we’re calling it now? He’s with Maya at the office, having one of their special ‘meetings’ that mysteriously never make it onto the calendar.”

“Eleanor!” My mother scolded, but her eyes twinkled with amusement.

“What? Everyone knows they’re dating,” Eleanor defended herself. “Serena’s Dreamland partner and our brother—it’s practically a business merger at this point.”

I laughed, leaning into Ryan’s side. “Well, I’m happy for them. Maya deserves someone who appreciates her brilliance.”

“And Ethan needs someone who can handle his workaholic tendencies,” Eleanor added. “Speaking of which, look who just walked in!”

My father appeared in the doorway, his tired expression immediately brightening when he spotted me. “Serena!” He crossed the room in three quick strides and pulled me into a bear hug. “My girl is home!”

Dinner was everything I’d missed about home—loud conversations overlapping, laughter punctuating every story, and my mother constantly refilling plates no one had emptied. Ryan sat beside me, his hand resting comfortably on my knee under the table.

“So,” my father said after taking a sip of the whiskey we’d brought, “I’ve been so busy I didn’t even hear about your London branch until your mother mentioned it. Is Dreamland Studio officially across the pond now?”

“We’re getting there,” I replied, unable to hide my pride. “The space is perfect, and Fashion Week will be our grand introduction to London.”

“Need any help? Connections? Advice?” Dad offered, his fork hovering mid-air.

I shook my head, feeling a surge of independence. “Dad, I can handle this one on my own. Dreamland Studio’s reputation speaks for itself these days.”

Ryan squeezed my knee supportively, and I caught the flash of pride in his eyes.

“That it does,” my father conceded with a broad smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. “My daughter, the design powerhouse.”

The table erupted in laughter, the kind that wraps around you like a warm blanket. I glanced around at my family—my mother’s soft gaze, Eleanor’s animated gestures as she told a story about her latest client, my father’s proud smile, and Ryan’s steady presence beside me. This was what I’d been missing.

After dinner, Ryan and I slipped out for a walk through the neighborhood. The evening air was cool against my skin, the stars unusually bright for London. His hand found mine naturally, our fingers intertwining as we strolled along the quiet streets.

“I can’t remember the last time I felt this relaxed,” I sighed, leaning my head against his shoulder. “I just wish Vivian was here too. It would be perfect.”

The thought of our daughter made my heart ache with longing. Some nights I’d wake up from dreams where I could hear her babbling, see her tiny hands reaching for me.

“What’s the rush?” Ryan’s voice was soft, teasing. “When you’re back in New York, you’ll see her every day.” He pulled me closer, his warmth seeping through my light sweater. “Right now, you have me all to yourself.”

I laughed, feeling lighter than I had in weeks. “You’re right. And having you here with me... it really does make me happy, Ryan.”

We stopped under a streetlamp, its soft glow casting shadows across his face. I traced my finger along his jawline, memorizing the contours I’d miss again tomorrow.

“Coming home feels so good,” I admitted. “Once things aren’t so hectic, I could even stay at the family house while I’m here.” I leaned back, gazing up at the night sky. “Once the branch is stable, Maya can take over. I think she and Ethan are getting serious anyway.”

Ryan’s arms wrapped around my waist from behind, his chin resting on my shoulder.

“The future looks pretty good, doesn’t it?” I whispered, stretching my arms toward the stars. In that moment, happiness wasn’t an abstract concept—it was tangible, real, something I could almost touch.

Morning came too quickly. I stood at the airport departure gate, Ryan’s arms wrapped tightly around me.

“Call me when you land,” I murmured against his chest, breathing in his scent one last time.

“Take care of yourself,” he replied, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “I mean it, Serena. Don’t push too hard.”

I watched him disappear through security, already counting the days until I’d be back in New York with him and Vivian.

With Ryan gone, I threw myself back into work. Fashion Week was approaching fast, and I needed to make the most of this opportunity. The days blurred together in a whirlwind of fabric samples, model fittings, and endless meetings.

On the eve of Fashion Week, I led my team to the venue to begin setting up our display. The space buzzed with activity as competing studios prepared their sections, everyone sizing each other up while pretending not to.

“Excuse me, are you Mrs. Quinn from Dreamland Studio?”

I turned at the unfamiliar voice, finding myself face-to-face with a striking woman. Her vibrant red curls framed a confident face, and her outfit screamed fashion industry insider—perfectly tailored with just the right amount of edge.

“I’m Serena, yes,” I replied, extending my hand. “And you are?”

She assessed me for a moment before taking my hand. “Zara Percy, head designer at Kruse. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

I nodded in recognition. The name Zara Percy was well-known in our circles—she’d made her mark years before I had, mostly working overseas. I hadn’t realized she’d joined Kruse, one of London’s premier fashion houses.

“The pleasure’s mine,” I replied. “Your reputation precedes you.”

Zara smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “You’re too kind, Mrs. Quinn. Though Lazuli’s name carries quite the weight these days too.” She tilted her head, studying me. “I heard you recently had a baby, so I’m surprised to see you here in person.”

I suppressed a sigh—I’d grown tired of people’s shock that I could be both a mother and a professional. “Yes, that’s true, but I’ve recovered well. Fashion Week is too important an opportunity to miss. I needed to oversee things personally.”

“A true powerhouse,” she remarked, genuine admiration in her tone. “With Dreamland joining the London scene, this year’s show will be even more exciting. Perhaps there might be room for collaboration in the future?”

“Kruse is legendary,” I admitted, feeling a spark of interest. “I’d definitely be open to discussing possibilities.”

“If you’re free for lunch today, we could talk more,” she suggested. “Kruse is actually looking for new partners, and I personally think Dreamland would be perfect. We could even announce something during Fashion Week if things align.”

The invitation caught me by surprise—in a good way. Kruse was a major player in London, and a partnership could fast-track our establishment here.

“I’d love that. The café next door in about an hour?”

We settled on the details, and she departed with a friendly wave. As I watched her go, I found myself genuinely intrigued by both the potential collaboration and by Zara herself.

When I arrived at the café later, Zara was already seated, several sketches spread before her. She didn't bother to hide them as I approached.

“Mrs. Quinn, please join me,” she gestured to the chair opposite her.

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Serena's POV

I'd barely sat down and exchanged pleasantries when she slid the sketches across the table. They were evening gown designs, each one more exquisite than the last. Kruse was famous for their formal wear, with each season's limited pieces becoming instant must-haves among society women.

The sketches showed remarkable attention to detail—intricate beadwork patterns, clever structural elements, and flattering silhouettes.

“Are these for Fashion Week?” I asked, examining the detailed pencil work.

Zara smiled enigmatically. “Good eye. These are indeed Kruse's preparations for tomorrow's showcase.”

I froze, my coffee cup halfway to my lips. Even for tomorrow's show, these designs should be highly confidential. Why was she showing them to me? The gesture made no sense.

As if reading my thoughts, Zara leaned forward. “Mrs. Quinn, please don't misunderstand. I'm showing you these because I feel something's missing. I was hoping you might offer some insight.”

Her eyes met mine, and I couldn't decide if this was a genuine request for collaboration or something else entirely.

“You want my opinion?” I asked, unable to hide my surprise. “On designs you're presenting tomorrow?”

Zara tucked a strand of vibrant red hair behind her ear, leaning forward with an intensity that felt both flattering and slightly unnerving. “Precisely. I've hit a creative wall with these pieces, and honestly, Lazuli's perspective might be exactly what I need.”

I studied the sketches more carefully now. The gowns were undeniably beautiful—elegant lines, dramatic silhouettes, the kind of pieces that would make entrance statements at galas and red carpets. But I immediately saw what she meant about something missing.

“They’re exquisite, but...” I hesitated, not wanting to overstep.

“Please, be candid,” Zara urged. “That’s exactly why I wanted to speak with you.”

I took a deep breath. “They’re technically perfect, but they feel... safe. Like something Kruse has done before.” I pointed to one particular design. “This neckline, for instance—it’s beautiful, but it’s become a Kruse signature. Fashion Week audiences expect surprise, something that makes them gasp.”

Zara’s eyes widened slightly, then she broke into a slow smile. “That’s exactly what’s been bothering me. Too familiar.”

For the next hour, we bounced ideas back and forth, sketching modifications on napkins and talking about everything from fabric choices to styling. I found myself genuinely enjoying Zara’s company—she was smart, quick-witted, and refreshingly direct.

“You know,” she said as she stirred her second cappuccino, “when I suggested this meeting, I had an ulterior motive beyond just getting your opinion.”

“Oh?” I raised an eyebrow, suddenly wary.

“Kruse is looking to expand our accessories line. Your jewelry designs would complement our evening wear perfectly.” She leaned forward. “I’m thinking a limited collaboration—Dreamland Studio creates exclusive pieces for the Kruse winter collection. The timing with Fashion Week couldn’t be better for an announcement.”

My mind raced with possibilities. A collaboration with Kruse would accelerate Dreamland’s entrance into the London market exponentially. It was the kind of opportunity designers dreamed about.

“That’s... quite an offer,” I said carefully, trying to contain my excitement. “I’d need to discuss it with my team, of course.”

“Of course,” Zara nodded. “But I’d love your initial thoughts.”

“Honestly? I think it could be brilliant,” I admitted. “Our aesthetics are different enough to create something fresh, but complementary enough to make sense.”

As we continued talking, I couldn’t help thinking about Ryan’s reaction. He’d be thrilled—this was exactly the kind of strategic partnership that could establish Dreamland’s London branch firmly in the market. I made a mental note to call him tonight, already imagining his proud smile.

When we finally parted ways, exchanging numbers and promises to meet again after Fashion Week, I practically floated back to our preparation area. Maya caught sight of my expression immediately.

“What’s got you looking like you just landed a *Vogue* cover?” she asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Potentially something even better,” I whispered, pulling her aside to explain the Kruse opportunity. “This could be huge for us, Maya!”

She squeezed my arm excitedly. “Serena, that’s amazing! But...” her enthusiasm dimmed slightly, “are you sure about Zara Percy? I’ve heard some industry rumors...”

“What kind of rumors?” I frowned.

Maya shrugged. “Just whispers about her being difficult to work with. Supposedly she’s burned some bridges.”

I considered this information. “Well, she seemed perfectly lovely to me. Besides, we’d be working with Kruse, not just with Zara personally.”

“True,” Maya conceded. “And this opportunity is too good to pass up over gossip.”

We spent the rest of the day in a blur of activity—finalizing displays, checking lighting, rehearsing the models one last time. By evening, my feet were killing me, but satisfaction hummed through my veins. Everything was coming together beautifully.

Back at my hotel room, I kicked off my shoes and immediately called Ryan. Despite the late hour in New York, he answered on the second ring.

“Miss me already?” His deep voice wrapped around me like a warm blanket, making the distance between London and New York feel momentarily smaller.

“Always,” I smiled into the phone. “But I also have news that couldn’t wait. How would you feel about Dreamland collaborating with Kruse?”

There was a moment of silence. “Kruse? The luxury evening wear brand?”

“The very same. Their chief designer approached me today about creating jewelry pieces for their winter collection.”

“That’s...” Ryan paused, and I could practically see him processing the business implications. “That’s actually brilliant timing. A perfect entry strategy for the London market.”

I grinned. “Exactly what I thought! We’re still in early discussions, but it feels promising.”

“You’re incredible, you know that?” The pride in his voice made my chest warm. “Not even officially launched in London yet, and you’re already securing major collaborations.”

“Don’t get too excited—it’s not a done deal,” I cautioned, though I couldn’t keep the excitement from my own voice. “How’s Vivian?”

“Missing her mother. She keeps staring at your photo on my phone.” There was a rustle, and I imagined him peering into the nursery. “She’s sleeping now, but she’s been extra fussy today.”

A pang of longing shot through me. “I miss her so much. Give her extra kisses from me.”

“Every morning and night,” he promised. “Have you been taking your medicine?”

“Yes, Dr. Blackwood,” I teased. “And eating properly, and not overworking.”

“Liar,” he said, but I could hear the smile in his voice. “I know exactly how you get before a big show.”

We talked for another half hour before I reluctantly admitted I needed sleep. Fashion Week officially began tomorrow, and I needed to be at my sharpest.

“I love you,” Ryan said softly. “Call me after the show.”

“I will. Love you too.”

As I drifted off to sleep that night, my mind swirled with jewelry designs that would complement Kruse gowns, business expansion plans, and the sweet memory of Ryan’s face when he’d surprised me in London. Everything was falling into place perfectly.

## CEO’s Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 276

Serena’s POV

I smoothed down my custom-tailored blazer, giving myself a final once-over in the mirror before meeting with Kruse. The outfit was perfect—professional yet creative, with just enough edge to make a statement. The subtle Dreamland Studio pin on my lapel caught the light as I turned. I needed to look impeccable for this negotiation, especially after seeing those sketches.

“Ready for battle,” I murmured to myself, grabbing my portfolio and heading out to meet Ivy.

She was waiting outside my hotel, her vibrant red curls catching the London sunlight. There was something in her posture—a slight tension in her shoulders—that my instincts immediately

picked up on. This wasn't just a professional meeting for her; there was desperation lurking beneath her composed exterior.

"You look stunning, Mrs. Quinn," Ivy greeted me.

As our cab navigated through London's busy streets, I decided to test the waters.

"So, how long have you been with Kruse?" I asked casually, watching her reaction carefully.

Ivy's fingers twisted in her lap—a nervous tell. "Three years now. I was brought on to revitalize their evening wear line."

"And how's that been working out for you?"

She hesitated, then something in her seemed to break. Perhaps it was the genuine interest in my tone, or maybe she was simply at her breaking point.

"If I'm being honest, not as well as I'd hoped," she admitted, her professional mask slipping. "These past few months have been... challenging. The creative direction keeps shifting, designs get rejected without explanation, and Matthews—" She stopped herself, shaking her head.

"Matthews?" I prompted gently.

"Our branch director. He's... difficult, to put it mildly." She looked out the window, her reflection showing a flash of vulnerability. "I used to love designing. Now I dread going into the studio each morning."

I recognized the look in her eyes—I'd seen it in my own reflection during my darkest days with Ryan. That trapped feeling, that sense of having your creativity smothered.

"Mrs. Quinn," she turned to me suddenly, her voice low and intense, "if I hadn't met you yesterday, I honestly wouldn't know what to do anymore. Those designs you saw—they've been rejected three times already. Fashion Week is tomorrow, and we're still finalizing details that should have been locked in weeks ago."

I studied her for a moment, sensing an opportunity.

"After Fashion Week concludes, do you plan to continue working with Kruse?" I asked directly.

Ivy froze, her eyes widening as she caught my meaning. "Mrs. Quinn, are you suggesting—"

"Join Dreamland Studio," I said without hesitation. "I need designers with your talent. Whatever requirements you have, we can discuss them. I may be the boss, but my team members are never shortchanged, and they certainly don't face the kind of stress you're dealing with at Kruse."

I could see the hope blooming in her eyes.

“I’m not asking for your answer now,” I added softly. “Think about it carefully. After Fashion Week, we can talk more.”

Ivy nodded, a small smile playing at her lips. “I will. Thank you.”

When we arrived at Kruse’s London branch, the building was impressive—all glass and chrome, projecting an image of sleek modernity. Ivy led me through security and up to the executive floor, her steps becoming more hesitant the closer we got to our destination.

“Matthews’s office is just down here,” she murmured. “He should be expecting us.”

As we approached, I could hear a harsh voice through the partially open door. Matthews was on the phone, his tone angry and dismissive.

“I don’t care what Paris thinks! This is my branch, my decision. If they wanted input, they should have—” He cut himself off, noticing us at the doorway. With a frustrated growl, he ended the call abruptly.

The tension in the room was palpable.

“Mr. Matthews,” Ivy began tentatively, “this is Mrs. Quinn from Dreamland Studio.”

He took a deep breath, visibly trying to compose himself before standing to greet me.

“Mrs. Quinn, hello.” His handshake was firm but brief, his eyes evaluating me with undisguised skepticism. “Please, have a seat.”

I remained standing, noticing how he hadn’t offered Ivy a seat. These power games were familiar territory to me.

“Ivy, shouldn’t you be at the venue ensuring everything is ready for tomorrow?” he asked pointedly, dismissing her presence entirely.

I watched Ivy’s face fall slightly, though she maintained her professional composure. “Mr. Matthews, Mrs. Quinn is here specifically to discuss Fashion Week. A potential collaboration.”

His eyebrow arched. “Is that so?”

I smiled coolly. “If you’re too busy to hear the proposal, I understand. My time is valuable as well.” I turned slightly as if preparing to leave.

The dismissive tone worked.

“Mrs. Quinn, forgive my manners,” he said, forcing a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “I’ve had some frustrating news this morning. Please, sit down.”

I glanced at Ivy, making it clear I expected her to be included in this conversation, before taking a seat.

“What kind of collaboration did you have in mind?” Matthews asked, getting straight to the point.

I matched his directness. “I propose that Ivy’s evening wear designs share the runway with Dreamland Studio’s accessories. A joint presentation, combining our strengths.”

Matthews let out a short, dismissive laugh. “You must be joking. In all my years at London Fashion Week, I’ve never heard of such an arrangement.”

I leaned forward slightly, my voice dropping to a more challenging tone. “And now you have.” I held his gaze steadily, letting my natural dominance as a Quinn show through. “You’re the branch director here, so I assume you’re perceptive enough to see that Ivy’s designs have… gaps that need addressing. Dreamland’s pieces would complement them perfectly.”

Matthews’s expression hardened as he shot an accusatory glance at Ivy. “Mrs. Quinn, what exactly are you implying? Have you seen our design drafts? Those are strictly confidential materials.” His tone became threatening. “As someone in the industry, you should understand the importance of confidentiality.”

## CEO’s Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 277

Serena’s POV

I watched Ivy bite her lip nervously as she rushed to explain. “Mr. Matthews, you’ve misunderstood. Mrs. Quinn only chatted with me. She hasn’t seen any of our Fashion Week pieces.”

I waved my hand dismissively. “Miss Percy, why don’t you step outside for a moment? I’d like to discuss this collaboration privately with Mr. Matthews.”

I needed to get her out of the room—partly to protect her. The last thing I wanted was to witness Matthews tear into her while I sat there. Something about her vulnerability stirred my protective instincts.

“Of course,” she replied, clearly understanding my intentions. She left quickly, gently closing the door behind her.

The office fell silent. Matthews sat across from me, brow furrowed with impatience.

“Mrs. Quinn, Kruse and Dreamland Studio aren’t exactly competitors. But looking at our sketches in advance seems… inappropriate, don’t you think?”

I leaned forward, my voice dropping to a cool, authoritative tone. “Mr. Matthews, that’s hardly the point here. If you use Ivy’s current pieces for Fashion Week, Kruse will suffer a devastating loss. When headquarters starts looking for someone to blame, do you really think you can pin everything on her?”

I tilted my head slightly. “I’d say you’ve enjoyed your position as branch director long enough.”

His face changed color as my words hit their mark. Whatever comeback he’d prepared died in his throat.

“You have two options,” I said, offering a thin smile. “Either replace Ivy’s collection for Fashion Week, or collaborate with Dreamland Studio.”

Matthews’ mouth twitched as his expression darkened. “Mrs. Quinn, this is an internal Kruse matter. We don’t need your… advice.”

I stood up smoothly, my voice turning glacial. “Take your time to consider. Accept my suggestion or don’t. After Fashion Week, the results will speak for themselves.” I buttoned my blazer casually. “I don’t necessarily need to collaborate with Kruse. I’m doing this to help you.”

Without waiting for his response, I walked out. Ivy was pacing nervously in the hallway, surprised to see me emerge so quickly.

“Mrs. Quinn, what happened—”

I gave her a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Ivy. If Matthews insists on using your unfinished work for Fashion Week, terminate your contract.”

Her eyes widened.

“I’ll handle any consequences,” I continued. “All the legal fees, the career implications—everything. That is, if you want my help.”

Emotion flickered across her face. I could tell she was speechless with gratitude.

“I should head back,” I said. “I have a mountain of work waiting for me.”

Ivy nodded. “Let me walk you out, Mrs. Quinn.”

Author’s POV

After Serena left Kruse, Ivy returned to Matthews’ office. Taking a deep breath outside his door, she finally felt ready to stand up for herself.

Matthews was still sitting on the sofa, mulling over Serena's words when Ivy entered. His expression immediately turned hostile.

"What exactly did you tell Mrs. Quinn?" he demanded.

Ivy swallowed hard, steeling herself before speaking. "Mr. Matthews, if you insist on using my pieces, you must collaborate with Dreamland Studio. Otherwise, I'll terminate my contract with Kruse."

His eyes narrowed in panic. "Terminate? Do you have any idea how much the penalty clause will cost you?"

Ivy let out a bitter laugh. She had been blinded by Kruse's flashy promises when she was younger and less experienced. For years, the overseas headquarters had treated her like a cash cow, forcing her to create designs that violated her artistic integrity. When she pushed back, they transferred her to this branch. Now they kept her trapped with an oppressive contract.

Serena's arrival had given her hope—a lifeline she desperately needed.

"Don't use that contract to threaten me anymore, Matthews. I'm done!" Her emotions finally broke through as she rolled up her sleeve dramatically. "After I suffered this serious injury, you didn't show an ounce of concern. Instead, you forced me to take responsibility for Fashion Week."

Her voice rose with frustration. "I've told you repeatedly these pieces are old designs that aren't ready for the runway. But you refused to listen. Now there's a perfect solution, and you're still resistant. What exactly do you want?"

Matthews, having never seen Ivy so passionate, finally backed down. "Ivy, calm down. Everything's negotiable. Dreamland Studio just opened in London, and this is all very rushed. I'm just being cautious. If they have ulterior motives and something goes wrong during Fashion Week, will you take responsibility?"

Ivy scoffed. "It's all about avoiding blame, isn't it? Fine, Matthews. If you're too afraid to take responsibility, I will. Now can you finally agree to the collaboration?"

With Ivy's guarantee, Matthews reluctantly agreed.

As Ivy walked back to her office, her heart was still racing from the confrontation. She had never stood up to Matthews like that before, and the adrenaline coursed through her veins. Part of her couldn't believe she had actually done it—threatened to terminate her contract, called out his cowardice so boldly. But another part of her felt incredibly liberated, as if a weight she'd been carrying for years had finally lifted.

Serena had been right. She deserved better than this toxic environment, better than being treated like a disposable asset. The fear of the penalty clause still gnawed at her, but for the first time in years, she felt like she had options. She had someone in her corner.

Her hands trembled slightly as she reached for her phone. She needed to call Serena immediately—to share the good news, to thank her for the courage she'd given her, and maybe to finally start believing that things could change.

Taking a steady breath, Ivy dialed Serena's number, a small smile playing at her lips as she waited for her to pick up.

## CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 278

Serena's POV

My phone vibrated with an incoming call, and Ivy's name flashed across the screen. I couldn't help but smile as I answered.

"Mrs. Quinn," Ivy's voice came through, sounding more confident than I'd ever heard her. "Matthews finally agreed to the collaboration. You were right—I just needed to stand my ground!"

A warm sense of satisfaction washed over me. "I knew you could do it, Ivy. Sometimes people just need a little push to find their voice."

We quickly arranged to meet within the hour. Fashion Week was practically breathing down our necks, and there wasn't a moment to waste. This collaboration needed to be perfect—both our reputations were on the line.

When we met at Kruse's design studio, we skipped the pleasantries and dove straight into work mode. I'd already reviewed Zara Percy's sketches briefly, but seeing her finished pieces hanging on the mannequins sparked an immediate flood of ideas in my mind.

"These silhouettes," I murmured, running my fingers along the delicate fabric of one evening gown. "They have such potential for our celestial elements."

Every Dreamland Studio collection revolves around a distinct theme, each telling its own story. What struck me most was how seamlessly Zara's creations aligned with Dreamland's aesthetic—as if our design languages were speaking the same dialect.

"What if we incorporated these crystal embellishments along the neckline?" I suggested, pointing to one of her simpler designs. "They'd catch the light beautifully on the runway."

Ivy's eyes lit up. "Yes! And if we added that signature metallic thread you use in the Dreamland collections through the bodice—"

"It would create continuity between both brands," I finished her thought, feeling that rare spark of creative synchronicity.

We fell into an effortless rhythm, bouncing ideas off each other, sketching modifications, and occasionally bursting into laughter when we'd both reach for the same fabric swatch simultaneously.

"Great minds," I'd say with a wink.

"Or desperate designers with a deadline," she'd quip back.

Hours melted away. The afternoon sun sank below London's skyline, and before I knew it, darkness had fallen outside the studio windows. Our impromptu workshop had produced something remarkable—a cohesive collection that honored both our artistic visions while creating something entirely new.

"Mrs. Quinn," Ivy said, noticing me stifle a yawn, "you should take a break. I can handle the finishing touches."

I hesitated, glancing at our shared workspace covered in sketches, fabric swatches, and half-empty coffee cups. Pride swelled in my chest at what we'd accomplished in mere hours.

"Are you sure?" I asked, though my body was practically begging for rest. The creative adrenaline that had sustained me was wearing thin.

"Absolutely. You've done more than enough. Our team can work with yours to finalize everything."

As I gathered my things to leave, I noticed Ivy's dinner—delivered by her assistant hours ago—sitting mostly untouched on the table. She'd been so engrossed in our work she'd barely taken a bite. That level of dedication was exactly what Dreamland Studio needed.

"Mrs. Quinn, your phone is ringing," Ivy called out just as I reached the door.

I fished my phone from my purse and felt a flutter in my chest when I saw Ryan's name on the screen. No matter how many times we spoke, that feeling never quite disappeared.

"Thanks, Ivy. I'll see you tomorrow for the final run-through," I called back, stepping into the hallway with a lightness in my step despite my exhaustion.

"Good evening, Mr. Blackwood," I answered playfully. "Checking up on me again?"

His warm chuckle traveled through the line, wrapping around me like a familiar blanket. “Just wanted to hear your voice. Fashion Week eve—you must be knee-deep in chaos right now.”

“You have no idea,” I sighed, making my way to the waiting car. “But we’ve made incredible progress. I think I’ve found a design prodigy in Ivy Percy. She has this innate understanding of balance and form that can’t be taught.”

“Should I be worried you’ll replace all your designers with new talent?” Ryan teased, but I could hear the genuine interest beneath his words.

“Just expanding our family,” I replied, settling into the backseat of the car. “Speaking of which, I can’t wait to come home after all this. London is beautiful, but...”

“But it’s not where your heart is?” Ryan finished softly.

“Something like that,” I admitted, feeling a blush warm my cheeks. Even after everything we’d been through, he still had that effect on me. “Once Fashion Week wraps and things stabilize here, I’ll be on the first flight back to New York.”

“I’ll be counting the days, Serena,” he said, his voice dropping to that intimate tone reserved just for me. “The house feels empty without you bustling around with fabric samples and coffee mugs in every room.”

I laughed, picturing the creative chaos I often created. “You miss my mess? That’s how I know it’s true love.”

“I miss everything about you,” he replied simply. “Even finding your sketches mixed in with my business reports.”

“That was one time!” I protested, but couldn’t keep the smile from my voice.

“Three times, actually. But who’s counting?” His gentle teasing made me feel closer to him, despite the ocean between us.

“Get some rest tonight,” Ryan continued. “Tomorrow’s your moment to shine. I wish I could be there to see it.”

“Me too,” I whispered, feeling the day’s exhaustion finally settling into my bones. “I’ll call you after the show.”

“I’ll be waiting. I love you, Serena.”

“Love you too,” I murmured, ending the call as my eyes grew heavy.

We chatted for a few more minutes about nothing in particular. When a yawn escaped me, I realized how truly exhausted I was. After saying goodnight, I ended the call and leaned back

against the seat, allowing myself to finally relax. Tomorrow would be a defining moment for both Dreamland Studio and Ivy Percy—and I was ready.

## CEO's Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 279

Serena's POV

I arrived at the Fashion Week venue early the next morning, the buzz of anticipation already thick in the air.

Ivy was already there, immersed in final preparations with the models. I watched her from the corner of the hallway, impressed by her meticulous attention to detail as she adjusted accessories and gave last-minute instructions.

I chose not to interrupt her flow, instead hanging back to confer with my assistant about the day's schedule. As we were discussing the post-show interviews, Matthews appeared, striding purposefully down the corridor before pushing open the door to the models' dressing room.

“Ivy,” his voice carried into the hallway, commanding and sharp. “How are the preparations coming along?”

I edged closer, curious about their interaction.

“Everything’s on schedule,” Ivy replied, her voice brimming with confidence. “We’re ready to make a statement today.”

“Good. There are several additional models waiting in the adjacent room,” Matthews announced. “You’ll need to reallocate the gowns and reorganize the lineup.”

I watched Ivy’s expression shift from confidence to confusion. “I’m sorry, Matthews, but there must be some misunderstanding. All our confirmed models are already here and nearly ready. The adjacent room isn’t allocated to us.”

“How could there be a misunderstanding?” Matthews’ tone hardened. “These models were specially requested by Kruse. They have significant industry presence and following.”

“You should arrange them immediately.”

The tension in Ivy’s shoulders was visible even from where I stood. She glanced at her watch with a slight frown.

“Matthews, we’re less than an hour from curtain. The current models have already been fitted, styled, and briefed on the choreography. Changing now would—”

“Ivy,” he cut her off, his voice dropping to that dangerous quiet that executives use when they’re not making a suggestion. “Fashion Week is as much about who wears the clothes as the clothes themselves. Rather than arguing with me, I suggest you handle this immediately.”

Ivy fell silent, her face a mask of controlled frustration.

Without another word, she headed toward the adjacent room. I stayed hidden, curious to see how she would navigate this obvious sabotage.

When Ivy opened the door to the adjacent room, I could hear the voices of irritated models waiting inside.

“It’s about time someone showed up,” one woman snapped. “We’ve been waiting forever. Where are our outfits? Where are the makeup artists?”

“Kruse brought us here hours ago, and we’ve just been sitting around,” another added. “Is this how you run a professional show?”

Ivy took a deep breath, centering herself before speaking. “Ladies, I apologize for the confusion. There appears to have been a scheduling error with Kruse’s management.”

She straightened her posture, her voice becoming firm. “However, our lineup has been finalized, rehearsed, and is ready to walk. I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to return to your agencies. Of course, you’ll be compensated fully for your time today.”

The models erupted in protests.

“Are you kidding me? Do you have any idea who I am?”

“I didn’t clear my schedule for a Fashion Week show just to get paid to sit in a room!”

“My agent will hear about this. You can’t just dismiss us minutes before a show!”

Ivy remained poised despite the onslaught. Matthews had deliberately created this situation to undermine her debut.

“Enough!” Ivy’s voice cut through the chaos, authoritative and clear. “This is London Fashion Week, not a neighborhood runway. If you choose to create a scene, that’s your prerogative.”

Her gaze swept over the disgruntled models. “But understand that the organizing committee keeps meticulous notes on who creates problems. Once you’re blacklisted, good luck getting invited back to any major fashion event in Europe.”

The room fell into stunned silence. Ivy reached into her bag and pulled out a stack of cash—emergency funds she’d obviously prepared for unforeseen circumstances.

“Take this as compensation for your time,” she said evenly. “Walk away now, and this incident never happened. Create problems...” She shrugged. “Well, I’ve nothing to lose. I don’t intend to remain at Kruse after today anyway.”

Smart girl, I thought as the models reluctantly accepted the money and filed out.

“Mrs. Quinn,” my assistant whispered, drawing my attention back. “The show is about to begin.”

I nodded, a smile playing at my lips. “Yes, and I believe the real performance is just getting started.”

The Kruse and Dreamland Studio collaboration had been deliberately scheduled as the finale—the coveted closing spot that fashion insiders recognize as a mark of prestige. I took my front-row seat, observing the other collections with professional interest.

When our turn finally arrived, the venue darkened dramatically. The host offered a brief introduction about the unprecedented collaboration between an established European design house and an emerging American studio. As the first beats of our carefully selected soundtrack filled the space, spotlights pierced the darkness to illuminate the runway.

The first model emerged wearing one of Ivy’s silk evening gowns, ethereal and flowing, paired perfectly with Dreamland’s celestial-inspired jewelry. The audience’s reaction was immediate—hushed whispers of appreciation followed by enthusiastic applause as each new design appeared.

“Quite an interesting pairing,” the fashion editor next to me murmured. “Kruse and Dreamland—who would have thought?”

“The cohesion between the garments and accessories is remarkable,” another critic commented. “They’ve achieved that rare balance where neither overshadows the other.”

“That young designer—Ivy Percy—she’s the one behind these gowns? Absolutely brilliant construction.”

I smiled, satisfaction warming my chest as I watched our vision come to life on the runway. Each model moved with confidence, showcasing how seamlessly our two aesthetics had merged into something greater than either could have achieved alone.

Across the runway, I spotted Matthews, his expression growing increasingly sour as the show progressed without a hitch. He’d clearly expected chaos—hoped for it, even—but instead was witnessing a triumph.

When the final model completed her walk, Ivy stepped onto the runway to thunderous applause. The lighting shifted to illuminate her as she addressed the audience.

“I want to thank everyone for being here today,” she began, her voice steady despite what I knew must be overwhelming nerves. “These designs wouldn’t have been possible without the guidance and collaboration of Mrs. Serena Quinn.”

She gestured toward me with genuine warmth. “Mrs. Quinn is also known in design circles as Lazuli, a brilliant jewelry designer in her own right. This collaboration was her vision, and I’m incredibly honored she chose to work with me.”

The spotlight suddenly swung to illuminate me in my seat, catching me by surprise. The audience erupted in applause.

“Mrs. Quinn,” Ivy called out, extending her hand toward me. “Would you join me on stage to share more about our inspiration for this collection?”

This hadn’t been part of our plan, but I recognized a golden opportunity when I saw one. Rising gracefully, I made my way to the stage, conscious of every camera tracking my movement.

“Good afternoon,” I began, my voice carrying confidently through the venue. “I’m Serena Quinn, founder of Dreamland Studio, and yes—also the designer behind the Lazuli collections.”

I turned slightly to include Ivy in my gaze. “This collaboration came about because I’ve long admired Ivy Percy’s distinctive aesthetic. As Dreamland establishes its presence in London, finding a kindred creative spirit has been invaluable.”

I directed my attention back to the audience. “I’m grateful to the Fashion Week committee for giving our studio this opportunity to introduce ourselves to the European market in such a meaningful way.”

The response was even more enthusiastic than I’d anticipated—fashion journalists were already tapping away on their tablets, no doubt rushing to publish the first articles about our show.

Ivy and I exchanged knowing smiles, both aware of how perfectly our gamble had paid off. Not only had we created a stunning collection, but we’d also established Dreamland’s legitimacy in one of the world’s most competitive fashion markets.

## CEO’s Regret After I Divorced – Chapter 280

Serena’s POV

“Those additional models were deliberate sabotage, weren’t they?” Ivy demanded, her posture rigid with righteous anger.

Matthews scoffed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Ivy.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” she countered. “You hoped I’d fail today. What—did you think I was getting too much attention at Kruse? Were you worried I might outshine you?”

“You’re giving yourself far too much credit,” Matthews sneered. “Kruse has dozens of talented designers. Why would I bother targeting you specifically?”

He waved dismissively. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have actual important matters to attend to. You should focus on wrap-up duties.”

As Matthews turned to leave, Ivy called out, “Wait!”

He paused, irritation evident in the set of his shoulders.

Ivy reached into her bag and pulled out an envelope, holding it out with unwavering conviction. “Matthews, I’m resigning from Kruse, effective immediately.”

Matthews stared at the resignation letter in Ivy’s hand, momentarily stunned into silence. His composure slipped just enough to reveal genuine shock before his features hardened once more.

“What did you just say?” he finally managed, his voice laced with disbelief.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t hear me,” Ivy replied, her voice steady and clear. “And don’t think you can manipulate me with empty threats. I’m done.”

Matthews’s lips curled into a sneer. He clearly couldn’t fathom that Ivy Percy would actually walk away from Kruse—not when she had signed a five-year contract with only six months remaining. In his mind, she should be grateful to endure whatever treatment he dispensed until her obligation was fulfilled.

“You can’t possibly be serious,” he said with a dismissive wave. “After everything Kruse has given you? The exposure? The resources?”

“I couldn’t be more serious,” Ivy replied, her voice rising with newfound confidence. “I. Quit.”

Matthews’s face flushed with anger, his professional veneer cracking. “Fine. Quit if you want. But the contract stipulates very clearly that you’ll owe a substantial termination fee.” His smile turned predatory. “Unless you’ve got a small fortune hidden away, expect my lawyers to be in touch. Perhaps they can explain the concept of ‘legally binding’ to you.”

“I’ll cover it.”

Both heads turned as I approached, my Louboutins clicking decisively against the polished floor. The look of stunned realization dawning on Matthews’s face was almost worth the price of admission alone.

“Of course,” he said, eyes darting between Ivy and me. “I should have known. You orchestrated this whole thing.” He turned to Ivy, voice dripping with venom. “You think you’re so clever, don’t you? Securing a safety net before jumping ship? You realize this industry runs on reputation, and loyalty still means something to—”

“Loyalty?” I interrupted with a harsh laugh. “That’s rich coming from someone who just tried to sabotage his own designer’s debut.” I took a step closer, dropping my voice to ensure only he could hear my next words. “The only question Kruse’s headquarters should be asking is why one of their most promising talents chose to walk away six months before her contract expired. What pushed her to that breaking point, Matthews? Or should I say... who?”

I watched the blood drain from his face as the implications sank in.

“You wouldn’t,” he whispered.

“Try me,” I replied with a smile that didn’t reach my eyes. “I’ve survived far worse than an industry scandal. Have you?”

Matthews’s jaw clenched so tightly I could almost hear his teeth grinding. “You’ll regret this, Ivy,” he hissed, pointedly ignoring me now. “You think you’re special? Kruse has dozens of designers more talented than you waiting in the wings.”

“Then finding my replacement shouldn’t be a problem,” Ivy replied coolly. “Though they might want to know what they’re signing up for under your... leadership.”

“You ungrateful little—” Matthews stopped himself, visibly struggling to regain composure as he noticed industry peers watching their exchange with undisguised interest. With a final venomous glare, he straightened his tie and stalked away, nearly colliding with a waiter carrying champagne flutes.

Ivy exhaled slowly, her shoulders dropping as the tension partially released. She turned to me with eyes bright with emotion.

“Mrs. Quinn, I can’t thank you enough,” she said quietly. “You didn’t just preserve my professional dignity today—you helped me reclaim my self-respect.” She hesitated before adding, “About the termination fee... I’ve saved enough over the years. I can manage it myself.”

I shook my head decisively. “Ivy, designers with your talent can’t be bought with money, but they can certainly be crushed by financial burdens. That fee is nothing to me.” I placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Leave the legal matters to my team. When would you like to officially join Dreamland?”

The question seemed to catch her off guard, as though the reality of her liberation was just now sinking in.

“I could start immediately,” she replied, a genuine smile blooming across her face. “Though my arm will need some time to heal properly.”

“Take all the time you need,” I assured her. “Besides, I have bigger plans for you than just design work.”

Ivy’s eyes widened slightly. “Bigger plans?”

“Indeed. How would you feel about heading our London division?”

Her hand flew to her mouth, eyes widening in disbelief. “Mrs. Quinn, I... are you serious?”

“Absolutely. You’ve worked at Kruse long enough to understand London’s market intimately. You know the clients, the suppliers, the entire ecosystem.” I leaned in conspiratorially. “Matthews wanted to destroy you? Let’s beat him at his own game. Take what he values most—Kruse’s market share in London—and show him exactly what he lost.”

I watched as uncertainty transformed into determination across Ivy’s features.

“You think I can actually do this?” she asked, her voice stronger than before.

“I know you can,” I replied with absolute conviction. “Your design talent speaks for itself. But today I saw something even more valuable—your ability to think clearly under pressure and make difficult decisions when it matters most. Those are leadership qualities, Ivy. The rest can be learned.”

The spark in her eyes told me everything I needed to know.

“I won’t let you down,” she stated firmly, squaring her shoulders despite her injury.

“I know you won’t.” I glanced at my watch. “Now, I believe we’ve earned a celebration. The Fashion Week debut was an unqualified success. Shall we?”

“Lead the way,” she replied, her smile wider than I’d ever seen.

Within days, Ivy officially joined Dreamland Studio. I engaged top lawyers to handle her contract termination, making it clear to Kruse that we would fight any excessive penalties. Word quickly reached Kruse’s headquarters about both Ivy’s departure and her immediate hiring by Dreamland. Their reaction was swift and merciless.

Matthews found himself stripped of his position and reassigned to a struggling branch office in a much less prestigious market. His explanations and excuses fell on deaf ears—Kruse’s leadership had apparently been watching London’s underperforming numbers for some time, waiting for justification to make a change.

When I shared this news with Ivy back at our temporary London workspace, her expression was one of surprised vindication.

“I never expected them to act so quickly,” she admitted, organizing fabric swatches for our next collection. “Though I’m not entirely surprised. London’s numbers have been stagnant for years under his management.”

“His loss is our gain,” I replied, scanning through the growing list of appointments on my tablet. “Speaking of gains, how are those client meetings coming along?”

Ivy’s face lit up with excitement. “Better than expected. I’ve reached out to several former clients who were... let’s just say, not Matthews’s biggest fans. They’re eager to learn more about Dreamland Studio. Three have already requested consultations for custom pieces.”

“Perfect.” I nodded approvingly. “You’ve accomplished more in three days than most could in three weeks.”

As I packed my belongings in preparation for my return to New York, I felt a rare sense of complete satisfaction. The London division would be in capable hands with Ivy until Maya could arrive to provide additional support. Once Ivy fully embraced her role as London director, Dreamland would be positioned to expand into other European markets.

“The groundwork is laid,” I told Ivy as we said our temporary goodbyes. “Now we build.”

Her determined nod told me everything I needed to know.