

CEO's Regret After I Divorced - Chapter 326

Serena's POV

I let out a long sigh as I finally escaped the studio, my shoulders feeling like they were carrying the weight of the world while I dragged myself home. The sky had turned pitch black hours ago, Bangkok's night lights guiding my way through the bustling streets.

Two years ago, I'd made the decision to move out of Cedric Lancaster's sprawling mansion into a modest apartment closer to Elegant Realm. Independence matters when you're piecing your life back together from scratch.

The moment I pushed open my front door, tiny footsteps came racing across the hardwood floor.

“Mama!” My two-year-old daughter Rancy squealed, launching herself at me like a tiny missile, her curly hair bouncing with each step.

All my exhaustion evaporated instantly as I scooped her up, breathing in her baby shampoo scent. God, how did I get so lucky with this little angel?

“Why are you still up, little monkey?” I asked, pressing kisses against her chubby cheeks. “It’s way past your bedtime!”

Rancy giggled, wrapping her tiny arms around my neck. “Miss Mama,” she mumbled into my shoulder, her limited vocabulary somehow perfectly conveying what I needed to hear.

“I missed you too, sweetheart,” I whispered, holding her close.

“Did she give you hell tonight?” I asked the nanny who appeared from the kitchen, looking slightly frazzled.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle, Mrs. Lancaster,” she replied with a tired smile. “Just wouldn’t go down until you got home. Kept saying ‘wait for Mama’ over and over.”

I nodded, swaying gently with Rancy in my arms. “I’ve got her now. Thank you for staying late again.”

After the nanny gathered her things and left, I carried Rancy upstairs to her bedroom, decorated in soft pastel colors with twinkling fairy lights creating a dreamy atmosphere.

“Story, Mama?” Rancy asked hopefully as I tucked her into bed.

“Just a quick one tonight, baby,” I conceded, grabbing her favorite book from the nightstand.

Halfway through the second page, her eyelids began to droop, and by the fifth, she was sound asleep, one tiny fist clutching her stuffed elephant. I carefully slipped away from the bed, planting one final kiss on her forehead before tiptoeing out.

I nearly had a heart attack when I turned and found Cedric Lancaster lounging against the doorframe, watching us.

“Jesus Christ!” I whispered harshly, pressing a hand to my racing heart. “You scared the hell out of me. How long have you been standing there?”

His lips curled into that familiar half-smile that never quite reached his eyes. “Long enough.”

I brushed past him, heading downstairs with Cedric following close behind. Though we’d been living separately since I established Elegant Realm, he still showed up unannounced several times a week, claiming he needed to see Rancy.

“It’s almost midnight,” I said, pouring myself a glass of water in the kitchen. “What’s so urgent it couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

Cedric dropped onto my sofa with the ease of someone who considered himself at home despite not living here. His expensive suit looked slightly rumpled, his usually perfect hair disheveled as though he’d been stress-running his hands through it all day.

“I’ve been thinking about your Europe trip,” he said, watching me intently.

I kept my poker face, though my pulse quickened. This was the conversation I’d been dreading since our blowout at the office.

“And?” I prompted, leaning against the kitchen counter, keeping my distance.

“You can crash at my London place when we get there,” he said, catching me off guard. “It would be more comfortable for Rancy, and safer for both of you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “We? I don’t remember sending you an invitation.”

“You didn’t need to.” His tone was final, like the conversation was over. “I have business interests in London anyway. Perfect timing.”

Perfect timing my ass. I bit my tongue to keep from saying something I’d regret. This was classic Cedric—making executive decisions about my life without consulting me, all under the guise of protection.

But I needed to be strategic. If I pushed back too hard, he might become even more suspicious about my real motives for going to Europe.

“Actually,” I said slowly, choosing my words like I was defusing a bomb, “having you there might be helpful with Rancy while I attend meetings.” I offered a smile that didn’t quite reach my eyes. “Thanks for the offer.”

“There’s something I’ve been wondering about,” I ventured, keeping my tone light as I joined him on the sofa, maintaining a careful distance. “You’ve mentioned before that we met in London, right? Where exactly?”

His body went rigid. “We were college classmates. Why are you suddenly asking about this?”

“Just curious,” I shrugged. “I keep having these fragments… dreams, maybe. There’s a jewelry store that keeps appearing. Something with an ‘L’?”

I watched his reaction like a hawk, noticing how his fingers tightened around his glass.

“Probably just your imagination,” he dismissed, way too quickly. “After we graduated college, you stopped doing jewelry design.”

Another lie. I’d caught him in several over the years—small inconsistencies about our supposed past together. Each one made me more certain that London held answers he didn’t want me to find.

“Hmm, you’re probably right,” I conceded, pretending to buy it. “Must just be random dreams.”

He checked his watch and bolted upright. “It’s late. I should go.”

“Actually,” he paused, looking down at me with an intensity that made my skin crawl, “do you mind if I stay tonight? I’m exhausted, and it’s a long drive back.”

The question hung between us like a loaded gun. In three years, we’d never shared a bed. Not once. Despite his claims we were married before my accident, something deep in my gut recoiled at the thought of physical intimacy with him. My body seemed to remember what my mind couldn’t.

“You can take the guest room,” I said firmly. “I’ll have Rosa prepare it.”

His jaw clenched almost imperceptibly. “Of course.”

While Rosa bustled about getting the guest room ready, Cedric moved closer, his hand suddenly landing on my waist. I flinched violently, instinctively jerking away and tripping over the coffee table in my haste.

“Shit!” I yelped as my ankle twisted.

“Serena!” Panic flooded his face as he reached for me. “Are you hurt?”

I scrambled back like he was on fire, ignoring the throbbing pain. “I’m fine! Just—just back off, please.”

The hurt and frustration that flashed across his face made guilt twist through me. He’d been patient for three years, never pushing beyond my boundaries. But patience had limits, and I could see his wearing dangerously thin.

“The guest room is ready, Mr. Lancaster,” Rosa announced, cutting through the tension.

“Thank you,” I said quickly, using the interruption to escape. “I’m heading to bed. Goodnight, Cedric.”

Without waiting for his response, I practically sprinted upstairs, my heart hammering in my chest. Once inside my bedroom, I leaned against the closed door, breathing like I’d just run a marathon.

Why did I react so violently to his touch? If we truly had been in love, wouldn’t some part of me respond positively? The visceral rejection my body exhibited told a completely different story than the one Cedric had been feeding me for years.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I pulled out my laptop and opened the file I’d been compiling—research on LUXE Jewelry, the company I’d chosen for my European collaboration. Their designs stirred something deep within me, a sense of familiarity I couldn’t explain.

In three days, I’d be in London, chasing this pull toward my past despite Cedric’s obvious anxiety. Whatever he was hiding, whatever truths were waiting for me across the ocean—I was finally ready to face them.

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Author’s POV

London welcomed them with its signature gray skies and light drizzle as Serena stepped off the plane, herding her exhausted design team and clutching Rancy’s tiny hand. The air felt different here—heavier somehow, like it was charged with secrets she couldn’t remember.

Cedric Lancaster was already waiting at the arrivals gate, immaculately dressed in a tailored charcoal suit that emphasized his tall frame. When Rancy spotted him, she let out an ear-splitting squeal and broke free from Serena’s grasp, racing toward him like a tiny missile.

“Daddy!” The toddler’s excited voice practically echoed through the entire terminal.

Cedric scooped her up effortlessly, his usually stone-cold expression melting as Rancy planted sloppy kisses on his cheek. Serena watched the interaction with a twisted knot of emotions swimming behind her carefully neutral expression.

Her design team wasn't nearly as subtle with their feelings. They nudged each other, stage-whispering just loud enough for her to hear.

"Mrs. Lancaster and Mr. Lancaster look like they walked straight off a movie set," one sighed dreamily.

"And that precious daughter! Some women seriously hit the jackpot," another added with barely disguised envy.

"When will I find a man like Mr. Lancaster? The way he looks at her—like she's the only person in the world!"

Serena pretended to be deaf, though irritation flickered across her features. If they only knew the reality behind that supposedly fairy-tale marriage. She approached Cedric, immediately switching into all-business mode.

"I need to meet with someone about the collaboration," she said, handing him Rancy's small pink backpack. "Can you take her off my hands for now?"

Cedric's smile vanished like someone had flipped a switch. "Right now? You literally just got off a plane. Surely you need to rest first?"

His brow furrowed with concern that didn't quite reach his eyes. What Serena couldn't see was the calculating look lurking behind that worry.

"No time to waste," Serena shook her head firmly. "I just found out LUXE's studio got caught up in a plagiarism scandal. If they can't give me a damn good explanation, I'm pulling the plug on the collaboration immediately."

As a designer whose entire reputation was built on originality, plagiarism was her personal third rail. The fact that LUXE's founder was implicated made it even worse—it suggested a toxic culture that could destroy her own brand by association.

Something dark flashed in Cedric's eyes.

"Their explanation will just be damage control bullshit," he said smoothly. "If they've plagiarized once, why waste your time meeting them at all? Cut your losses and be done with it."

Serena paused, chewing on his words. "There's logic to that, but I still should meet them face to face. Basic professional courtesy, at minimum."

“Serena,” Cedric’s voice dropped to that intimate tone that always made her skin crawl. “Your memories of Europe aren’t pleasant ones. Let me handle this LUXE mess for you.”

The suggestion made every alarm bell in her head go off. “Absolutely not. This is Elegant Realm’s business, not yours. I’ll handle it myself.” She softened slightly at his expression. “I won’t meet with LUXE this round, but I’ll contact their manager directly.”

Relief practically radiated off him in waves. “Good. In that case, shall we get out of here? Rancy’s dead on her feet from the flight.”

As if she’d been waiting for her cue, Rancy rested her head against Cedric’s shoulder and reached toward him with grabby hands.

“Up, up,” she demanded sleepily.

Cedric’s entire persona did a complete 180, his voice gentle as he adjusted his hold on her. “How about we get you something delicious to eat, princess? Would you like that?”

While he carried Rancy toward the waiting car, Serena yanked her assistant aside.

“Contact LUXE and tell their management I expect them to get in touch with me,” she instructed, her voice like ice. “They need to explain the plagiarism situation, or they’ll be hearing from our legal team.”

Her assistant looked like she’d been slapped. “Mrs. Lancaster, we literally just landed. Isn’t that approach a bit... nuclear for day one?”

Serena’s eyes went arctic. “LUXE deceived us first. I have zero tolerance for plagiarism.” She tapped her fingers against her arm impatiently. “Find us some backup design houses to partner with, and dig deep into AArt Design’s background. I want to know everything down to what the CEO had for breakfast.”

“Yes, absolutely,” the assistant nodded quickly, recognizing the danger zone she’d wandered into.

By the time Serena slid into the sleek black town car beside Cedric, her mood had gone from bad to worse. This European expansion was supposed to be her company’s moment of triumph—and now this plagiarism scandal threatened to blow everything to hell.

“Mommy, are you sad?” Rancy’s tiny voice cut through Serena’s spiral, her little face pinched with concern. “You said you wanted to come back here. Don’t you like it anymore?”

The innocent question immediately cracked something open in Serena’s chest. She reached across to brush Rancy’s curls from her forehead.

“Mommy’s just tired, sweetheart. How are you feeling? Is it too chilly for you here?”

Rancy shook her head like a bobblehead, pressing her nose against the car window. “Look! Everything’s so gorgeous!” Her eyes widened with childish wonder. “Can we go exploring, Mommy? Pretty please?”

Despite everything, Serena found herself genuinely smiling at her daughter’s enthusiasm.

Before she could answer, Cedric swooped in. “Mommy’s going to be swamped with work, Rancy. How about Daddy takes you on adventures instead?”

Serena’s smile went tight around the edges. Since Rancy’s birth, Cedric had insisted on calling himself her father, despite Serena’s repeated pushback. Now that Rancy was old enough to understand relationships, she had completely accepted him as her dad—creating an emotional minefield Serena couldn’t navigate without casualties.

“Yay! Daddy gives the absolute best piggyback rides!” Rancy clapped her hands excitedly.

Watching them together, Serena felt that familiar knot of frustration twist in her chest. With Rancy between them, there was never a clean exit strategy with Cedric. He knew it, too—she could see it in that smug little smile he tried to hide whenever Rancy chose him.

The car glided through wrought iron gates, revealing a sprawling Georgian mansion nestled among magazine-perfect gardens. A line of staff stood waiting at the entrance, their posture like soldiers at attention.

“Welcome home, Madam,” they chorused as Serena stepped from the car.

Looking up at the imposing house that had never once felt like home, Serena took a deep breath. London held answers she desperately needed—if only she could slip Cedric’s surveillance long enough to find them.

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Author’s POV

Maya’s office phone shrieked like a banshee just as she was reviewing the latest gemstone shipment samples. The moment she heard her assistant’s panicked words about Elegant Realm terminating their contract, her blood pressure went through the stratosphere.

“What? Because of a plagiarism accusation from three fucking years ago?” Maya gripped the edge of her desk, knuckles going bone white. “Not just pulling the plug on the contract, but threatening to drag us to court for fraud?”

Rage and disbelief duked it out in her chest. The plagiarism scandal had been Serena's nightmare three years ago—before her disappearance. LUXE had managed to bury most of the fallout publicly, but within the industry, the rumors had spread like a cancer.

Time was supposed to heal all wounds, yet this particular accusation seemed burned into their reputation like a brand. Now even international jewelry studios were digging it up like fresh gossip.

“How can they just bail without even talking to us? We had a deal!” Maya snapped, shooting up from her desk. “Elegant Realm’s director has returned to her home country, right? Get me connected with her—I need to set the record straight.”

Her assistant looked like she’d rather be anywhere else, shaking her head apologetically. “Mrs. Quinn, I’m really sorry, but they’re stonewalling all meeting requests.”

Maya let out a bitter laugh. “So they won’t even give us a chance to defend ourselves? This Mrs. Lancaster must be a real piece of work.”

After mulling it over for a hot minute, Maya decided to take the bull by the horns. “I’ll contact Mrs. Lancaster’s assistant directly. Send me the digits.”

“On it, Mrs. Quinn.”

Minutes later, Maya was pleading her case to Mrs. Lancaster’s ice-cold assistant, desperation creeping into her voice.

“Please tell Mrs. Lancaster that the plagiarism thing from three years ago was a complete frame job. Someone deliberately threw Lazuli under the bus. There was absolutely zero plagiarism involved,” Maya insisted, her voice climbing with each word. “Lazuli’s work has been phenomenal from day one, garnering widespread acclaim. She’s racked up tons of international awards—why would someone of her caliber ever need to steal?”

Maya couldn’t help getting emotional. Anything involving Serena always shattered her professional cool.

“Mrs. Quinn, I get your concern,” the assistant replied with robot-like patience, “but Mrs. Lancaster feels strongly that the plagiarism issue will torpedo future collaboration. This isn’t my decision to make.”

“If you agree to kill the contract now, maybe we can avoid a legal bloodbath.”

Maya sighed like her soul was leaving her body, frustration mounting. “This partnership is make-or-break for LUXE. I can’t just waltz back to my company and say it’s over. There must be another solution.”

After a beat, the assistant remained unmoved. “I’m really sorry, Mrs. Quinn, but this is way above my pay grade.”

“Then give me Mrs. Lancaster’s direct line,” Maya demanded, patience going up in smoke. “I’ll explain it to her myself.”

The assistant’s continued brick wall routine pushed Maya to her breaking point.

“Alright, Mrs. Quinn,” the assistant finally threw her a bone. “But heads up—Mrs. Lancaster has absolutely zero chill when it comes to plagiarism. It’s her nuclear red line.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Maya replied through gritted teeth, “but I’ll say it till I’m blue in the face—Lazuli never plagiarized jack shit.” She hung up before the assistant could respond.

Within minutes, Serena’s assistant had sent over a phone number. Maya took a deep breath to get her shit together before dialing.

The call rang forever without pickup. Meanwhile, Serena was busy organizing her belongings when her phone rang for the second time. She eyeballed the random number, hesitated briefly, and the call ended before she could decide whether to answer.

Maya cursed creatively under her breath and determinedly hit redial. This project was too important to roll over and die without a fight.

On the third try, Serena finally picked up.

“Hello? Who’s this?”

The familiar voice made Maya’s heart skip like a broken record. She froze, momentarily struck dumb. After years of friendship with Serena, she’d recognize that voice in a crowd of thousands. Though the tone was ice-cold and all business, the cadence and pitch were hauntingly identical to her missing friend’s.

“Serena?” The name escaped before Maya could slam the brakes.

On the other end, Serena’s face scrunched up. “Who are you?”

Maya snapped back to reality, quickly course-correcting. “Is this Mrs. Lancaster from Elegant Realm Studio? This is Maya from LUXE.”

“Mrs. Quinn.” Serena’s expression thawed slightly. While they’d been coordinating this partnership, all previous communications had gone through middlemen.

Setting aside her work, Serena already knew why the woman was calling. “Mrs. Lancaster, there’s been a major miscommunication between us. About the plagiarism situation—it was a hit

job by someone with an ax to grind. This partnership means the world to LUXE. I hope you'll give us another shot."

Serena scoffed loud enough to be heard in the next room, clearly unconvinced. "Mrs. Quinn, let's cut the bullshit. As a designer myself, I have absolutely zero tolerance for plagiarism in any shape or form."

Her voice turned razor-sharp, laced with contempt. "Moreover, this scandal hit LUXE's flagship jewelry studio three years ago. Despite the founder's impressive trophy case, nothing changes the fact that plagiarism happened. I don't need to hear sob stories—I don't have time for them."

Serena's blunt shutdown stung, her hatred for plagiarism practically radiating through the phone.

"Mrs. Lancaster, please don't jump the gun," Maya pleaded. "I think we need to hash this out face-to-face. What you've dug up isn't the whole story. Besides, you must have hand-picked LUXE from countless potential partners for this international collaboration. Wouldn't it be a damn shame to throw it all away so easily?"

Serena paused, grudgingly admitting Maya had a point. Without the plagiarism scandal throwing a wrench in everything, they would likely already be toasting their partnership over dinner by now. Finding another European partner would eat up serious time and resources—something Serena hated to waste.

As Cedric Lancaster constantly hammered into her, European business waters ran deep and shark-infested.

"What would meeting accomplish? I don't see the point, Mrs. Quinn."

"Mrs. Lancaster," Maya pressed her advantage like a poker player going all-in, "this would be Elegant Realm's maiden voyage with a European studio. If rumors spread that you've bailed on contract negotiations this early, other studios will question whether you're reliable. That won't do your company's expansion plans any favors."

"Are those the kind of consequences you're looking for?"

Serena sighed softly. Contract termination would indeed torch her studio's reputation—something she definitely wished to avoid. Maya had successfully found her Achilles' heel.

After wrestling with it for a moment, Serena finally threw in the towel. "Fine. Tomorrow at two o'clock, we'll sit down and talk."

"But Mrs. Quinn," she added with arctic precision, "I expect you to blow my mind with your explanation. Otherwise, I won't change my mind about nuking our agreement, regardless of the potential fallout."

Maya exhaled like she'd been holding her breath underwater, quickly accepting the terms.
"Thank you, Mrs. Lancaster. See you tomorrow."

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Serena Lancaster arrived at Blue Moon Restaurant precisely at 2 PM—punctual, as always, for her meeting with Maya Quinn.

The waiter led her upstairs to a private room on the second floor with practiced efficiency. Serena expected to find the LUXE representative waiting. Instead, she was greeted by an empty room.

"Would you like me to call Mrs. Quinn?" her assistant, Sally, asked softly, already reaching for her phone.

Serena waved the suggestion away, irritation simmering beneath her composed exterior. "She's the one who requested this meeting. Basic punctuality should be a given." Her voice sharpened. "If LUXE can't even manage that, perhaps this partnership isn't worth pursuing."

Despite her annoyance, she took a seat in the plush chair, crossing her legs and checking her watch while skimming through emails on her phone. Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen. Her patience evaporated with every tick of the second hand.

"This is ridiculous," Serena muttered, fingertips tapping against the polished tabletop. "Does she think I have all day?"

Soft jazz drifted in from the hallway, doing nothing to calm her nerves. Serena despised wasted time—especially when she had completely rearranged her schedule for this meeting.

Meanwhile, just down the corridor, Ryan Blackwood arrived with his business associates, their conversation echoing faintly as they discussed quarterly projections. As they headed toward their reserved VIP room, Ryan's gaze flicked toward a partially open door.

He stopped mid-step.

The silhouette inside—straight-backed, elegant, checking her watch with a familiar tilt of the head—sent something violent crashing into his chest.

His heart stopped.

Even from behind, even with only a fraction of her visible, his body reacted before his mind could intervene.

“Mr. Blackwood?” Anderson, one of his associates, placed a concerned hand on his arm. “Is everything all right?”

Ryan blinked, snapping back to reality. “Yes. I just—” The words deserted him as Anderson gently steered him forward, past the room, and into their meeting space.

Inside, Ryan found it impossible to focus. His attention kept drifting to the door, to the knowledge that just a few walls away might be the woman he had spent three years hunting for across continents.

The woman who had vanished without a word.

The woman whose absence had carved out his soul.

“Ryan? Your thoughts on the Singapore proposal?” someone prompted.

“I need a moment to go over the numbers,” he replied, though he couldn’t remember which proposal they were discussing.

Back in the private room, Serena had hit her breaking point.

Twenty-three minutes late.

“This is completely unacceptable,” she said curtly, rising to her feet and grabbing her purse. The chair scraped sharply against the floor. “Sally, we’re leaving. Now.”

As they stepped into the hallway, Serena smoothed her dress and adjusted her blazer with quick, irritated movements.

“If anyone from LUXE calls again, don’t put them through,” she said coldly. “The partnership is dead. I don’t do business with people who have zero respect for my time.”

“Yes, Mrs. Lancaster,” Sally replied, typing swiftly on her tablet as she hurried to keep up.

Serena’s phone buzzed. Maya Quinn’s name lit up the screen.

Without hesitation, Serena hit decline—and immediately blocked the number.

The nerve of calling now.

As Serena descended the marble staircase, heels clicking decisively, Ryan stepped out of his meeting room, driven by an instinct he couldn’t explain.

He stepped into the hallway just as the private room door across from his own swung shut.

Too late.

A faint trace of warmth still lingered in the air, the echo of someone who had only just been there. His chest tightened for reasons he couldn't explain.

He spun around. "The guest who was in that room—where did she go?"

The server hesitated, then gestured toward the staircase. "She just left, sir. Less than a minute ago."

Less than a minute.

Ryan moved without thinking.

He reached the banister in three long strides, fingers gripping the polished wood as his gaze swept the lobby frantically. At the bottom of the stairs, a woman's back disappeared through the revolving doors—tall, composed, unmistakably familiar in a way that made his pulse spike painfully.

"Wait—" The word tore from his throat, low and raw, but it was swallowed by the noise of the restaurant.

Outside, Serena was already opening her car door.

Ryan broke into a sprint.

But the glass doors closed.

The valet stepped aside.

An engine turned over.

By the time Ryan reached the entrance, the sleek sedan was pulling away from the curb, slipping seamlessly into traffic. He stood there, breathing hard, eyes locked on the shrinking silhouette of the car until it vanished completely.

Gone.

Again.

"Mr. Blackwood?" His assistant caught up, slightly breathless. "What's wrong?"

Ryan didn't answer right away.

Because for one unbearable second—just one—he had been certain. Not hope. Not imagination. Absolute certainty.

That was her.

The same presence he had felt in empty airports. In crowded streets halfway across the world. In the quiet moments before sleep, when memory became almost physical.

His hands slowly clenched at his sides.

“...Nothing,” he said at last, the word hollow. “Tell Anderson I’m done. Have them finish without me.”

“And afterward? Back to the office?”

Ryan’s jaw tightened.

“Home.”

In his sleek black car, Ryan leaned back against the leather seat and closed his eyes. The weight of three years crushed down on him.

Every morning, he woke to an empty space beside him.

Every night, he looked at Vivian—their daughter—and saw Serena’s features reflected in her innocent face.

“Where are you?” he whispered, fingers tightening around the steering wheel.

Meanwhile, Serena sat rigidly in the back seat of her car, fury still burning.

“Call Cedric,” she instructed Sally. “The LUXE meeting was a complete bust. We’ll look into other options for European distribution.”

What neither of them knew was just how close they had come.

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Serena’s POV

After severing ties with LUXE, Elegant Realm had no shortage of suitors. Design studios from across the industry were practically lining up at my door, eager to fill the vacancy. But I wasn’t about to make another hasty decision. This time, I would carefully evaluate each potential partner—even if it meant delaying our expansion plans.

Some called my approach overly cautious. I called it strategic.

Rather than pursuing temporary collaborations, I'd decided to establish a permanent branch office here. Within days, I'd secured prime real estate in the heart of downtown—a penthouse office space where rent costs made even me wince when signing the lease.

"The location projects the right image," I told myself, running my fingers along the pristine quartz countertop in what would become our reception area. The space needed minimal renovation, which was fortunate given our timeline.

For a foreign-based studio like Elegant Realm, first impressions were everything. We'd earned our reputation as the year's breakthrough design firm in Europe, but here we were still the newcomers. I wouldn't give the established studios any reason to dismiss us.

I was reviewing furniture placement options with Sally, my assistant, when Cedric burst through the door without warning. His normally composed demeanor was noticeably strained, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Serena," he said without preamble, "how could you make such a significant decision without consulting me first?"

I glanced up from the floor plans, momentarily startled by his intrusion. Lucy's eyes darted between us before she mumbled something about checking on material samples and made a swift exit.

"Consult you?" I replied, my tone cooling. "Expanding into the Europe market is the natural progression for Elegant Realm. I wasn't aware I needed permission."

Cedric ran a hand through his hair, a gesture I recognized as his attempt to remain calm. "When you first mentioned returning, you said it was for potential collaborations. Now you've leased an entire office floor. Are you planning to relocate permanently?"

I met his gaze directly. "Yes. My plans evolved after arriving."

"And you didn't think that warranted a discussion?" His voice held that quiet intensity I'd grown familiar with—the careful control masking deeper emotions.

"This is my company, Cedric." My words were measured but firm. "I make the final decisions."

"There's something else," I continued before he could respond. "Rancy starts preschool today. I've enrolled her here instead of back in Bangkok. We won't be returning anytime soon."

The shift in his expression was subtle but unmistakable—a tightening around the eyes, a slight pallor beneath his tan. This wasn't merely a business disagreement anymore.

"Serena, you can't be serious. These decisions affect both of you," he argued, his composure slipping. "Rancy needs stability, a proper environment. With your schedule, how do you plan to manage?"

“My daughter will always be my first priority,” I replied, the edge in my voice making it clear this wasn’t negotiable. “I’ve handled both motherhood and building a business from the ground up for three years. I believe I’ve proven my capability.”

Cedric opened his mouth to respond, but I cut him off. “I respect our friendship and your input on business matters, but this decision is made. I hope you can respect that.”

The tension between us stretched, neither willing to back down. Finally, his phone buzzed, breaking the stalemate. After checking the screen, he mumbled something about an urgent call and left without further argument.

I watched him go, feeling a familiar pang of guilt that I quickly suppressed. Cedric had been there through some of my darkest moments, but I couldn’t let emotional attachments dictate my business decisions—or my choices for Rancy.

Glancing at my watch, I realized it was nearly pickup time. I quickly finished giving Sally instructions about the office furnishings.

“Handle the interior details and use the corporate account for expenses,” I told her. “I trust your judgment—no need to consult me on every item.”

Twenty minutes later, I pulled my car into the circular drive of Bright Horizons Preschool, one of the city’s most prestigious preschools. The parking area resembled a luxury car showcase—Bentleys and Maseratis lined up alongside Range Rovers and Mercedes.

“Rancy!” I called, waving.

Her face lit up instantly.

“Mommy!”

She let go of her teacher’s hand and toddled into a run—more enthusiasm than coordination—throwing herself against me with a happy squeal.

I caught her just in time, laughing softly as I lifted her up. Her cheeks were warm, her eyes bright, her whole little body humming with excitement.

“Hi, sweetheart,” I murmured, brushing her hair back. “Did you have a good day?”

She nodded hard. “Fun!”

“Fun?” I echoed, smiling. “What did you do?”

“Snack.” She grinned proudly. “I help.”

Relief loosened something tight in my chest. I kissed her temple. “That sounds wonderful.”

Then she suddenly wriggled in my arms, twisting around.

“Oh—!” She pointed. “Vivian!”

Her small hand flapped enthusiastically in the air. “Bye-bye! See you!”

I followed her gesture—and froze.

A little girl stood a few steps away, dark curls framing a delicate face. There was something unsettlingly familiar in the shape of her eyes, the slight lift of her brows, the quiet curve of her smile.

The girl looked back at Rancy, then at me.

“Hello,” she said politely, her voice clear but soft.

I set Rancy down, my heartbeat suddenly uneven.

Rancy tugged my sleeve. “Mommy.”

She pointed again, as if this explained everything. “Vivian. Friend.”

“Friend?” I asked gently.

Rancy nodded. “She give candy.”

She dug into her backpack, pulling out a crinkled little packet of cloud-shaped sweets and holding it up like a treasure.

“That was very kind of you,” I said, meeting the other child’s eyes. “Thank you for sharing with her.”

Vivian smiled, then studied my face more closely. Her head tilted, just slightly.

“You look like my mommy,” she said matter-of-factly.

The words landed with quiet force.

Before I could respond, a man’s voice called out from behind us.