

# **GLASS SLIPPERS, SECOND CHANCES**

# CHAPTER 1

The clock struck midnight five years ago when I walked away from Ethan Carrington, but unlike Cinderella, I kept both my shoes and my dignity.

My mother named me Ella after her favorite fairy tale, never imagining how prophetic it would become.

Ella Vatore—yes, say it fast enough and you'll get the joke. The universe - and my mom - have a twisted sense of humor.

They say every woman wants to be Cinderella, but nobody warns you what happens when the prince turns out to be the villain of your story. If Cinderella had known what I know now, she would've kept the pumpkin and ditched the prince.

My life has followed the blueprint of that damned fairy tale so precisely it's almost suspicious.

Cinderella had a fairy godmother. I had Goddie Fairweather and her basement full of designer fabric scraps. Cinderella had a pumpkin carriage. I had a maxed-out credit card and the F train. Cinderella scrubbed floors. I sorted swatches until my fingers bled and my eyes crossed.

The similarities were cute—until they weren't.

Because here's where our stories diverge: Cinderella lost her glass slipper and supposedly found her happily ever after... Or so the fairy tale claims. I left my heart—and my name on a billion-dollar fashion line.

Five years, four months, and sixteen days ago. Not that I'm counting.

I'm wedged into seat 32B, returning to the scene of the crime. New York. Economy class, where dreams and legroom go to die. Could I afford business? Sure. Midnight Designs cleared seven figures last year. But old habits die hard, and I'd rather invest in Italian silk than mediocre champagne.

Some women run from love. Others run from success.  
I ran from both.

Now I'm running back.

Correction: not running back. Strategic professional advancement. Because apparently, I enjoy psychological torture.

"OMG, you're her!" The woman beside me vibrates with recognition. "You're THE Ella Vatore! From the Carrington campaigns!"

I smile. Tight. Practiced. "Former Carrington designer. Current owner of Midnight Designs."

"I read you two were getting back together!" She clutches her phone like it's oxygen. "The fashion world's most romantic reunion!"

Jesus. I've been airborne for six hours and rumors have already outpaced my plane.

"We're discussing a professional collaboration." I emphasize "professional" hard enough to bruise the word. "Nothing more."

She winks. Conspirator-style. "They say never mix business with pleasure. But when the business is Ethan Carrington..."

I didn't tell her I wrote that rule in my own blood after I walked away. After he said my designs would never succeed without his name attached. After I proved him spectacularly wrong.

I traded my glass slippers for steel-toed boots and built my own empire. Now the prince wants me back—but this time, I make the rules.

My phone buzzes with texts:

**From: Stephi**

*Car waiting at JFK. Brought your power suit. That red one that makes men fear/want you.*

**From: Jax**

Break a leg. Or Carrington's face. Your choice.

**From: Goddie**

Remember who you are now, darling. Not who you were.

**From: Unknown Number**

Welcome home, El. —E

My stomach drops. Not turbulence. Terror. In twelve hours, I'll be sitting across from the man whose ring I almost wore. The man who pressed me against floor-to-ceiling windows of his corner office, whispering filthy promises with Manhattan spread beneath us like our personal kingdom.

Fairytales normally end with a happily ever after. Real love stories begin when the clock strikes midnight and you choose to stay.

I chose to leave.

The wheels hit tarmac with a jolt that rattles my teeth. New York has never been good at gentle landings.

Neither have I.

Game on, Carrington.

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The customs line coils like a designer snake choking its prey—slow, deliberate, inevitable. Unlike the snake, there's nothing elegant about this process. JFK at 7 PM is purgatory with fluorescent lighting and squeaking luggage wheels.

I spot Stephi before she sees me, a welcome glimpse of normal in this surreal homecoming. She's tapping at her phone, one sleek heel bouncing impatiently against the floor. My former stepsister has evolved from teenage terror to PR powerhouse, with a reputation for turning scandals into stepping stones. That transformation—from quasi-villain to trusted ally—remains one of my life's strangest plot twists.

"If it isn't Cinderella, back from her self-imposed exile," she calls when she finally looks up.

"If it isn't the wicked stepsister who somehow turned out to be my fairy godmother." I surrender to her air-kiss bombardment, twin assaults on each cheek that smell of Chanel No. 5 and ambition.

"We're all characters in someone's story." Stephi shrugs, stepping back to assess me. Her gaze is clinical, like I'm a garment she's considering for a client. "The bags under your eyes say red-eye flight. The line between your brows says Ethan Carrington. The haircut says 'I'm fine' but we both know that's bullshit."

"Your empathy is overwhelming," I deadpan, but I'm smiling despite myself. "I've missed your particular brand of brutal honesty."

"Someone has to keep you from your own delusions." Stephi grabs one of my bags. "Car's waiting. You need carbs, caffeine, and a battle plan. In that order."

The town car slides into Manhattan traffic, a black fish in a metal stream. New York unfolds outside my window—familiar yet foreign, like a language I once spoke fluently but now stumble through. Skyscrapers pierce the evening sky like ambitious dreams made concrete. This city never apologizes for its excesses or its scars. Neither should I.

"So," Stephi says, tapping something into her tablet. "Carrington called. Three times."

"About?"

"Meeting details, allegedly. But there was this... tone." She makes air quotes with French-manicured fingers. "This is me, reminding you that sleeping with him again is officially on the Not To-Do List. Item number one, bold and underlined."

"I'm here to secure a distribution deal that will put Midnight Designs in department stores across three continents," I say, repeating the mantra I've practiced since his first email landed in my inbox six weeks ago. "That's it."

"Right. And I'm just here to make sure your reunion stays strictly about hemlines, not heartlines." She passes me a garment bag. "The power suit, as promised. And tomorrow's schedule. Meeting at Carrington HQ at 10 AM. Lunch with Goddie at 1. Drinks with potential investors at 6."

I accept the schedule but keep my eyes on the cityscape. "He's had five years to reach out. Why now?"

"Because you're no longer the girl who left him. You're the woman who succeeded without him." Stephi's voice softens, just a degree. "Also, the Carrington fall collection tanked. The brand needs an injection of something fresh. Something that captures what made you two magical together, professionally speaking."

I absorb this with a twinge of vindication I'm not proud of. "So this is a business rescue mission."

"For him, maybe. For you, it's leverage." Her phone pings and she smirks at whatever she sees. "And speak of the devil who wears bespoke Tom Ford..."

She turns her phone to reveal an industry gossip site with a headline screaming: FASHION'S FAVORITE POWER COUPLE REUNITING? CARRINGTON & VATORE COLLAB SENDS STOCKS SOARING

Beneath it, a photo of Ethan from some recent event—all sharp angles and sharp tailoring. He looks older. Harder around the edges. Still unfairly handsome in that way that makes me want to either slap him or slide my fingers through his hair. Sometimes both, simultaneously.

"Stocks soaring on a rumor." I hand the phone back. "Imagine what will happen when they realize it's just business."

"Is it, though?" Stephi raises a perfectly arched eyebrow. "Because from where I'm sitting, nothing about you two has ever been 'just' anything."

The car pulls up to my hotel, saving me from responding. Because she's right, and we both know it.

Some people collect stamps or vintage wines.  
I collect bad decisions with good intentions.

And Ethan Carrington was the best bad decision I ever made.

## CHAPTER 2

I woke up to Manhattan light filtering through hotel curtains—that particular gray-gold that makes the city look both gritty and magical. For one disorienting moment, I'm twenty-four again, waking up in Ethan's SoHo loft, his arm heavy across my waist, his voice rough with sleep as he tries to convince me that meetings can wait.

Then reality comes crashing back. I'm thirty, alone, and about to face the man I walked away from.

I open my suitcase, excavating layers of carefully rolled garments. What does one wear to face their ex-almost-fiancé turned business collaborator? The red power suit Stephi brought is too obvious. My usual black feels like armor, not strategy.

I settled on a midnight blue dress of my own design—structured shoulders, nipped waist, hemline that hits just below the knee. Professional but distinctive. The fabric, a textured silk-wool blend, is one of my signatures. I pair it with black stilettos that cost more than my first month's rent in this city.

Some women wear makeup as war paint. I wear fabric that tells my story without saying a word.

The Carrington building hasn't changed—fifty-two floors of glass and ambition in Midtown. Neither has the flutter in my stomach as the elevator climbs toward the executive floor. The last time I rode this elevator down, I was ugly-crying, my resignation letter clutched in one hand, engagement ring in the other.

Today, I'm arriving as an equal. A competitor. A success story written in spite of, not because of, the Carrington name.

The receptionist—new, of course—smiles with practiced hospitality. "Ms. Vatore! Mr. Carrington is expecting you. May I offer you coffee?"

"No, thank you." My voice stays steady, a minor miracle.

"Ella." The familiar voice hits me before I can turn around.

Time slows, like in those movies where everything goes into ridiculous slow motion during the pivotal reunion scene. Except this isn't a movie, and the swooping sensation in my stomach is entirely too real.

Ethan Carrington stands in the doorway to the conference room, one shoulder against the frame in a deliberately casual pose that I know is anything but. Five years have added subtle lines around his eyes and a hint of silver at his temples. Otherwise, he's the same—tall, broad-shouldered, with those intense eyes that always made me feel like I was the only person in any room.

"Ethan." I extend my hand, all business. "Thank you for the invitation."

He looks at my outstretched hand like it's a curious artifact, then takes it. His grip is warm, firm, and sends an entirely unprofessional jolt up my arm.

"Five years, and I get a handshake?" His voice is low, meant just for me.

"Five years, and I get a text message from an 'unknown number'?" I counter.

The corner of his mouth twitches. "Touché. Please, come in."

The conference room is intimidatingly minimal—glass table, ergonomic chairs, floor-to-ceiling windows framing a Manhattan panorama. Laid out on the table are mock-ups of what appears to be marketing materials for our potential collaboration.

"You've been busy," I observe, gesturing to the displays.

"Just preliminary concepts." He closes the door behind us. "Nothing is decided until we talk terms."

I slide into a chair, crossing my legs and placing my portfolio precisely in front of me. "Then let's talk terms."

"Just like that?" He remains standing, studying me with an unsettling intensity. "No 'how have you been'? No 'good to see you'?"

"How have you been, Ethan? Good to see you." I deliver the lines with practiced neutrality. "Now, terms."

He laughs—a real laugh that crinkles those devastating eyes. "Still direct as ever. That's one thing I've missed."

I ignore the comment, opening my portfolio. "I assume you're proposing a capsule collection. Six to eight pieces that capture the essence of both our brands."

"Actually," he sits opposite me, "I'm proposing something more substantial. A full collection. Women's ready-to-wear, accessories, possibly footwear. 'Midnight Carrington' has a ring to it, don't you think?"

I blink, momentarily speechless. A full collection is a much bigger commitment—and opportunity—than I'd anticipated.

"That's... ambitious." I choose my words carefully. "Particularly given our history."



"Our history is precisely why it will work." Ethan leans forward. "The industry still talks about what we created together, Ella. The market is saturated with disposable collaborations. We have a chance to do something authentic."

"Authentic," I repeat, tasting the word like a suspicious ingredient. "Is that what your marketing team suggested would resonate with consumers? Our authentic chemistry?"

His eyes narrow slightly. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Reduce what we had to a marketing strategy."

The tension between us pulls taut. I break eye contact first, looking down at my notes.

"Midnight Designs maintains creative control over any joint designs," I say, redirecting to business. "And we split revenue 60-40."

"50-50," he counters. "With joint creative control. This is a partnership, Ella, not a takeover."

"60-40," I insist. "Midnight Designs is the smaller company taking the bigger risk."

"55-45, and we co-sign off on the final collection. That's my best offer." His eyes hold mine, challenging.

The old Ella would have compromised immediately, so eager for his approval. The new Ella recognizes negotiation tactics for what they are.

"55-45, with Midnight Designs maintaining final say on all textiles and fabrications. That's my best offer." I match his steady gaze.

A slow smile spreads across his face. "Deal."

He extends his hand, and I shake it, trying to ignore the lingering sensation when we separate.

Ethan stands, walking to a credenza where a coffee service waits. "Now that business is settled, can we speak honestly for a moment?"

I stiffen. "Define 'honestly.'"

"You look good, El." He hands me a cup of coffee—prepared exactly how I used to take it. "Success suits you."

"Thank you." I accept the coffee, surprised he remembers. Cream, no sugar. "You look... well."

"Diplomatic." He laughs again. "I deserved more than 'well,' but I'll take it."

"What's this really about, Ethan?" I set the cup down, untouched. "Carrington Designs doesn't need Midnight to survive. So why now, why me?"

He sits on the edge of the table, close enough that I can smell his cologne—still the same custom blend that used to cling to my skin after nights in his bed.

"The fashion industry is changing. Fast fashion on one end, luxury conglomerates on the other. The middle is getting squeezed out." His expression turns serious. "Your textile innovations, combined with Carrington's distribution network, creates something neither of us can achieve alone."

It's a good answer. Logical. Probably even true. But it's not complete.

"And?" I press.

His eyes hold mine for one heartbeat, two, three. "And I wanted to see you again. Five years is a long time to wonder 'what if.'"

The air between us changes, charged with unspoken history. I stand, needing distance.

"We know exactly 'what if,' Ethan. We tried. It didn't work. I left."

"You ran," he corrects softly.

"I walked away," I counter. "There's a difference."

"Is there? Because from where I was standing, watching you disappear felt remarkably like abandonment."

His words land like a slap. The unfairness of it stings. "You told me my designs would never succeed without your name attached. That I was making the biggest mistake of my career. That I was letting my emotions cloud my business judgment."

"I was hurt," he admits. "And wrong. Clearly." He gestures to me, as if my very existence in this room as a successful designer proves his point.

"Water under the bridge," I say, gathering my things. "We have a deal. 55-45 split, joint creative control, Midnight has final say on textiles. I'll have my lawyer draft the agreement."

"Ella." He catches my wrist as I turn to leave. Gentle, but electrifying. "I'm sorry. For what I said then."

I look down at his hand on my skin, then back to his face. "Is that all?"

"For now." He releases me. "We'll need studio space for the collaboration. Neutral ground. I've had my assistant prepare some options."

"Text them to me. I'll review them with my team."

At the door, I pause, unable to resist one parting shot. "By the way, that gray in your hair? It works for you."

His surprised laugh follows me into the hallway, and I allow myself a small smile once I'm safely inside the elevator.

Fashion is about transformation. Love is about recognition.  
Once upon a time, I wanted both.

Now I'll settle for a successful business partnership and the satisfaction of watching Ethan Carrington realize exactly what he lost.

## CHAPTER 3

Lunch with Goddie Fairweather is like attending a fashion masterclass, therapy session, and standup comedy show simultaneously. At seventy-two, with a shock of platinum hair and hands permanently stained with fabric dye, she remains the most vibrant person in any room.

We're at her favorite hole-in-the-wall Italian place in the Garment District, where the pasta is transcendent and the wine flows freely, even at lunch.

"So," Goddie leans forward, eyes sparkling with mischief, "you've seen him. How was it?"

"Professional," I answer, twirling fettuccine around my fork. "Surprisingly painless."

"Liar." She points a breadstick at me accusingly. "The day seeing Ethan Carrington is painless for you is the day I start designing in polyester."

I laugh despite myself. "Fine. It was... complicated."

"Now we're getting somewhere." She pours more wine into my barely-touched glass. "Define 'complicated.'"

The truth tumbles out before I can filter it. "He looks good. Too good. Like the universe is personally victimizing me by making him more attractive at thirty-four than he was at twenty-nine."

"The universe isn't that invested in your love life, darling." Goddie's laugh is a weathered, beautiful thing. "Though I admit, that man does age like a fine Italian leather."

"He apologized," I continue, surprising myself. "For what he said when I left."

Goddie's expression softens. "Well, it's about damn time."

"It doesn't change anything," I insist, more to myself than to her. "We're different people now. This is strictly business."

"Mhmm." She doesn't even attempt to hide her skepticism. "Just like fashion is strictly about clothing."

I change the subject. "How's the fabric house doing?"

"Thriving, despite the industry's best efforts to push us toward digital printing and mass production." She waves dismissively. "But we're not here to talk about my business."

We're here because you're collaborating with your ex, and I want to make sure you're not wandering into a minefield without a map."

"I have boundaries," I assure her. "And a contract, soon."

"Contracts don't protect hearts, Ella." She reaches across the table to cover my hand with hers. "Just promise me you'll remember who you are now. Not the girl who left five years ago, but the woman who built something remarkable from scratch."

I squeeze her hand. "I promise."

"Good." She sits back, satisfied. "Now, tell me about the collection. What are you thinking?"

We spend the rest of lunch discussing silhouettes and color stories, the creative energy between us flowing as easily as it did when I was her apprentice. Goddie has always understood my vision, sometimes better than I understand it myself.

As we're finishing our espressos, my phone buzzes with a text. Ethan.

**From: Unknown Number**

Studio options attached. The one on 27th Street has the best light. Your thoughts?

Attached are photos of three different spaces, all industrial-chic with high ceilings and massive windows. The one on 27th Street does indeed have beautiful light—morning light, the kind that makes everything look possessively gilded.

"Let me guess," Goddie smirks over her tiny cup. "Mr. Carrington?"

"Studio options." I show her the photos.

She studies them, then points to the one on 27th. "That one. It'll make your textiles sing."

"That's what he said." I slip the phone back into my bag.

"Well, he always did understand your aesthetic." Goddie dabs her lips with a napkin. "That was part of your magic together."

"We didn't have magic," I protest weakly. "We had compatible design sensibilities."

"Oh, honey." Goddie shakes her head. "You had nuclear fusion. The entire industry felt the heat."

Before I can argue further, a familiar voice calls my name. I turn to see Duchess Tremaine approaching our table, elegant as ever in a tailored pantsuit that probably costs more than most people's monthly rent.

My former stepmother air-kisses the space near my cheek, her perfume an aggressive cloud of gardenias and ambition. "Ella, darling! I heard you were back in town."

"Duchess." I smile tightly. "How are you?"

"Divine, of course." She turns to Goddie with barely concealed disdain. "Godiva, still dining in these quaint little establishments, I see."

"Some of us prefer flavor over facade, Duchess." Goddie's smile is sharp as scissors.

The two have been fashion industry rivals since before I was born—Goddie the innovative textile artist, Duchess the calculating businesswoman who married into my father's modest fashion empire and proceeded to run it into the ground after his death.

"Well," Duchess returns her attention to me, "I must say, you've made quite a splash with that little brand of yours. Midnight Designs, isn't it? Very... boutique."

Coming from Duchess, "boutique" sounds like "insignificant."

"It's doing well enough that Carrington Designs wants to collaborate," I reply sweetly. "Speaking of which, how is Tremaine Collections these days?"

A flash of annoyance crosses her perfectly Botoxed face. Tremaine Collections—once my father's legacy, now Duchess's struggling brand—has been losing market share for years.

"We're repositioning," she says, the standard euphemism for "hemorrhaging money."

"How fascinating." I mirror her earlier condescension.

Duchess leans closer, dropping her voice. "Actually, Ella, I've been meaning to reach out. Perhaps we could discuss a potential partnership as well? Tremaine could use your... youthful perspective."

I nearly choke on my espresso. After years of Duchess dismissing my design aspirations, the irony of her now seeking my help is almost too delicious.

"I'm afraid my schedule is quite full with the Carrington collaboration," I say. "But I'm flattered by your interest."

"Don't be hasty, darling." Her perfectly manicured hand lands on my shoulder. "Family should stick together, after all."

"We haven't been family since my father died," I remind her, keeping my voice even. "And you made it very clear that Tremaine Collections had no place for my designs."

"People change, Ella." Her smile doesn't reach her eyes. "I've always admired your potential."

Goddie snorts audibly. Duchess ignores her.

"Think about it," Duchess continues. "The prodigal daughter, returning to resurrect her father's legacy. It's a compelling narrative."

"I've written my own narrative, thanks." I stand, signaling the end of our conversation. "It was lovely seeing you, Duchess."

Her expression hardens for a fraction of a second before smoothing back into practiced charm. "We'll talk soon, darling. Give my regards to Ethan, won't you?"

She sashays away, leaving a cloud of gardenia and insincerity in her wake.

"Well," Goddie raises her eyebrows, "that was unexpected."

"She's desperate," I say, sitting back down. "Tremaine must be in worse shape than the industry knows."

"Undoubtedly." Goddie studies me. "But be careful, darling. Duchess has always played the long game. If she's approaching you now, she has an angle."

"I have no intention of working with her," I assure Goddie. "Once was enough."

"Good." She reaches for the check. "Now, I believe I promised to show you those new Japanese textiles I've been importing. They'll be perfect for your collaboration."

As we leave the restaurant, I text Ethan back:

**To: Unknown Number**

27th Street works. When can we start?

His response is immediate:

**From: Unknown Number**

Tomorrow. 9 AM. I'll bring coffee and bagels. You bring your sketchbook and that brilliant mind of yours.

Despite everything, a flutter of anticipation stirs in my chest. Creating together was always the easy part with Ethan. It was everything else that got complicated.

Memories are like vintage couture—too precious to wear every day, too valuable to discard. I've kept mine carefully preserved, brought out only when I'm feeling strong enough to handle their weight.

Tomorrow, I'll need to be stronger than ever.



## CHAPTER 4

The studio on 27th Street is bathed in morning light when I arrive, exactly as promised. Industrial chic at its finest—exposed brick, concrete floors polished to a subtle gleam, steel beams supporting a ceiling high enough to house dreams. Dress forms stand like patient sentinels near the windows. Drawing tables wait for inspiration to land.

It's perfect. It's also empty.

I check my watch. 8:55 AM. I'm early, as usual. This space, currently bare except for essential furniture, will soon hold the creative energy of two strong-willed designers with a complicated history. What could possibly go wrong?

I set my portfolio and sketchbook on the largest table, claiming territory. Then I wander to the windows, gazing down at the street below. New York bustles with its particular brand of organized chaos—delivery trucks, taxis, pedestrians all performing their morning dance.

"It's different than you remember, isn't it?"

I turn to find Ethan in the doorway, balancing a cardboard tray of coffee cups in one hand and a bag of what I assume are the promised bagels in the other. He's dressed more casually today—dark jeans, a charcoal sweater pushed up to the elbows, revealing forearms mapped with the faintest veins. It's unfairly distracting.

"The city?" I ask, taking the coffee he extends to me. "Or us?"

"Both." He sets the bag down, extracting individually wrapped bagels. "Everything evolves."

"Some things devolve," I counter, accepting the sesame bagel he offers—still my favorite. Another detail he's remembered.

"Ever the optimist." His smile is quick, wry. "I've missed that about you."

"No, you haven't." I take a sip of coffee, finding it prepared exactly to my preference. Again. "You've missed challenging me. Different thing entirely."

He laughs. "Fair enough."

We settle at the large table, spreading out our materials with practiced efficiency. Despite the years apart, we fall into a familiar rhythm—sketches laid out, fabric swatches organized by color family, reference images grouped by theme.

"I've been thinking about direction," I begin, pulling out my concept board. "Something that honors both our aesthetics but pushes into new territory."

"I'm listening." He leans forward, all focused attention.

I lay out my vision—a collection that juxtaposes structure and fluidity, masculine and feminine elements, drawing inspiration from architecture and nature simultaneously. As I speak, Ethan nods, occasionally making notes or asking clarifying questions.

When I finish, he sits back, studying me with an expression I can't quite read.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious.

"Nothing." He shakes his head slightly. "It's just... your design vocabulary has evolved. There's a confidence in your concepts that's... impressive."

The compliment catches me off guard. "Thank you."

"Now, let me show you what I've been thinking." He pulls out his own sketches—clean, precise drawings that reflect his architectural approach to design.

As he walks me through his ideas, I'm struck by how our visions align in some areas and diverge dramatically in others. It's invigorating, this creative push-pull that always characterized our best work together.

"We could combine these approaches," I suggest, placing one of my sketches beside his. "Your structured bodice with my draped skirt."

He nods, already sketching the hybrid design. "And what if we add this element here?" He indicates a detail from another of my drawings.

For hours, we lose ourselves in the creative process, building on each other's ideas, challenging assumptions, finding unexpected harmony in our different perspectives. It's exhilarating and familiar and dangerous all at once.

By mid-afternoon, we've outlined the bones of a collection—twelve pieces that will form the core, with accessories and additional items to be determined. The wall is now covered with sketches, swatches, and notes. Creative chaos, but with a clear direction emerging.

"We need a name," Ethan says, standing back to survey our work.

"'Midnight Carrington' was your suggestion," I remind him.

"It feels too... expected." He frowns. "This collection deserves something that captures its essence."

I study the emerging aesthetic—the interplay of structure and flow, darkness and light, restraint and release.

"Unfinished Business," I suggest, only half-joking.

Ethan's eyes meet mine, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Too on the nose."

"Second Chances'?" I offer, then immediately regret it.

His expression shifts, something vulnerable flashing across his features before he masks it. "Maybe."

The tension that's been simmering beneath our professional interaction suddenly crackles to life. I take a step back, needing distance.

"I should probably check in with my assistant," I say, reaching for my phone. "She's handling some production issues back in London."

"Of course." Ethan turns away, busying himself with organizing sketches. "I need to make a few calls as well."

I retreat to the far corner of the studio, dialing Midna's number. She answers on the second ring.

"Boss lady! How's New York? More importantly, how's the reunion with Fashion's Most Eligible Bachelor?"

I roll my eyes, though she can't see me. "It's professional, Midna. And productive. How are things there?"

"Mostly good. The production samples for the resort collection arrived. The blue dress has some issues with the seam alignment, but I've already sent it back for corrections."

"Good." I lower my voice, aware that Ethan is still in the room. "And the other matter?"

"The potential investor is still interested... He wants to meet when you're back in London."

"Keep them warm," I instruct. "This collaboration could increase our valuation significantly."

"Will do." She pauses. "There's one other thing. Someone from Duchess Tremaine's office called... Wanted to set up a meeting with you."

I sigh. "Decline politely. Say my schedule is full."

"Got it. Anything else you need from me?"

"Send over the textile development files for the new Japanese fabrics. I want to incorporate some of them into this collection."

"On it. Oh, and Ella?" Her voice turns teasing. "Try not to fall back in love with him, okay? It makes my job harder when you're distracted."

"That's not—" I start, but she's already hung up.

I turn to find Ethan watching me, his expression unreadable. "Everything alright in London?"

"Fine," I say, too quickly. "Just some production details."

He nods, clearly not believing me but choosing not to press. "I was thinking we should bring in Cindy Ashton as the face of the collection. Her look would be perfect for the aesthetic we're developing."

The mention of Cindy—a rising model known for her striking features and massive social media following—makes me pause. "Cindy Ashton?"

"You don't approve?" Ethan raises an eyebrow.

I choose my words carefully. "She's very... of the moment."

"Exactly. She brings contemporary relevance, plus her following gives us built-in promotion."

What I don't say is that Cindy Ashton used to be Christina Ashton, a quiet girl from my hometown who transformed herself into a modeling sensation. A girl who knew me before Ethan, before Midnight Designs, before I became "Ella Vatore, fashion designer." A connection to my past I'm not sure I want overlapping with my present.

"I'd prefer someone less... obvious," I say instead.

Ethan studies me for a moment. "There's something you're not saying."

"There are many things I'm not saying," I reply evenly. "That's the nature of a professional relationship."

He sets down the sketch he's holding, giving me his full attention. "Ella, if we're going to make this work, we need to be honest with each other. At least about the things that affect the collection."

I sigh, relenting. "I know Cindy. Or knew her. We grew up in the same town."

His eyebrows rise in surprise. "You never mentioned that."

"It never came up." I shrug. "We weren't close."

"Is it going to be a problem, working with her?"

"No," I say, not entirely convinced. "It was a long time ago."

Ethan considers this, then nods. "I'll set up a meeting with her agent. If there's any tension, we can look at other options."

"Fine." I glance at my watch, surprised to see it's almost 6 PM. "I should go. I have drinks with potential investors tonight."

"Investors?" He looks curious. "For Midnight?"

I nod, gathering my belongings. "We're looking at expansion opportunities. Retail presence in key markets, possibly a diffusion line."

"Ambitious." There's something like pride in his voice. "Midnight has come a long way in five years."

"It has." I meet his gaze steadily. "Despite certain predictions to the contrary."

He accepts the hit with a slight wince. "I deserved that."

"Yes, you did." I zip my portfolio closed. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Actually," he hesitates, "I was thinking we could work late tomorrow. Really dive into the collection concept. I could have dinner brought in."

Warning bells ring faintly in my head. Dinner. Late night. Alone in this beautiful space with the man who once knew every inch of me. Dangerous territory.

"I'll check my schedule," I say noncommittally.

"Do that." His voice is neutral, but his eyes hold mine a beat too long. "Good luck with your investors tonight."

As I leave the studio, I can feel his gaze on my back—a physical weight I haven't felt in years. Working with Ethan is like handling beautiful, sharp objects. The potential for creation is matched only by the potential for being cut.

Tomorrow, I'll bring thicker gloves.

## CHAPTER 5

The following day finds me back at the studio, armed with fresh sketches and a renewed determination to maintain professional boundaries. I arrive early again, hoping to settle into the space before Ethan appears.

What I don't expect is to find him already there, dress shirt sleeves rolled up, examining fabric swatches with intense concentration. He looks up when I enter, a smile warming his features.

"Morning. I brought reinforcements." He gestures to a small table where coffee and pastries wait. "And I've been thinking about our color story."

I set down my bags, accepting the offered coffee. "Let me guess—you want to include Carrington blue."

He laughs. "It is our signature. But actually, I was considering a departure. Something unexpected."

He shows me his proposed palette—rich burgundies, deep teals, charcoal grays, with unexpected pops of burnt orange and gold. It's daring, sophisticated, and not at all what I expected.

"It's... good," I admit, surprised. "Bold but wearable."

"Don't sound so shocked." His eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles. "I do occasionally have ideas that surprise even you."

We fall into work again, the creative tension between us productive rather than awkward. By midday, we've refined our silhouettes and are deep in fabric selection discussions when my phone buzzes with an incoming call from Stephi. I excuse myself to answer.

"Please tell me you haven't slept with him yet," she says without preamble.

"Hello to you too. And no, I'm maintaining appropriate professional boundaries."

"Good, because you're trending."

"I'm what?"

"Trending. On social media. You and Ethan were photographed through the studio windows yesterday. You were leaning over a table together, looking very...collaborative. The fashion blogs are having a field day. 'Fashion's Favorite Power Couple: The Sequel.'"

I groan. "We're working. That's it."

"Tell that to the Internet. Also, Page Six is running a piece tomorrow about your 'passionate reunion.' My contact there gave me a heads-up."

"Can you shut it down?"

"I can try to control the narrative, but not eliminate it. This is what happens when two attractive, successful exes with industry clout start working together again. People talk."

I glance over at Ethan, who's watching me with curious eyes. "What do you suggest?"

"Lean into it," Stephi says decisively. "Use it for the collection launch. 'The Creative Chemistry Behind Midnight Carrington.' Better to control the story than be controlled by it."

"I'm not using my personal history as a marketing tool," I hiss.

"Then be prepared for everyone else to do it for you, inaccurately and invasively." She sighs. "Just think about it. I'll send you the links to the current coverage."

We hang up, and I return to the worktable, trying to maintain my composure.

"Problem?" Ethan asks.

"Apparently, we're trending." I show him the links Stephi has just sent. Photos of us through the studio windows, looking intensely engaged in conversation. The headlines are ridiculous: 'FASHION'S MOST ELECTRIC CHEMISTRY REIGNITES' and 'CARRINGTON AND VATORE: DESIGNING LOVE 2.0?'

Ethan studies the photos, his expression unreadable. "Well, at least they caught my good side."

"This isn't funny," I snap. "I've worked too hard to have my professional accomplishments reduced to gossip about my love life."

His expression softens. "I get it. But we both know how this industry works. Perception becomes reality becomes marketing opportunities."

"I won't use our history to sell clothes," I say firmly.

"Nobody's suggesting that," he soothes, though we both know that's exactly what will happen. "But we can't control what people speculate about. We can only control the work."

"The work," I repeat, grounding myself in what matters. "Right."

"Speaking of which," he shifts gears smoothly, "Cindy Ashton's agent confirmed. She's available for a meeting tomorrow afternoon."

The reminder of Cindy sends an unexpected wave of anxiety through me. "Great," I say, not meaning it.

Ethan studies me. "You sure you're okay with this? We can look at other models."

"It's fine." I force a smile. "Ancient history."

We return to work, but the easy flow of the morning has been disrupted. I'm too aware of him now, of how we might appear to someone watching through the windows. I find myself keeping physical distance, avoiding the casual touches that naturally occur when two designers collaborate.

Ethan notices, of course. He always notices everything about me.

"You're overthinking it," he says finally, after I've circled to the opposite side of the table for the third time.

"Overthinking what?"

"How to be around me without giving the gossip mills more ammunition." He sets down his pencil. "Ella, we can't design effectively if you're choreographing every movement."

He's right, which is irritating. "I just don't want to feed the narrative."

"The narrative exists whether we feed it or not." He runs a hand through his hair, a gesture so familiar it makes my chest ache. "Look, let's just focus on the collection. The rest is noise."

I nod, making an effort to relax. We work through the afternoon, eventually finding our rhythm again. True to his word, Ethan has dinner delivered—gourmet salads and sandwiches from a nearby café I used to love.

"You remembered," I say, opening the container with my favorite Mediterranean salad.

"I remember everything about you, Ella." His voice is quiet, matter-of-fact. Not a line, just a truth.

I don't know how to respond to that, so I focus on my food. We eat at the worktable, surrounded by our sketches and fabric samples, discussing the collection between bites. It's companionable, creative, and dangerous in its comfort.



After dinner, we lose ourselves in the work again. The evening stretches on, the city lights coming alive outside our windows. We've progressed to draping fabric on forms, testing how our sketched ideas translate to three dimensions.

I'm adjusting a draped piece of midnight blue silk on a form when Ethan comes to stand beside me. Too close. I can smell his cologne, feel the heat radiating from his body.

"It needs to fall from here," he says, reaching past me to adjust the fabric at the shoulder. His arm brushes mine, casual but electric.

I step back, creating distance. "I see it."

His eyes meet mine, something like hurt flashing in them before he masks it. "Sorry. Professional boundaries."

"It's not—" I start, then stop. Because it is exactly that. "Let's just focus on the work."

He nods, returning to his side of the studio. The silence that follows is heavy with unspoken words.

Finally, I can't stand it anymore. "The media attention complicates things," I say, not looking at him. "I've worked too hard to be taken seriously as a designer on my own terms."

"I know." His voice is gentle. "And I respect that. But Ella, look at me."

I do, reluctantly.

"Five years ago, I said things I've regretted every day since. I let my pride and hurt speak instead of my heart." He takes a step toward me, maintaining a respectful distance. "You deserved better. You deserved support for your vision, not doubt."

The sincerity in his voice cuts through my defenses. "Thank you for saying that."

"I mean it." Another step closer. "Your success isn't surprising to me, Ella. It's confirmation of what I always knew—that your talent is extraordinary. I just couldn't bear the thought of you pursuing it without me."

The admission hangs between us, achingly honest.

"That's the problem, isn't it?" I say softly. "You couldn't bear me pursuing anything without you. But I needed to know I could."

"And now you do." His eyes hold mine, intense and clear. "You've proven it to yourself, to me, to the entire industry. Midnight Designs is a success because of you, not me or my name."

The validation I once desperately wanted from him now feels bittersweet. "Why couldn't you have said this five years ago?"

"Because I was an arrogant ass who thought I knew what was best for both of us." His smile is self-deprecating. "I've done some growing up since then."

The moment stretches between us, taut with possibility. Part of me wants to step forward, to close the distance, to see if his lips still fit perfectly against mine. The wiser part keeps me rooted in place.

"It's getting late," I say, breaking the spell. "We should wrap up for tonight."

He accepts the retreat with a nod. "Tomorrow we meet with Cindy. 10AM?"

"I'll be here." I gather my things, avoiding his eyes.

At the door, I pause. "Ethan?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For what you said."

His smile is gentle, a little sad. "It's just the truth, El. Always has been."

I leave before I can do something foolish, like believe that we could find our way back to each other without destroying everything we've built separately.

Some people think fashion is frivolous, but they don't understand its power. We're all just trying to match our outsides to our insides, one stitch at a time. Sometimes the fit is perfect. Sometimes alterations are required.

And sometimes, no matter how beautiful the garment, it simply wasn't made for you after all.

## CHAPTER 6

Cindy Ashton—formerly Christina from Woodbury, Connecticut—has transformed herself as thoroughly as a caterpillar to butterfly. The shy girl who sat two rows behind me in high school English is now statuesque, poised, and radiant with the particular confidence that comes from being among the world's most photographed faces.

She arrives at the studio precisely at ten, trailed by a harried-looking agent clutching a tablet and a venti something-or-other. Her smile when she sees me is genuine, if surprised.

"Ella Vatore!" She embraces me with the European double-kiss that always feels affected when Americans do it. "When they said Midnight Designs, I had no idea it was you! Small world!"

"Tiny," I agree, returning her smile with what I hope is equal warmth. "You look amazing, Cindy."

"Thanks to clean living and excellent genetics," she jokes, then turns to Ethan, extending a perfectly manicured hand. "Mr. Carrington. It's an honor to be considered for this collection."

"The honor is ours," Ethan replies smoothly. "Your aesthetic aligns perfectly with our vision."

We settle into a discussion about the collection concept, showing Cindy and her agent the preliminary sketches and mood boards. Her enthusiasm seems genuine, her questions thoughtful. I find myself warming to her despite my initial reservations.

"I love how you're balancing structure and fluidity," she says, examining a sketch. "It reminds me of your earliest designs, Ella—remember that dress you made for the spring showcase senior year? The one with the handkerchief hem?"

The casual reference to our shared past startles me. "You remember that?"

"Of course! Everyone knew you were going places." She laughs lightly. "I was so intimidated by you."

"By me?" I can't hide my surprise. In my memories, I was the awkward, ambitious nobody, not someone who intimidated others.

"Absolutely. You were so focused, so talented." Her smile turns wistful. "I was still trying to figure out if I wanted to be a veterinarian or a movie star."

"And now you're one of fashion's most sought-after faces," I observe.

"Life takes unexpected turns." She glances between Ethan and me meaningfully. "For all of us, it seems."

The conversation flows easily as we discuss the shoot concept, timeline, and compensation. Cindy's agent handles the business details efficiently, while Cindy herself connects with the creative vision. By the time they leave, with contracts pending legal review, I'm feeling cautiously optimistic about working with her.

"That went well," Ethan observes after they've gone. "You seemed to relax once you started talking."

"She's not what I expected," I admit. "More genuine than her public persona suggests."

"People can surprise you." He gives me a meaningful look. "They can grow, change, evolve beyond your memories of them."

I choose to ignore the subtext. "Let's focus on finalizing these design specs. We need to get fabric orders placed by the end of the week."

We work companionably through the morning, breaking only when Jax calls to confirm his availability to shoot the collection.

"My favorite fashion power couple," he teases when I put him on speaker. "How's the creative reunion?"

"Professional and productive," I reply, giving Ethan a warning look.

"Uh-huh." Jax's skepticism travels clearly through the phone. "And I'm straight. Listen, I've booked the studio for the dates you requested. Are we still thinking minimalist industrial for the backdrop?"

"With architectural elements," Ethan adds. "We want to create contrast with the more fluid pieces in the collection."

"Got it. And Ella tells me we're working with Cindy Ashton? Bold choice. She's everywhere right now."

"She's perfect for the aesthetic," I say, surprising myself by defending the decision.

"If you say so. Anyway, I'll send over the production schedule later today. And Ella? We need to catch up properly while you're in town. Drinks, no Carringtons allowed. Tonight?"

I laugh. "Tonight works. Text me details."

After we hang up, Ethan raises an eyebrow. "No Carringtons allowed? Should I be offended?"

"Jax is protective," I explain. "He was there for the aftermath."

"Ah." Ethan's expression clouds. "The post-Ethan recovery period."

"Something like that."

He's quiet for a moment, then asks, "Was it very bad? After you left?"

The question catches me off guard. We've been dancing around our history, focusing on present collaboration rather than past pain.

"It wasn't my finest hour," I admit, keeping my tone light. "But it was necessary."

"That doesn't answer my question."

I sigh, setting down my pencil. "What do you want me to say, Ethan? That I cried myself to sleep for months? That I questioned every decision I'd made? That I almost called you a thousand times?"

His eyes hold mine, serious and intent. "Did you?"

"Yes." The admission costs me something. "All of the above. But I also built something I'm proud of. Something that's mine."

"I never doubted you would succeed, Ella." His voice is soft. "I just couldn't bear not being part of it."

"That was the problem." I look away. "You wanted to be part of everything I did, but you couldn't accept that I needed to do some things without the Carrington name attached."

"I know that now." He runs a hand through his hair. "I was selfish. Possessive. I wanted to give you the world, but on my terms."

The honesty between us feels fragile, precious. I tread carefully. "And now?"

"Now I understand that the most impressive thing about you isn't what you create—though that's extraordinary. It's your determination to create on your own terms." His smile is rueful. "I'm learning to appreciate that without trying to control it."

The moment stretches between us, heavy with unspoken possibilities. Then my phone buzzes with an incoming text, breaking the spell.

It's from Stephi:

**From: Stephi**

Fashion Weekly wants a joint interview. Good opportunity for collection promo. Yes?

I show Ethan the message. "Thoughts?"

"It makes sense professionally," he says carefully. "But I'll follow your lead on this."

The offer to follow rather than lead isn't lost on me. It's a small thing, but significant from a man who once directed every aspect of our personal and professional lives.

"Let's do it," I decide. "But with ground rules. The focus stays on the collection, not our personal history."

"Agreed." He pauses. "Though they'll try to steer it there."

"Then we'll steer it back." I text Stephi our answer. "We're professionals. We can handle one interview."

"Absolutely," he agrees, though his slight smile suggests he knows as well as I do that fashion journalists are like bloodhounds with a scent—they'll pursue the personal angle relentlessly.

We return to work, the air between us somehow lighter after our moment of honesty. By late afternoon, we've finalized the core designs for the collection and created a production timeline that seems ambitious but achievable.

"I should go," I say, gathering my things. "I need to change before meeting Jax."

"Of course." Ethan walks me to the door. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Actually, I have a breakfast meeting with my London team. How about eleven?"

"Eleven works." He hesitates, then adds, "Have fun with Jax. Tell him I'm not the villain he thinks I am."

"I'll tell him you're only a partial villain," I tease, surprising myself with the lightness in my tone.

His laugh follows me down the hallway, wrapping around me like a familiar embrace.

---

Jax is waiting at a dimly lit bar in the East Village, looking exactly as he has for the decade I've known him—artfully disheveled, perpetually unshaven, with the intense eyes that make his subjects either fall in love with him or run screaming from his studio.

"There she is," he stands to hug me, enveloping me in his trademark scent of sandalwood and good whiskey. "The prodigal designer returns to the scene of the crime."

"Stop it." I slide onto the barstool beside him. "It's a business arrangement."

"Sure it is." He signals the bartender. "And I'm just taking casual snapshots of Cindy Ashton, not creating art."

"Speaking of Cindy," I accept the gin and tonic Jax has already ordered for me, "did you know we went to high school together?"

"No shit?" His eyebrows rise. "Small world."

"That's what she said." I take a sip of my drink. "She seems different than I expected. More... genuine."

"Don't be fooled by the friendly act. This industry turns everyone into strategic operators, especially the ones who seem most authentic." He studies me over his whiskey. "Including ex-boyfriends bearing collaboration opportunities."

I roll my eyes. "Let's not do this, Jax. Ethan and I are both different people now."

"Are you?" His gaze is too perceptive. "Because from where I'm sitting, you've got the same look in your eyes that you had five years ago. That dangerous mixture of creative excitement and personal fascination."

"That's ridiculous," I protest, knowing he's at least partially right. "I'm focused on the collection."

"Mhmm." He clearly doesn't believe me. "Just remember what happened last time you merged your personal and professional lives with Ethan Carrington."

"I remember." I stare into my drink. "But this is different. I'm different. I have my own company now, my own success."

"All the more reason to protect it." He covers my hand with his. "I'm not saying don't collaborate with him. I'm saying keep your heart locked down while you do it."

"My heart is not the issue," I insist.

"Liar." His smile is gentle. "Your heart has always been the issue with Ethan. It's what made your designs together so magical, and what made the breakup so devastating."

I can't argue with that, so I change the subject. "Tell me about your latest exhibition. Was Rome everything you hoped for?"

He allows the pivot, launching into stories about his recent photography show. We spend the next two hours catching up, carefully avoiding further discussion of Ethan. By the time we part with promises to meet again soon, I'm pleasantly buzzed and feeling more grounded than I have since arriving in New York.

Back in my hotel room, I check my emails one last time before bed. Among the business correspondence is a message from Ethan, sent just thirty minutes ago.

**Subject: Tomorrow's agenda**  
**To: Ella Vatore**

EI,

Attached are the revised timeline and budget estimates for your review before tomorrow's meeting. I've also included some thoughts on the fabric selections—I think the Japanese textiles you mentioned could be spectacular for the evening pieces.

On a personal note, I meant what I said today. I regret how things ended between us, but I'm grateful for this opportunity to create together again. Your vision continues to inspire me.

See you at eleven.

E

Professionally worded, but with a personal touch that makes my heart beat a little faster. I read it twice before closing my laptop.

I thought I was running away from him.  
Maybe, I was just taking the scenic route back.

The thought follows me into dreams of midnight blue silk... And hands that remember exactly how I like to be touched - and where.

Sometimes fairy tales don't end at midnight—they just pause until you're ready for the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 7

The Fashion Weekly interview is scheduled for the following afternoon at the studio. By the time I arrive at eleven, Ethan has already set up a display of our progress—mood boards, fabric samples, and preliminary sketches artfully arranged to showcase the collection's direction without revealing too much.

"Impressive," I say, taking in his work. "Very strategic."

"I figured we should control the visual narrative," he explains. "Give them enough to write about the collection without revealing our key designs."

"Smart." I set down my portfolio. "I spoke with Stephi this morning. She's sending over some talking points for us—ways to redirect if the questions get too personal."

"Good thinking." He hands me a coffee. "Though I still think a little personal connection plays well for the brand story."

"A little," I concede. "But I'm not having our history sensationalized to sell magazines."

"Agreed." He gestures to the worktable. "Before they arrive, I wanted to show you these textile samples that came in this morning."

We're deep in discussion about fabric options when the studio door opens to admit the Fashion Weekly team—a petite writer with sharp eyes and sharper cheekbones, accompanied by a photographer who immediately begins assessing the light.

"Mara Chen," the writer introduces herself. "Such a pleasure to meet you both. The industry has been buzzing about this collaboration since the news broke."

"We're excited to share our vision," Ethan says smoothly, charming as ever.

"Let's start with some photos," Mara suggests. "Perhaps the two of you at the worktable? Something that captures your creative process."

We pose as directed, leaning over sketches, arranging fabric swatches, a choreographed performance of collaboration. The photographer circles us, capturing angles and moments with rapid clicks.

"Perfect," he murmurs. "The chemistry is palpable."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Beside me, I feel Ethan suppress a laugh.

After the photos, we settle into the interview portion. Mara starts professionally enough, asking about the collection concept, our design approach, and the market positioning we envision.

"The collection balances structure and fluidity," I explain. "It's about the tension between opposing forces finding harmony."

"An apt metaphor for your partnership," Mara observes. "Given your history."

And there it is—the pivot to personal that we anticipated.

"Our history includes tremendously successful professional collaborations," Ethan redirects smoothly. "The Carrington Midnight collection from six years ago still influences industry aesthetics."

"But this reunion must carry emotional weight," Mara presses. "After your very public breakup and Ella's departure from Carrington Designs."

I smile pleasantly. "What carries weight is our mutual respect for each other's design sensibilities. This collection represents a mature creative partnership."

"Mature," Mara repeats, scribbling in her notebook. "Interesting choice of word. Would you say you've both grown since your relationship ended?"

"I think growth is inevitable in this industry," I say carefully. "My experiences building Midnight Designs have certainly shaped my approach to design and business."

"And I've gained perspective on what truly matters in both creative partnerships and leadership," Ethan adds. "The collection benefits from our individual evolutions."

Mara looks between us, clearly sensing the controlled narrative we're presenting. She tries another angle.

"The fashion world still references your relationship as legendary—the passionate designer and the visionary CEO whose partnership transformed Carrington Designs. Do those feelings inform your current collaboration?"

I feel Ethan tense slightly beside me. This time, I take the lead.

"Passion for excellent design has always been our common ground," I say. "That hasn't changed. What's different now is that we bring more diverse experiences to the table. Midnight Designs has developed a distinct identity, as has Carrington since I left."

"The magic happens in the synthesis," Ethan adds. "Taking the best of both our brands to create something new."

Mara nods, but her expression says she's not giving up easily. "Ella, your departure from Carrington was followed by rumors of creative differences and personal heartbreak. Yet here you are, working together again. What changed?"

The directness of the question catches me slightly off-guard. Before I can formulate a response, Ethan speaks.

"I'll take that one," he says, his voice calm but firm. "What changed is that we both achieved what we needed to separately. Ella proved beyond any doubt that her vision could succeed independently—Midnight Designs' success speaks for itself. And I learned that holding too tightly to people or ideas limits their potential to flourish."

His candor surprises me.  
Personal without being invasive.  
Honest without revealing too much.

"So this collaboration represents a new chapter?" Mara prompts.

"Exactly," I say, finding my voice again. "It's not about revisiting the past. It's about creating a future where two strong design identities can coexist and complement each other."

The interview continues for another twenty minutes, with Mara making several more attempts to probe our personal relationship. We navigate each question carefully, keeping the focus on the collection while acknowledging just enough of our history to satisfy the narrative.

As they're packing up to leave, Mara's final question catches us both by surprise.

"One last thing—I understand Cindy Ashton is the face of the collection. Any truth to the rumors that she and Ethan were briefly involved last year?"

The question lands like a slap. I keep my expression neutral through sheer force of will, while beside me, Ethan stiffens almost imperceptibly.

"Cindy was the face of Carrington's spring campaign last year," he says evenly. "Any rumors beyond our professional relationship are just that—rumors. We chose her for this collection because her look perfectly embodies the aesthetic we're creating."

Mara's eyes flick between us, registering the subtle tension her question has created. "Of course. Well, thank you both for your time. The piece should run in next week's issue."

After they leave, a heavy silence fills the studio. I busy myself rearranging fabric samples, not looking at Ethan.

"Ella," he begins.

"Were you involved with Cindy?" The question escapes before I can stop it. I hate how much I care about the answer.

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "No. Not in the way the rumors suggest."

"What does that mean?" I finally look at him.

"It means we went to dinner a few times during the campaign shoot. It was never romantic." His eyes hold mine steadily. "The industry gossips about everything. You know that."

"I do know that." I turn away, frustrated by my own reaction. What right do I have to feel jealous? "It doesn't matter anyway. We're not together. You can date whoever you want."

"Can I?" His voice is quiet.

The question hangs between us, loaded with implication. I don't answer.

"For what it's worth," he continues after a moment, "there hasn't been anyone serious. Not since you."

I don't know what to do with this information. Part of me wants to ask why, part of me doesn't want to know. Instead, I change the subject.

"We should get back to work. The production timeline is tight."

He accepts the deflection with a nod, and we return to the safe territory of design discussions. But something has shifted—a door opened that can't be entirely closed again.

We work late into the evening, the creative flow gradually erasing the awkwardness from earlier. Around eight, Ethan orders dinner again, and we eat while reviewing fabric orders and production schedules.

"The first samples should be ready next week," he says, checking the timeline. "We'll need to schedule fittings with Cindy."

I nod, making a note. "Jax wants to do a preliminary shoot with the samples—test shots for lighting and composition."

"Good idea." Ethan hesitates, then adds, "About Cindy..."

"It's fine," I interrupt. "Really. Your personal life is your business."

"That's not—" He sighs. "I just want to be clear that there's nothing between us. I wouldn't have suggested her for this collection if there were complications."

"I believe you." And strangely, I do. "I'm sorry for reacting. It caught me off guard."

"Mara knew exactly what she was doing," Ethan observes wryly. "Dropping that bomb as she was leaving."

"Classic journalism tactic," I agree. "We handled it well."

"We did." He studies me for a moment. "You know, five years ago, that would have sparked a three-day argument."

"Five years ago, I was less secure in myself," I admit. "In us."

The implication of "us" as a current concept hangs in the air. Neither of us addresses it directly.

"I like who you are now," Ethan says finally. "Not that I didn't before, but there's a certainty to you that's... compelling."

"Success is the best revenge," I say lightly, deflecting the compliment.

"Is that what this is to you?" His voice is serious now. "Revenge?"

I consider the question. "No. Not anymore. Maybe at first, but now it's about proving something to myself, not to you or anyone else."

"And what's that?"

"That I can face the past without being consumed by it." I meet his gaze directly. "That I can work with you, create with you, without losing myself in the process."

His expression softens. "And how's that going so far?"

"Ask me when the collection launches," I say with a small smile. "The jury's still out."

He laughs, and the tension breaks. We pack up for the night, our movements synchronizing without conscious effort—a remnant of years spent orbiting each other's spaces.

At the door, he pauses. "My brother's in town. He's asking about you."

"Prince?" I haven't thought about Ethan's younger brother in years. "How is he?"

"Still charming everyone in a ten-mile radius. Still driving me crazy." Ethan's expression is affectionate. "He's having a small dinner party tomorrow night at his place. He specifically asked me to invite you."

The prospect of seeing Prince again—and entering the Carrington family orbit, even peripherally—gives me pause. "I don't know, Ethan. That feels..."

"Complicated?" he supplies.

"Exactly."

"It's just dinner. A few people from the industry, some of Prince's art world friends." His tone is casual, but I sense he cares about my answer. "You could bring Jax if you'd like."

The offer to include Jax—knowing full well my friend's protective stance toward me—shows a level of confidence I hadn't expected.

"Let me think about it," I say finally.

"Of course." He steps back, giving me space literally and figuratively. "No pressure."

As I head back to my hotel, I find myself genuinely considering the invitation. Dinner with the Carrington family once felt like home. Now it feels like a foreign country I used to know the language of.

Hearts and hemlines both need adjusting as we grow. The question is whether they can ever truly fit the same way again.

## **CHAPTER 8**

Prince Charming Carrington—christened Princely at birth by parents with either tremendous foresight or a cruel sense of humor—lives up to his name in every possible way. At thirty, he's the golden boy to Ethan's dark intensity, the charmer to his brother's brooder, the artist to the businessman.

His SoHo loft reflects his personality—eclectic, vibrant, meticulously curated to appear effortlessly stylish. Art covers nearly every wall, most of it from emerging artists Prince has "discovered" through his gallery.

"Ella Vatore!" He sweeps me into a hug as soon as I arrive. "The prodigal designer returns! You look spectacular—success clearly agrees with you."

"Prince," I return his embrace, genuinely happy to see him. Unlike my complicated feelings about Ethan, I've always had a straightforward affection for his younger brother. "Still charming the world, I see."

"It's my sacred duty." He winks, taking my coat. "And look who you've brought—the infamous Jax Hunter. Your photographs of the Carrington spring campaign were extraordinary."

Jax, who agreed to accompany me as emotional support, accepts Prince's praise with his typical gruff nod. "Nice place. Good light."

"The highest compliment from a photographer," Prince laughs. "Come in, both of you. Drinks first, then I'll introduce you around."

The loft is already filled with about twenty people—a carefully selected mix of fashion industry insiders, art world luminaries, and the particular brand of beautiful people that seem to naturally orbit the Carringtons.

Prince guides us to the bar, where a mixologist in suspenders (of course) is creating elaborate cocktails. "What's your poison tonight?"

"Gin and tonic," I reply.

"Predictable," Prince teases. "Still a creature of habit, I see. Let's live a little. Marco, make Ella something special—sophisticated but with a kick, like the lady herself."

The mixologist nods, immediately reaching for bottles. Jax orders a straight whiskey, refusing Prince's attempts to upgrade his selection.

As Marco crafts my mystery drink, I scan the room, relieved when I don't immediately spot Ethan. Maybe he's running late. Or maybe he decided to spare us both the awkwardness.

"He's in the kitchen," Prince says, reading my thoughts with his usual uncanny accuracy. "Arguing with the caterer about the proper temperature for serving the tuna tartare. Control freak tendencies die hard."

I accept the coral-colored concoction Marco presents. "I wasn't looking for Ethan."

"Sure you weren't." Prince's smile is knowing. "And I'm not deliberately wearing the same cologne as my brother to mess with your head."

I nearly choke on my first sip. The drink is delicious—citrusy, spicy, with an unexpected depth.

"That's evil," I tell him, but without heat.

"That's strategy," he corrects. "I've missed teasing you, Ella. Nobody else gives me such satisfying reactions."

Before I can respond, Jax cuts in. "I'm going to check out the art. You good?"

I nod, grateful for his presence but also confident I can handle Prince on my own. "Perfect. I'll find you later."

As Jax wanders off, Prince links his arm through mine. "Come, let me introduce you to people who are dying to meet the woman who broke my brother's heart and then returned to collaborate with him. You're a legend."

"Prince," I warn.

"I'm kidding. Mostly." He guides me through the room. "Though I should warn you, Ethan has been unusually distracted since you came back to New York. The board is starting to notice."

This gives me pause. "Distracted how?"

"Arriving late to meetings. Leaving early. Staring at his phone with that little smile he only ever had around you." Prince keeps his tone light, but his eyes are serious. "He says the collaboration is going well."

"It is," I confirm. "We've finalized the designs. Production starts next week."

"Good." Prince stops, turning to face me fully. "Because I've never seen him recover from losing you, Ella. Not completely. So whatever happens this time, just... be careful with him."



The role reversal—Prince asking me to be gentle with Ethan, rather than the other way around—catches me off guard. Before I can respond, a hand touches my elbow.

"There you are." Ethan's voice is warm behind me. "I see my brother has already claimed you."

I turn to find him looking unfairly handsome in dark jeans and a charcoal sweater that makes his eyes appear more blue than gray. There's something intimate about seeing him in casual clothes again, a reminder of lazy Sundays and quiet dinners at home.

"Just catching up," I say, finding my voice. "Prince was about to introduce me around."

"I'm sure he was." Ethan gives his brother a look that speaks volumes. "Why don't I take over that duty? Prince, I think Marco needs rescuing from that art critic who's lecturing him about prohibition-era cocktails."

Prince grins, unrepentant. "Subtle, brother. Very subtle." He squeezes my hand before departing. "Find me later, Ella. We have years of gossip to catch up on."

As Prince glides away, Ethan shakes his head. "Sorry about him. He has exactly zero boundaries."

"I've always liked that about him," I admit. "It's refreshing."

"Is it? I find it exhausting." But Ethan's smile is affectionate. "You look beautiful tonight."

The compliment, delivered simply and directly, warms me more than it should. I'm wearing a midnight blue jumpsuit of my own design—elegant, minimalist, with subtle architectural details at the shoulders.

"Thank you. You look... well." I echo my assessment from our first meeting, but this time with a teasing smile.

He laughs. "Still just 'well'? I'm wounded."

"Fine. You look good," I concede. "The casual look suits you."

"High praise indeed." His eyes crinkle at the corners. "How's your drink? Prince's mixologist tends toward the experimental."

"It's actually perfect." I take another sip for emphasis. "Spicy but sophisticated."

"Like its consumer," Ethan murmurs, echoing Prince's earlier description.

An electric current runs between us, charged with memory and possibility. I break eye contact first, looking around the room.

"Should we circulate? I assume there are people here I should meet."

"Of course." He offers his arm, an old-fashioned gesture that feels both foreign and familiar. After a moment's hesitation, I take it.

The next hour passes in a blur of introductions and conversations. Ethan stays close, his hand occasionally touching the small of my back as he guides me through the crowd. Each touch is brief, professional, yet leaves a trail of warmth. I tell myself it's the drink, not his proximity, that's causing the pleasant buzz under my skin.

We're discussing fabric innovations with a buyer from Bergdorf's when a striking blonde approaches our group.

"Ethan, darling." She kisses both his cheeks. "You've been hiding from me."

"Camilla." Ethan's smile remains pleasant, but I feel him tense slightly. "I didn't realize you'd be here tonight."

"Prince and I go way back." Her eyes slide to me, assessing. "And you must be Ella Vatore. The prodigal designer returns."

Why does everyone keep calling me that?

"Camilla Reinhart," Ethan introduces us. "Fashion director at Style Quarterly."

"Of course." I shake her hand. "Your editorial on sustainable luxury last month was brilliant."

She preens slightly at the compliment. "Thank you. I'm fascinated by your collaboration with Ethan. Particularly given your... history."

There's something in her tone that suggests more than professional curiosity. I glance at Ethan, whose expression has become carefully neutral.

"The collection is coming together beautifully," I say smoothly. "We're excited to share it with the world."

"I'm sure." Her smile doesn't reach her eyes. "Ethan, we should discuss that feature we talked about. Perhaps lunch next week?"

"My schedule is rather full with production starting," he deflects. "But have your office reach out to mine."

She looks between us, something calculating in her gaze. "Of course. Don't let me interrupt your reunion. It's all anyone can talk about, you know. Fashion's favorite love story, the sequel."

After she saunters away, I raise an eyebrow at Ethan. "Friend of yours?"

"Former colleague," he says. "And briefly, unwisely, more than that. About a year ago."

The admission stings more than it should. "I see."

"It was two dinner dates," he clarifies. "Before I realized she was more interested in Carrington connections than in me."

"You don't owe me explanations, Ethan."

"I know." His eyes hold mine. "But I'd rather you hear it from me than through industry gossip."

I nod, appreciating his honesty if not the information itself. "I think I need some air."

"Of course." He gestures toward a set of glass doors. "The terrace is this way."

The night air is cool and refreshing after the warmth of the crowded loft. The terrace offers a stunning view of downtown Manhattan, the city lights creating a galaxy of human ambition below us.

I lean against the railing, breathing deeply. Ethan stands beside me, respectfully distant yet undeniably present.

"I'm sorry," he says after a moment. "This evening must be strange for you. Being back in this world, these circles."

"It is," I admit. "But not entirely in a bad way. Some of it feels... familiar. Comfortable, even."

"You always belonged here, Ella." His voice is soft. "In this industry, in this city."

"I belonged to myself more in London," I reply. "That was what I needed."

"And now?"

The question hangs between us, weighted with possibility. I turn to look at him directly.

"Now I'm figuring out if I can have both. Independence and connection."

His eyes search mine. "I think you can. I think that's what this collaboration is showing us."

"Professionally, maybe." I look back out at the city. "Personally is more complicated."

"It doesn't have to be." He moves closer, not touching me but near enough that I can feel his warmth. "We're different people now, Ella. Stronger separately, which means we could be extraordinary together."

The sentiment echoes my own thoughts so closely it's unsettling. Before I can respond, the terrace door opens, spilling light and conversation onto our private moment.

"There you are!" Prince's voice breaks the spell. "They're serving dinner, and I've seated you two together because I'm a hopeless romantic and a terrible meddler. Come on, before the food gets cold!"

Ethan gives me a look that's half-apology, half-amusement. "Shall we? Fair warning—Prince's seating arrangements are usually designed for maximum dramatic potential."

"I think I can handle it," I say, finding my equilibrium again.

Dinner is served at a long table that somehow accommodates all twenty guests while maintaining an atmosphere of intimate camaraderie. True to Prince's word, I'm seated beside Ethan, with Prince directly across from us—the better to observe whatever drama he hopes will unfold.

The food is exquisite, the wine flows freely, and the conversation ranges from fashion industry gossip to art world controversies to global politics. Throughout the meal, I'm acutely aware of Ethan beside me—the brush of his arm against mine as he reaches for his glass, the sound of his laugh at something Prince says, the way his knee occasionally touches mine under the table.

"So, Ella," Prince says during a lull in conversation, his expression innocently curious though his eyes spark with mischief, "now that you've conquered London, will you be returning to New York permanently? The fashion world here has missed you."

I feel several pairs of eyes turn to me, including Ethan's. It's a question I've been asking myself since arriving, with no clear answer yet.

"London has been good to Midnight Designs," I say diplomatically. "But I admit, there's an energy to New York that's hard to replicate elsewhere."

"Plus, certain attractions that London can't offer," Prince adds, glancing meaningfully at his brother.

"Prince," Ethan warns.

"What? I meant the superior bagels." Prince's fake innocence doesn't fool anyone. "Though now that you mention it, Ethan has been remarkably more pleasant since Ella returned. The entire Carrington staff sends their gratitude, by the way."

The table laughs, and even I can't suppress a smile. Ethan shakes his head, but I notice he doesn't contradict his brother's observation.

The evening continues pleasantly, and by the time dessert is served, I find myself relaxing in a way I haven't since returning to New York. These people, this world—it was mine once. Perhaps parts of it still are.

As coffee is being offered, I excuse myself to find the restroom. In the hallway, I encounter Jax, who's examining a large abstract canvas with critical interest.

"Having fun?" he asks, not looking away from the painting.

"Surprisingly, yes." I lean against the wall beside him. "The Carringtons always did know how to host."

"Hmm." He finally turns to me. "You and Ethan seem... cozy."

"We're being civil," I correct. "As colleagues should be."

"Civil colleagues don't look at each other the way you two do." Jax crosses his arms. "Just saying."

"And how is that, exactly?"

"Like you're both starving and the other person is a gourmet meal." His bluntness makes me laugh despite myself. "I'm not judging. Just observing."

"It's complicated," I say, which feels like the understatement of the century.

"Love usually is." He squeezes my shoulder. "Just be sure about what you want this time, El. And make him work for it."

Before I can respond, Prince appears in the hallway. "There you are! I was about to send a search party."

"Just appreciating the art," I gesture to the canvas Jax was studying.

"Ah, yes. Emerging artist from Brooklyn. Ethan hates it, which means it's probably brilliant." Prince grins. "Listen, we're moving to the living area for digestifs. Some people are leaving, but the interesting ones are staying."

"Actually, I should probably head out," I say, suddenly feeling the weight of the day.  
"Early meeting tomorrow."

"On a Saturday?" Prince pouts. "That's tragically adult of you."

"The fashion world doesn't respect weekends," I remind him. "Especially with production deadlines looming."

"Fine, abandon me to less beautiful company." He sighs dramatically. "But at least say goodbye to Ethan. He'll sulk for days if you disappear."

I roll my eyes but agree, following Prince back to the main room with Jax trailing behind. Ethan is engaged in conversation with a silver-haired man I recognize as a major department store buyer, but his eyes find mine immediately as I enter.

He excuses himself and makes his way to me. "Leaving?"

"Early meeting tomorrow," I explain. "But thank you for tonight. It was... nicer than I expected."

"High praise," he teases. "Can I walk you out?"

I glance at Jax, who shrugs. "I'll grab an Uber. Text me when you get to your hotel."

After collecting my coat and saying goodbyes to Prince and a few others, Ethan and I step into the elevator. The small space feels suddenly intimate after the crowded loft.

"Thank you for coming tonight," he says, his voice low. "It meant a lot to Prince. And to me."

"It was fun," I admit. "Your brother hasn't changed a bit."

"A fact I find both comforting and terrifying." His smile is warm. "Did you drive here?"

"No, I was planning to grab a taxi."

"Let me take you back to your hotel," he offers. "My car is downstairs."

The sensible answer would be to decline. To maintain boundaries. To remember that every moment alone with Ethan blurs the careful lines I've drawn between past and present, personal and professional.

"That would be nice," I hear myself say instead.

His car is a sleek black Audi, understated luxury that perfectly suits him. He opens the passenger door for me, a gentlemanly gesture that feels both old-fashioned and genuine.

As we drive through late-night Manhattan, a comfortable silence settles between us. The city slides by outside the windows, a kaleidoscope of lights and possibilities.

"Prince likes you," Ethan says finally. "He always has."

"The feeling is mutual. He's impossible not to like."

"A trait I apparently didn't inherit." His tone is light, but there's a question underneath.

I turn to look at him, his profile illuminated by passing streetlights. "You're plenty likable, Ethan. Just in a different way."

"Different how?" He glances at me briefly before returning his eyes to the road.

"Prince makes people feel special by giving them his full attention in the moment. You make people feel seen over time—like you're really paying attention to who they are, not just who they present themselves to be."

He seems surprised by my answer. "I didn't realize you'd analyzed us so thoroughly."

"Five years gives you perspective," I say simply.

We fall silent again until he pulls up outside my hotel. Instead of dropping me at the entrance, he parks in the loading zone and turns off the engine.

"I'll walk you in," he says, already opening his door.

In the lobby, we pause, the moment stretching between us. I should say goodnight. I should go upstairs alone. I should remember all the reasons why complicating this reunion is a terrible idea.

"Would you like to come up for a drink?" I ask instead. "To continue our conversation."

His eyes search mine, looking for certainty. "Are you sure?"

I'm not sure at all. I'm terrified and exhilarated and possibly making a huge mistake. But I'm also tired of second-guessing every interaction, analyzing every feeling.

"Yes," I say finally. "I'm sure."

The elevator ride to my floor is charged with unspoken possibilities. We stand closer than necessary, not touching but acutely aware of each other's presence. I can smell his

cologne, the same scent he's worn for years, and beneath it, the familiar smell that is simply Ethan.

In my suite, I set my purse down and move to the minibar. "What would you like? They have most basics."

"Whatever you're having is fine."

I pour two small bottles of whiskey into hotel tumblers, the ordinary action helping to ground me. When I turn, Ethan is standing by the window, looking out at the city.

"Still the same view," he observes as I hand him his drink. "You always loved the eastside skyline."

"You remembered." I'm touched by this small detail.

"I remember everything about you, Ella." His eyes hold mine as he takes a sip of his whiskey. "That's part of the problem."

"Problem?"

"Five years of carefully constructed distance, undone in two weeks." He sets his glass down. "Being around you again... it's like no time has passed and everything has changed simultaneously."

I understand exactly what he means. "It's disorienting."

"That's one word for it." He moves closer, still maintaining a respectful distance. "I've thought about what I would say if I ever got this chance again. I've rehearsed it a thousand times."

"And what did you decide?" My voice comes out softer than intended.

"That there are no perfect words to undo past mistakes." His expression is open, vulnerable in a way the public Ethan Carrington never allows. "I can only show you, day by day, that I'm not the same man who let you walk away five years ago."

The sincerity in his voice touches something deep within me—a place I've protected fiercely since our breakup.

"I'm not the same woman either," I remind him. "I don't need validation the way I once did. I don't need the Carrington name to feel legitimate."

"I know." His smile is both sad and proud. "I've watched your success from afar, Ella. Everything you've built, every boundary you've broken—you did that without me. Despite me, even."



"Not despite you," I correct gently. "Because of you, in some ways. Leaving was the hardest thing I've ever done, but it forced me to prove myself on my own terms."

He absorbs this, nodding slowly. "Then perhaps we both needed these five years apart. To become the people who could stand here now, as equals."

The word "equals" resonates deeply. That's what I've wanted all along—not to be overshadowed, not to be the fortunate protégée, but to be recognized as an equal partner in creativity and business.

"Maybe," I agree, taking a step closer.

We're standing near enough now that I can see the flecks of blue in his gray eyes, the slight stubble darkening his jaw. All the reasons this is complicated still exist, but in this moment, they seem less important than the magnetic pull between us.

"Ella," he says my name like a question.

I answer by closing the distance between us, pressing my lips to his.

The kiss is gentle at first, tentative—a question being asked and answered simultaneously. Then his arms wrap around me, pulling me closer, and tentative transforms into certain. His mouth is familiar and new all at once, awakening memories and creating fresh ones in the same moment.

When we finally break apart, both slightly breathless, he rests his forehead against mine. "I've missed you. Every day for five years, I've missed you."

The admission pierces straight through my carefully constructed defenses. "I've missed you too," I whisper against his lips. "Even when I didn't want to."

He kisses me again, deeper this time, his hands warm at my waist. I thread my fingers through his hair, rediscovering the texture, the way he responds when I tug gently.

We move toward the bedroom in a slow dance of rediscovery, pausing for kisses against walls, whispered admissions, the careful removal of clothing. By the time we reach the bed, we're down to undergarments, skin against skin igniting memories of how perfectly we've always fit together.

Ethan lays me down with reverent hands, hovering above me with a question in his eyes. "Are you sure about this?"

In answer, I pull him down to me, our bodies remembering what our minds have tried to forget.

Second chances aren't about getting back what you lost. They're about rediscovering what you never stopped looking for.

I found it tonight, in Ethan's arms, in the space between who we were and who we've become.

## CHAPTER 9

Morning arrives with gentle insistence, sunlight filtering through hotel curtains I forgot to close completely. I wake to the unfamiliar yet achingly familiar sensation of Ethan's arm draped across my waist, his breathing deep and even against my neck.

For one suspended moment, I allow myself to exist in this bubble—where complications fade against the simple reality of skin against skin, of comfort rediscovered. Then awareness returns in waves: the collection, our professional commitments, the tangled history between us.

I shift slightly, and Ethan's arm tightens reflexively around me. "Don't go," he murmurs, still half-asleep. "Five more minutes."

The echo of countless mornings past sends a bittersweet pang through my chest. How many times had I heard those exact words, spoken in that exact sleepy rumble?

"I'm not going anywhere," I assure him. "Just stretching."

He relaxes, eyes still closed but a smile curving his lips. "Good. Because I've waited five years to wake up next to you again. I'd like to enjoy it properly."

The rawness of his admission disarms me. This is the Ethan few people ever see—unguarded, unarmored, vulnerable in his honesty.

I brush my fingers through his sleep-tousled hair. "And how does one 'properly' enjoy waking up next to someone?"

His eyes open now, gray-blue and intense even in the soft morning light. "By acknowledging that it's not just any someone. It's you." He traces a finger along my collarbone. "By remembering every detail this time."

"As I recall," I say, keeping my tone light despite the emotions swirling beneath, "you had an excellent memory for details."

His smile turns wolfish. "Some things you never forget. Like—" he presses a kiss to the sensitive spot just below my ear, making me shiver, "—exactly where to kiss you to make you make that sound."

"Unfair advantage," I manage as his lips continue their exploration. "You've had years of research."

"And yet," he murmurs against my skin, "I feel like I'm discovering you all over again."

What follows is both reunion and revelation—familiar pathways traveled with new appreciation, memories confirmed and expanded. We rediscover each other slowly,

reverently, until morning has fully established itself and reality can no longer be held at bay.

"I actually do have that meeting," I admit reluctantly, tracing patterns on his chest. "Conference call with London at eleven."

"I have a board lunch at one." He sighs, pulling me closer for a moment. "The real world intrudes."

"It always does," I agree, but make no move to leave the warm cocoon of his embrace.

"Ella," he begins, his tone shifting toward serious. "About last night—"

"Don't overthink it," I interrupt, suddenly afraid of whatever carefully considered statement he's prepared. "It happened. It was..." I search for a word that won't reveal too much of my heart, "...nice."

"Nice?" He props himself up on one elbow, looking down at me with amused offense. "Five years of longing culminating in what I thought was pretty spectacular reunion sex, and you go with 'nice'?"

I laugh despite myself. "Fine. Earth-shattering. Mind-blowing. Cosmically significant. Better?"

"Much." He drops a kiss on my nose. "Though I was going to say that I don't regret it, not for a second, and I hope you don't either."

The sincerity in his voice touches me. "I don't regret it," I assure him. "But I also don't know what it means."

He nods, understanding. "It doesn't have to mean anything beyond itself right now. We have time to figure it out."

The pragmatism surprises me—the old Ethan would have pushed for definitions, commitments, certainty. This new patience speaks to growth I'm still getting used to.

"Thank you," I say simply. "For understanding."

"I'm trying." His smile is rueful. "Five years of therapy has its benefits."

This new piece of information catches me off guard. "You've been in therapy?"

"Don't sound so shocked." He traces my jawline with his finger. "After you left, I fell apart in ways that surprised even me. Therapy was either that or developing a drinking problem, and the board frowned on the latter."

I absorb this, feeling a complicated mix of guilt and validation. "Did it help?"

"Immensely. Turns out I had some control issues." His self-deprecating tone carries genuine self-awareness. "And some abandonment trauma that made me hold on too tightly to people I feared losing."

The vulnerability of his admission creates a corresponding openness in me. "I've done some work too," I confess. "On learning to speak up for what I need instead of exploding when it becomes unbearable."

"We might actually be becoming functional adults," he muses. "How terrifying."

I laugh, grateful for the lightness he's bringing to what could be a heavy conversation. "Speak for yourself. I'm still working on the 'adult' part."

"Could have fooled me." He gestures to the room around us. "Successful international business, hotel suites, morning conference calls... looks pretty adult from where I'm sitting."

"An elaborate facade," I assure him, then glance at the clock. "But one I need to maintain, which means I really do need to shower and prepare for that call."

"Go," he releases me with obvious reluctance. "I'll order breakfast."

By the time I emerge from the bathroom, wrapped in a hotel robe with my hair damp around my shoulders, Ethan has arranged an impressive room service spread on the small dining table. He's also pulled on his pants from last night, though his chest remains bare—a sight that momentarily distracts me from the coffee he's offering.

"I remembered how you take it," he says, handing me the cup. "Though your London time might have changed your preferences."

"Some preferences remain constant," I reply, accepting the coffee and taking a grateful sip. Perfect, as expected.

We eat breakfast in comfortable silence, occasionally exchanging glances that carry more meaning than words could convey. There's a domesticity to the moment that should frighten me but instead feels like slipping into a favorite sweater I'd forgotten I owned.

"I should go soon," Ethan says eventually, gathering his scattered clothing. "Need to change before the board lunch."

"Of course." I watch him dress, memorizing the familiar movements. "Will I see you at the studio later?"

"I can be there by four?" He phrases it as a question, giving me an out if I need space.

I consider briefly, then nod. "Four works. We need to finalize the accessory designs anyway."

Fully dressed now, he stands awkwardly by the door, neither of us quite sure of the protocol for this situation. Are we back together? Just sleeping together? Colleagues with benefits? The uncertainty hangs between us.

In the end, he simply steps forward and kisses me—a kiss that manages to be both gentle and promising. "Until four," he murmurs against my lips before stepping back.

After he leaves, I sink onto the edge of the bed, my mind racing. What just happened changes everything and nothing simultaneously. The collection still needs completing. Midnight Designs still needs my full attention. My life is still primarily in London.

Yet something fundamental has shifted, like tectonic plates realigning beneath the surface of my carefully constructed world.

My phone buzzes with an incoming call—Jax.

"Good morning, sunshine," his voice carries a knowing smirk. "Or should I say, good morning, woman who didn't text her friend when she got home safely last night because she was otherwise occupied?"

I groan. "How did you know?"

"Because I'm psychic. And because Ethan Carrington just did the walk of shame out of your hotel looking like the cat who ate the canary, the cream, and the entire dairy section."

"You're outside my hotel?" I ask, horrified.

"No, but I have eyes everywhere." He laughs. "Actually, I just guessed, and you confirmed it. So... how was the reunion tour?"

"I'm hanging up now."

"That good, huh? We're definitely getting drinks later so you can give me all the non-PG details."

"Goodbye, Jax."

His laughter follows me as I end the call, but I'm smiling despite myself. Trust Jax to cut through my overthinking with his particular brand of invasive affection.

The rest of the morning passes in a flurry of professional activity—the conference call with my London team, reviewing production timelines, answering emails that have piled up while I've been focused on the collaboration. I force myself to concentrate, to be present for my business, even as part of my mind keeps circling back to last night.

By mid-afternoon, I've managed to restore some semblance of professional focus. I arrive at the studio early, wanting to settle my thoughts before Ethan arrives. The space feels different somehow—charged with new meaning after our night together.

I'm arranging fabric samples when the door opens, but it's not Ethan who enters.

"Knock knock," Midna calls cheerfully, pulling a rolling suitcase behind her. "Surprise!"

"Midna?" I stare in confusion. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in London."

"The production issues are sorted, and you've been talking about how intense the timeline is for this collection." She shrugs, as if her transatlantic journey is the most natural thing in the world. "I thought you could use an extra pair of hands."

While her arrival is unexpected, I can't deny the logic. Having Midna here will help manage the growing workload as we move into production.

"That's... thoughtful," I say, still processing. "But you should have checked with me first."

"I wanted it to be a surprise." She looks around the studio with appreciative eyes. "So this is where the magic happens. Where's the famous Mr. Carrington?"

"Board meeting. He'll be here at four." I watch as she explores the space, noting how her fingers linger on the design boards, the fabric samples, the sketches that cover every surface. "How much do you know about what we're doing here?"

"Just what you've shared in our calls. A full collection, launching in three months, with Carrington's distribution network behind it." She turns to me, eyes bright with ambition. "It's going to put Midnight Designs on the map in a whole new way."

"We're already on the map," I remind her.

"In certain circles, yes. But this—" she gestures to the Carrington logo displayed on some of the materials, "—this is global domination territory."

There's something in her tone that unsettles me slightly—an eagerness that borders on hunger. But before I can analyze it further, the door opens again, and Ethan appears.

He stops short at the sight of Midna, his expression shifting from pleased anticipation (at seeing me, I realize with a small thrill) to professional neutrality.

"Hello," he says, extending his hand. "You must be Midna. Ella's mentioned you."

"Mr. Carrington." Midna's smile grows dazzlingly bright as she shakes his hand. "It's an honor to meet you. Your Fall 2018 collection changed how I thought about fashion."

I watch their interaction with mild surprise. Midna has always been confident, but there's a new quality to her manner now—something almost performative in her enthusiasm.

"Thank you," Ethan responds politely, though I can see him taking her measure. "Please, call me Ethan. Any member of Ella's team is automatically part of mine for this project."

"Midna surprised me by flying in from London," I explain. "She thought we could use extra support as we move into production."

"Smart thinking," Ethan acknowledges with a nod to Midna. "We were just about to finalize the accessory designs. Would you like to join us?"

"I'd love to," she says eagerly. "But I'm sure you two have a rhythm going. Maybe I should just observe today, get up to speed?"

"That makes sense," I agree, relieved by her self-awareness. "Why don't you review the production timeline while Ethan and I finish the accessory designs? Then we can brief you on where we stand."

As Midna settles at a smaller desk with the timeline documents, Ethan and I move to our usual workspace. We maintain a professional distance, but I'm acutely aware of the new current running between us—remembering his hands on my body just hours ago makes focusing on handbag designs surprisingly challenging.

"You okay?" Ethan asks quietly, placing a sketch in front of me.

"Fine," I assure him, though my cheeks feel warm. "Just... adjusting."

His mouth quirks in understanding. "Same. For what it's worth, you're handling it better than I am."

"Years of practice hiding my feelings in professional settings," I murmur, keeping my voice low enough that Midna can't overhear.

"You always were better at compartmentalizing," he acknowledges. "One of your many talents that used to drive me crazy."



The admission of past friction, delivered with self-aware humor rather than recrimination, makes me smile. "And here I thought it was my stubborn refusal to use color-coded file folders that really pushed you over the edge."

"That too," he agrees solemnly. "A serious character flaw."

We fall into work then, the easy banter helping to normalize our new dynamic. Occasionally our hands brush as we reach for the same sketch or fabric swatch, sending small electric currents up my arm. Each time, his eyes meet mine briefly, acknowledging the connection without drawing attention to it.

Midna observes us surreptitiously, her expression thoughtful. I make a mental note to establish clear expectations for discretion—the last thing we need is Midnight's assistant manager gossiping about a rekindled romance.

As the afternoon progresses into evening, the three of us establish a workable rhythm. Midna proves her value quickly, offering insightful suggestions on production logistics and pointing out potential bottlenecks we hadn't considered. By eight o'clock, we've made significant progress on both design finalization and production planning.

"I think that's enough for today," I announce, noting Midna's barely suppressed yawns. "Jet lag's catching up with you."

"I'm fine," she protests, but another yawn betrays her.

"Go to your hotel," I insist. "Get some sleep. We'll reconvene tomorrow."

After she leaves, an expectant silence fills the studio. Ethan and I are finally alone, the professional veneer we've maintained all afternoon suddenly unnecessary.

"That was unexpected," he comments, leaning against the worktable. "Her showing up out of the blue."

"Very," I agree. "But she's good at what she does. Having her here will help with the workload."

"Absolutely." He studies me. "Though I admit, I was looking forward to being alone with you."

The simple admission sends warmth spreading through me. "We're alone now," I point out.

"So we are." He moves closer, his intent clear in his eyes. "Which raises the question of what happens next."

"Next professionally, or next personally?" I ask, needing the clarification even as part of me wants to simply fall back into his arms.

"Both," he says. "But let's start with personally, since that's the more urgent matter at the moment."

"Urgent?" I raise an eyebrow, even as he steps into my personal space.

"Extremely." His hands settle on my waist. "I've been thinking about kissing you again for approximately seven hours and twenty-three minutes."

"That precise, huh?" I can't help smiling as his thumbs trace small circles against my sides.

"I'm a details man." His eyes drop to my lips. "So, may I?"

The formality of the question, the respect inherent in asking permission—it's another sign of growth, of lessons learned. The old Ethan would have simply taken what he wanted, confident in his welcome.

"You may," I whisper, already leaning into him.

The kiss is different from last night's—less urgent exploration, more deliberate appreciation. His hands remain respectfully at my waist, mine resting lightly on his chest. When we break apart, he presses his forehead to mine.

"I've missed this," he murmurs. "Not just the physical. The connection."

"Me too," I admit. "But it complicates things."

He sighs, straightening but not stepping away. "Doesn't it always? The question is whether the complication is worth it."

I search his face, finding nothing but sincere openness there. "And what do you think?"

"I think," he says slowly, deliberately, "that I let you walk away once because I couldn't give you what you needed. I'm not making that mistake again."

The declaration hangs between us, both promise and challenge.

"What if what I need is still independence?" I ask, voicing my deepest fear. "What if Midnight Designs still needs to stand on its own?"

"Then we find a way to make that work," he says simply. "Your success is part of who you are now, Ella. I would never ask you to diminish it."

The reassurance addresses the very core of my concerns—that rekindling our relationship would somehow mean surrendering the independence I've fought so hard to establish.

"We should take this slowly," I say, though my body is already arguing against such caution. "See if we can balance the personal and professional."

"Agreed." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Though I should warn you, my definition of 'slowly' might differ from yours."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'd like to take you to dinner tomorrow night. A proper date. In public."

The prospect of being seen together socially—of deliberately feeding the rumors already circulating—gives me pause.

"That would make a statement," I point out.

"It would," he acknowledges. "But hiding feels like we're ashamed of this, of us. I'm not. Are you?"

Put that way, my hesitation seems like cowardice. "No," I say finally. "I'm not ashamed. Cautious, yes. But not ashamed."

"Then have dinner with me tomorrow. We'll go somewhere quiet, but not secret." His smile is both understanding and challenging. "Let people talk. We know the truth."

"And what is the truth, Ethan?" I need to hear him say it.

His expression turns serious. "That I've never stopped loving you. That these five years apart have only confirmed what I already knew—you're it for me, Ella. Whether that means partnership, marriage, or just creating together... I want you in my life."

The declaration steals my breath. "That's quite a statement for someone advocating taking things slowly."

"I said we should take the physical relationship slowly," he clarifies. "I never promised to hide how I feel."

His honesty disarms me completely. "I don't know what to say to that."

"You don't need to say anything," he assures me. "Just have dinner with me tomorrow. We'll figure out the rest as we go."

"Okay," I agree finally. "Dinner tomorrow."

His smile is brilliant, lighting his entire face in a way I've missed desperately. "Excellent. I'll pick you up at eight."

As we gather our things to leave, a comfortable silence falls between us. At the door, he pauses.

"One more thing," he says. "About Midna."

"What about her?"

His expression turns thoughtful. "Just... be careful what you share with her. Something about her seems—"

"Ambitious?" I supply.

"I was going to say calculating." His tone is measured. "The way she was studying everything in the studio... it felt like she was taking inventory."

"She's my assistant manager," I remind him. "Of course she's interested in the collaboration."

"Of course," he agrees, but doesn't look entirely convinced. "Just trust your instincts with her."

After a brief goodbye kiss that threatens to become much more, we part ways. As I head back to my hotel, I find myself turning over both Ethan's declaration and his warning about Midna.

In fashion, timing is everything. In love, timing is the only thing. Five years ago, we were wrong for each other—or at least, wrong for who we needed to become.

Now, the question is whether our timing has finally aligned, or if we're simply falling into old patterns with new costumes.

Only time will tell. And for once, I'm not rushing toward the answer.

## **CHAPTER 10**

Our first official "date" since reuniting carries all the nervous anticipation of a first date combined with the weighted history of thousands that came before. I change outfits three times, settling finally on a midnight blue dress with architectural shoulder details—my own design, naturally. The color has always been my signature, my armor, my statement.

Ethan arrives precisely at eight, knocking on my hotel room door rather than texting from the lobby. When I open it, he's standing there with a single perfect lily—not roses, never roses with Ethan. He remembers my preference for flowers that embody both strength and grace.

"You look beautiful," he says simply, eyes taking in my appearance with appreciative warmth.

"Thank you." I accept the flower, our fingers brushing in the exchange. "You clean up pretty well yourself."

He's wearing a charcoal suit that I suspect was tailored within the last week, given how perfectly it fits his frame. No tie, just an open-collared shirt that softens the formality enough to suggest dinner rather than business.

"Shall we?" He offers his arm, old-world manners that once made me roll my eyes but now strike me as endearingly sincere.

The restaurant he's chosen is a small, elegant place in the West Village—exclusive enough to ensure privacy but not so trendy as to guarantee paparazzi. As we're led to our table, I notice a few recognizable faces from the fashion world, their eyes widening slightly at the sight of us together. By morning, I'm certain, the industry gossip mill will be in full swing.

"You seem calm about this," Ethan observes as we sit. "The public statement we're making."

"I've decided that hiding would only feed speculation," I reply, unfolding my napkin. "Might as well own the narrative."

His smile is appreciative. "Very strategic."

"I learned from the best." I glance at him over the menu. "Though I'm not sure your PR team would approve of this outing."

"They suggested it, actually." His admission surprises me. "Not this specific restaurant, but the concept of us being seen together socially. They think it humanizes the collaboration."

"Ah." I feel a pang of disappointment, irrationally. "So this is a PR move."

He reaches across the table, covering my hand with his. "The PR angle is a convenient excuse, nothing more. I'm here because I want to be with you, Ella. The rest is noise."

The sincerity in his eyes banishes my momentary doubt. "Okay."

"Now," he shifts, lifting his hand from mine as the waiter approaches, "I recommend the duck confit. It's extraordinary."

Dinner progresses with surprising ease—conversation flowing from professional topics to personal memories to future aspirations. We carefully navigate around potential land mines, keeping the tone light yet meaningful. By the time dessert arrives—a dark chocolate soufflé we agree to share—I feel both relaxed and exhilarated, a combination only Ethan has ever inspired in me.

"I forgot how easy this can be," I admit, taking a small bite of the decadent dessert. "Being with you."

"It wasn't always easy," he reminds me gently. "We had our challenges."

"True." I consider this. "But the good parts... they were really good."

"They were perfect," he agrees, his eyes holding mine across the table. "And they could be again."

The promise in his words sends a shiver through me. "You seem very confident about that."

"I am." He sets down his spoon, expression turning serious. "Because I understand now what I didn't five years ago. You don't need me to succeed, Ella. You never did. But I hope you might want me anyway."

The vulnerability beneath his confident exterior touches me deeply. "I never stopped wanting you, Ethan. That was never the issue."

"I know." His smile is tinged with regret. "The issue was that I couldn't separate wanting you from wanting to control your path. I'm still working on that, but I'm getting better."

"I can see that," I acknowledge. "And I'm working on communicating what I need instead of just walking away when it gets hard."

"Progress all around," he says, lifting his wine glass in a small toast. "To growth."

"To growth," I echo, touching my glass to his.

As we leave the restaurant, several discreet photos are taken by fellow diners—confirmation that our "statement" will indeed be public by morning. Ethan's hand rests lightly at the small of my back, a gesture that feels both protective and possessive in the best possible way.

Outside, his car waits at the curb. "Would you like to come back to my place?" he asks, the question casual but weighted with meaning. "For a nightcap."

We both know "nightcap" is code for much more. Five years ago, I would have said yes without hesitation, eager to please, to maintain our connection at any cost. Tonight, I consider my answer carefully.

"I should probably get back to the hotel," I say finally. "Early meeting with Midna tomorrow to review the production timeline."

For a moment, disappointment flashes across his features, quickly masked. "Of course. I understand."

"But," I add, reaching for his hand, "I'd like a rain check. When we don't have early meetings the next day."

His smile returns, relief evident. "Rain check noted and eagerly anticipated."

The ride back to my hotel is comfortable, his hand resting on mine between the seats. At the entrance, he insists on walking me to my door again—another old-fashioned gesture that feels genuinely caring rather than controlling.

Outside my room, he pulls me close for a kiss that starts gentle but quickly deepens, his hands tangling in my hair as mine grip the lapels of his jacket. When we finally break apart, both slightly breathless, his eyes are dark with desire.

"You sure about that rain check?" he murmurs against my ear.

I laugh softly, pushing him back with gentle hands. "Patience, Carrington. Good things come to those who wait."

"I've waited five years," he reminds me, but steps back respectfully. "What's another day or two?"

"Exactly." I unlock my door, then turn back to him. "Thank you for tonight. It was perfect."

"Just the beginning," he promises. "Goodnight, Ella."

"Goodnight, Ethan."

Inside my room, I lean against the closed door, heart racing with a familiar yet new excitement. Despite my outward composure, every cell in my body had screamed to invite him in, to continue what we'd started the other night. But something in me needed this small assertion of independence—to show both of us that while I may want him desperately, I'm not defined by that want.

My phone buzzes with a text from Stephi:

**From: Stephi**

Just got a heads-up from my contact at Fashion Daily. Photos of your dinner date already circulating. Headline tomorrow will be "Fashion's Power Couple: The Sequel." Want me to run interference?

I consider this, then reply:

**To: Stephi**

No interference needed. Let it run. But if they ask for comment, the official line is "Ella and Ethan are enjoying reconnecting both professionally and personally during the collection development."

Her response is immediate:

**From: Stephi**

Look at you, owning the narrative! I'm so proud. Call me tomorrow with ALL the details.

I smile, setting my phone aside. Five years ago, news of my personal relationship with Ethan overshadowed my professional contributions. Now, having established my own success, I can integrate the personal without fear of being diminished by it.

Progress indeed.

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The studio the next morning is already occupied when I arrive—Midna has beaten me there, and appears to have been working for some time judging by the organized stacks of materials and fabric swatches now labeled and cataloged.

"Morning, boss," she greets cheerfully. "Coffee's on the side table. Black, one sugar."

"You're efficient," I observe, accepting the coffee and surveying her work. "How long have you been here?"

"Since six," she admits. "Jet lag. Figured I might as well be productive."



"Very productive," I agree, impressed despite my lingering uneasiness about her surprise arrival. "You've organized all the production materials."

"And created a digital tracking system for the sample development." She gestures to her laptop. "I've set it up so both you and Mr. Carrington can monitor progress in real-time."

"Ethan," I correct automatically. "He prefers Ethan."

"Right." Something flickers in her expression—too quick to identify before she's smiling again. "Ethan it is. Speaking of which, I saw the photos online this morning. You two looked... cozy."

Here it is—the personal inquiry I'd been expecting. I keep my expression neutral. "We had dinner."

"Just dinner?" Her tone is casual, but her eyes are sharp with curiosity.

"Midna," I say firmly. "While I value your assistance professionally, my personal life remains private."

She has the grace to look chagrined. "Of course. Sorry. It's just... everyone in the London office has been speculating since you announced the collaboration. The excitement got to me."

"Understandable," I allow. "But to be clear—any speculation about my personal relationship with Ethan stays out of our professional environment. That's non-negotiable."

"Absolutely." She nods emphatically. "Professional boundaries maintained, 100%."

We spend the morning reviewing the production timeline, with Midna proving her worth through detailed knowledge of our supply chain and manufacturing capabilities. By the time Ethan arrives at eleven, we've developed a comprehensive schedule that accommodates the collection's ambitious scope while maintaining quality standards.

"Impressive work," Ethan comments after reviewing our timeline. "Midna, your organizational skills are remarkable."

She beams under his praise. "Thank you. I've been studying production management for the past year, specifically looking at integrating traditional craftsmanship with modern timelines."

"That's exactly the balance we're trying to strike with this collection," Ethan observes, looking genuinely interested. "Have you thought about specializing in production oversight long-term?"

"Actually, yes." Midna glances at me. "Though my heart is ultimately in design. I'm hoping to learn as much as possible from both of you during this collaboration."

"A well-rounded approach," Ethan approves. "Understanding both the creative and logistical aspects of fashion is increasingly valuable."

I watch their interaction with mixed feelings—pleased by Midna's evident capabilities, yet still harboring a vague unease I can't quite identify. There's something calculated in her enthusiasm, a strategic quality to her ambition that reminds me uncomfortably of myself at a younger age.

The day progresses smoothly, with the three of us falling into an efficient working rhythm. Ethan and I maintain professional distance in Midna's presence, though occasionally our hands brush or our eyes meet in moments of private understanding.

Around three, Ethan receives a call that takes him out of the studio for a board meeting. After he leaves, Midna visibly relaxes.

"So," she begins, sorting fabric swatches, "he's not what I expected."

"How so?" I ask, curious despite myself.

"Less intimidating. More... human." She considers this. "The way people talk about him in the industry, you'd think he was half corporate robot, half fashion dictator."

I laugh at the assessment. "Ethan cultivates that impression deliberately in business settings. It serves him well in negotiations."

"But not with you," she observes shrewdly. "With you, he's different."

I hesitate, then decide that a controlled revelation is better than allowing her to speculate wildly. "We have history. That changes the dynamic."

"The famous breakup," she nods. "Everyone knows that story—the designer who walked away from fashion's golden throne to build her own empire."

"That's the public version," I acknowledge. "The reality was more complicated."

"It always is." She hesitates, then adds, "For what it's worth, I think you made the right choice. Midnight Designs has an authenticity that most labels lack. It's truly yours."

The comment surprises me with its insight. "Thank you. That's precisely what I was fighting for."

"And now?" Her question is carefully casual. "Working with him again, is it what you expected?"

I consider my answer carefully. "Nothing about this situation is what I expected, Midna. Coming back to New York, collaborating with Carrington Designs, reconnecting with Ethan—it's all uncharted territory."

"But exciting territory," she suggests.

"Yes," I admit. "Exciting and terrifying in equal measure."

She nods, seeming to absorb this. "Well, for what it's worth, the collection is incredible. The blend of his architectural approach with your textile innovations... it's going to be revolutionary."

Her enthusiasm seems genuine, and I feel my wariness softening slightly. Perhaps Ethan's concerns about her were overblown. Perhaps my own reservations stem more from the unexpected nature of her arrival than any actual reason for distrust.

"I hope so," I say, allowing myself a moment of genuine excitement about the collection. "It feels special, doesn't it? Different from our regular work."

"It's the creative chemistry," she says with certainty. "Some designers just spark off each other. You and Ethan clearly do."

The observation is uncomfortably perceptive. Our creative connection has always been extraordinary—even during our worst personal conflicts, we could still design together with uncanny synchronicity.

"Chemistry is one word for it," I acknowledge. "Sometimes I think of it more as constructive friction. We challenge each other's instincts in ways that elevate the final product."

"That's rare," Midna says thoughtfully. "Most creative partnerships I've observed involve compromise that dilutes both visions. Yours seems to concentrate them instead."

Once again, her insight impresses me. For all my unease about her sudden appearance, Midna clearly understands the creative process on a fundamental level.

"It is rare," I agree. "Which is why this collaboration makes sense professionally, regardless of personal complications."

"And the personal complications?" she probes, crossing a line despite my earlier warning.

I give her a measured look. "Remain personal, as I mentioned earlier."

"Right. Sorry." She returns to her work, though I notice her casting curious glances my way throughout the afternoon.

By five, we've finalized the production schedule and confirmed appointments with our key manufacturers. Midna excuses herself for a dinner meeting with a fabric supplier, leaving me alone in the studio just as Ethan texts that he's on his way back.

When he arrives twenty minutes later, his smile at finding me alone speaks volumes.

"How was the board meeting?" I ask as he drops his briefcase on a nearby chair.

"Tedious but necessary," he replies, coming to stand before me. "How was your afternoon with Midna?"

"Productive. She's extremely capable." I hesitate, then add, "Though you're right about her ambition. It has a particular intensity to it."

"I noticed." He doesn't look pleased by the confirmation. "Keep an eye on what information she has access to. Call it paranoia, but I've seen that hunger before in young designers. It doesn't always channel itself ethically."

"You think she'd steal our designs?" The suggestion seems extreme. "She's been with Midnight for two years without incident."

"Not steal, necessarily." His expression is thoughtful. "But perhaps leverage her inside knowledge for future advantage. Just be careful."

I nod, making a mental note to limit Midna's access to our most innovative design elements until the collection launches. "Noted."

Ethan steps closer, his demeanor shifting from business to personal. "Now, about that rain check..."

The transition makes me smile. "Subtle, Carrington."

"Patience has never been my forte," he admits, hands finding my waist. "Though I am improving."

"Marginally," I tease.

"Have dinner with me tonight," he suggests. "At my place. I'll cook."

The offer surprises me. In our previous relationship, Ethan rarely cooked—not from lack of ability, but from lack of time. His suggestion signals both a desire for privacy and a willingness to make time for domestic moments.

"You'll cook?" I raise an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you've become domestic in my absence."

"Let's say I've developed a greater appreciation for life outside the office." His thumbs trace small circles against my sides. "Including the therapeutic benefits of chopping vegetables after stressful board meetings."

The image of Ethan Carrington, fashion mogul, finding zen through vegetable preparation makes me laugh. "Now this I have to see."

"Is that a yes?" His eyes hold mine, hopeful.

"It's a yes," I confirm. "What time?"

"Eight? My place in Tribeca." His smile turns slightly wicked. "And pack an overnight bag. I'm not letting you leave this time."

The presumption should irritate me. Instead, I find myself flushing with anticipation. "Confident, aren't you?"

"Hopeful," he corrects, pressing a quick kiss to my lips. "There's a difference."

As we leave the studio separately—me to return to my hotel to change and pack, him to prepare dinner—I find myself reflecting on the unexpected turn my New York trip has taken. I came for a business collaboration, to prove I could work with Ethan without complication. Now I'm packing an overnight bag for a romantic dinner at his home, consciously stepping back into the personal connection I'd convinced myself was firmly in the past.

The difference between a design and a masterpiece is the same as the difference between attraction and love—it's the intention behind every detail. Five years ago, our intentions were misaligned despite our feelings. Now, it seems, we might finally be working from the same pattern.

## CHAPTER 11

Ethan's Tribeca loft is both familiar and foreign—the same spectacular space I once half-lived in, yet transformed in subtle ways that speak to the passage of time and the evolution of its owner. The modern, almost sterile aesthetic I remember has softened—more books line the shelves, artwork that isn't purely investment-grade decorates the walls, and actual lived-in comfort has replaced showroom perfection.

"You've redecorated," I observe as he takes my coat.

"Rehumanized," he corrects with a self-deprecating smile. "My therapist suggested my living space reflected my emotional state—controlled to the point of isolation."

"Smart therapist."

"Smart, annoying, occasionally right." He guides me toward the kitchen, where delicious aromas suggest his cooking promises are being fulfilled. "Wine?"

"Please." I perch on one of the stools at the kitchen island, watching as he moves with surprising confidence among pots and cutting boards. "So this is really happening. Ethan Carrington, domestic god."

He laughs, handing me a glass of red wine. "Hardly. But I've learned that some problems can't be solved by working longer hours. Sometimes chopping an onion is more productive than sending another email."

"Wisdom indeed," I raise my glass in salute. "What are you making?"

"Coq au vin." He returns to stirring something that smells deeply of wine and herbs. "My mother's recipe, though she'd be horrified by my shortcuts."

The mention of Catherine Carrington—fashion icon, formidable matriarch, and occasionally terrifying mother-in-law-in-waiting—sends a small shiver through me. "How is your mother?"

"Still formidable. Still critical. Still secretly proud of everything Prince and I do while pretending we could always do better." His tone is affectionate despite the description. "She asks about you sometimes."

This surprises me. Catherine had always been coolly polite to me—respectful of my design talent but dubious about my suitability as her eldest son's partner. "Really?"

"Really." He glances up from his cooking. "She admires what you've built with Midnight Designs. Though she'd never admit it directly to me."

"Huh." I absorb this unexpected information. "I always thought she viewed me as inadequately pedigreed for her son."

Ethan's expression turns thoughtful. "I think she viewed you as a threat, actually. Someone who might convince me to prioritize something above the Carrington legacy."

"And now?"

"Now she sees you as someone who created your own legacy, which earns her respect." He shrugs. "Plus, I think she secretly enjoys that you walked away from me. Confirmed her belief that I needed to be taken down a peg."

I laugh at this assessment. "Your mother is a complicated woman."

"Understatement of the century." He lifts his wine glass. "To complicated women. May they continue to challenge and improve us mere mortal men."

I clink my glass against his, oddly touched by this evolution in his thinking. The old Ethan would have viewed being challenged as a threat. This new version appears to welcome it.

Dinner proves delicious—the coq au vin rich and flavorful, served with crusty bread and a simple salad. We eat at the dining table, conversation flowing easily from professional topics to personal updates to shared memories. It feels dangerously comfortable, as if the five-year gap in our relationship is steadily closing with each shared meal, each revealed evolution.

"I've been thinking about the collection name," Ethan says as we linger over the last of the wine. "'Midnight Carrington' is functional but uninspired."

"Agreed." I've been turning possibilities over in my mind for days. "It needs to capture the essence of what we're creating together."

"Which is?"

I consider this, swirling the wine in my glass. "Reunion, but with transformation. Recognition of what came before, but evolution into something new."

"'Renaissance,'" he suggests. "Rebirth. Too on the nose?"

"A bit." I smile. "And too grandiose, even for us."

"'Convergence'?" He leans forward, engaged in the creative process that has always connected us most powerfully. "The coming together of separate paths?"

"Getting warmer." I set down my glass, thinking. "What about 'Synthesis'? The creation of something new from combined elements."

His eyes light up. "I like that. 'Synthesis' by Carrington and Vatore."

"Not alphabetical order?" I tease, referring to his previous insistence on 'Carrington-Vatore' for all our joint projects.

"Vatore-Carrington works just as well," he says easily. "Another example of my tremendous personal growth."

I laugh, the wine and the company making me feel lighter than I have in years. "Truly impressive evolution. Your therapist must be so proud."

"Exceedingly." He stands, collecting our plates. "Dessert? I didn't make it, but the bakery down the street does an excellent chocolate tart."

"Maybe later," I say, my meaning clear in my tone.

He sets the plates down, his eyes darkening as he reads my intention. "Later works."

What follows is both familiar reunion and new discovery—the path to his bedroom known by muscle memory, yet the journey itself transformed by our five years apart. There's a patient appreciation to his touch that wasn't always present before, a conscious attention to my responses that speaks of lessons learned about the difference between possession and partnership.

"You've changed," I murmur against his skin, hours later, our bodies cooling in the aftermath of reunion.

"For the better, I hope," he replies, fingers tracing lazy patterns along my spine.

"Definitely better." I prop myself up on one elbow, studying his face in the dim light filtering through the bedroom windows. "Less... demanding. More present."

"That's very diplomatic language for 'less controlling and self-centered,'" he observes with rueful self-awareness.

"I was trying to be kind," I admit with a small smile.

"Don't be." His expression turns serious. "I need honesty from you, Ella. Especially about the ways I failed before."

The vulnerability in his request touches me deeply. "You didn't fail, exactly. We both got lost in the dynamics we created. I allowed myself to be overshadowed because it was



easier than fighting for my vision. You controlled because I let you, which only reinforced the pattern."

He absorbs this, nodding slowly. "And now?"

"Now I don't need your approval to trust my vision," I say simply. "Which means when I accept your input, it's because I value it, not because I'm seeking validation."

"And I'm learning that your independence strengthens us rather than threatens us." His hand finds mine, fingers intertwining. "That loving you doesn't mean directing you."

The word "loving" hangs between us, significant but not suffocating. Neither of us addresses it directly, allowing it to exist without demands for reciprocation or definition.

"We should probably set some boundaries," I say finally. "About work. About how we present this to others."

"Always the pragmatist," he teases gently, but his eyes remain serious. "What kind of boundaries did you have in mind?"

"Professional first," I decide. "At the studio, especially with Midna present, we maintain a collegial relationship. No displays of affection, no personal discussions."

"Agreed," he says. "Though I reserve the right to occasionally admire you from a professional distance."

"Admire away," I allow with a smile. "Second, we keep the collection as our primary focus. This—" I gesture between us, "—can't distract from what we're creating together professionally."

"Also agreed." He shifts, pulling me closer against his side. "And personally? What boundaries do you need there?"

I consider this carefully. "I need to know that whatever happens between us doesn't affect the collaborative agreement. If this personal reunion doesn't work out, the collection still launches as planned."

"Absolutely." His response is immediate and firm. "I would never compromise our professional commitments because of personal complications. You have my word."

The sincerity in his voice reassures me. "Then I think we can navigate this. One day at a time."

"One day at a time," he echoes, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "Though I should warn you, my hopes extend considerably beyond that timeframe."

The admission sends a flutter through my chest—equal parts excitement and trepidation. "Let's start with tonight," I suggest, not ready to contemplate longer horizons.

"Tonight," he agrees, pulling me closer. "And maybe tomorrow morning."

His smile against my skin promises many more tomorrows, if I'm brave enough to claim them.

---

Morning arrives with gentle insistence—sunlight filtering through Ethan's bedroom windows, the distant sounds of Manhattan awakening, and the warm weight of his arm draped across my waist. For a moment, I allow myself to savor the sensation of waking beside him again, the simple intimacy that once defined our mornings.

"You're thinking too loudly," he murmurs, voice rough with sleep. "I can practically hear the wheels turning."

I smile despite myself. "Just mentally reviewing today's schedule."

"Liar." He pulls me closer, eyes still closed. "You're analyzing what it means to wake up here, in this bed, and whether it complicates our carefully negotiated boundaries."

The accuracy of his assessment is both impressive and mildly irritating. "When did you get so insightful?"

"Somewhere between the third and fourth year of therapy." He opens his eyes now, startlingly alert. "The answer, by the way, is yes—it does complicate things. And no—that's not necessarily a problem."

"That's reassuringly ambiguous," I observe dryly.

He laughs, the sound vibrating against my back. "Would you prefer a detailed analysis of our relational trajectory with projected outcomes at the six-month, one-year, and five-year marks? Because I have those ready too."

"Of course you do." I turn in his arms to face him. "The man who created the fashion industry's most comprehensive five-year strategic planning model would naturally approach relationships the same way."

"Old habits," he acknowledges with a rueful smile. "Though I'm trying to leave more room for spontaneity these days."

"Is that what this is?" I gesture between us. "Spontaneity?"

His expression turns thoughtful. "No. This is the most deliberate choice I've made since you left. Everything else—work, acquisitions, expansion—that's been automatic. This... this has been my North Star. Getting back to you, somehow."

The raw honesty of his admission steals my breath. "Ethan—"

"You don't need to say anything," he interrupts gently. "I'm not looking for declarations. I just want you to know that for me, this isn't casual or convenient or collection-related. It's essential."

Words fail me entirely, my heart racing with a confusion of emotions—touched by his sincerity, frightened by the intensity, uncertain of my own ability to match such commitment after years of carefully guarded independence.

Sensing my turmoil, he smiles and shifts gears smoothly. "Now, I believe I promised you breakfast. How do you feel about avocado toast? It's basically the only other thing I can make besides coq au vin."

The deliberate lightening of the mood gives me space to breathe, to find my equilibrium again. "Avocado toast sounds perfect."

After a shower—shared, which delays our breakfast considerably—we move to his kitchen, working around each other with the ease of long familiarity. He prepares coffee and slices bread while I handle the avocados and eggs, our movements synchronized without conscious effort.

"We should head to the studio after breakfast," I say, settling at the kitchen island with my plate. "The sample fabrics are being delivered today."

"Eager to escape my emotional intensity?" he teases, but his eyes are understanding.

"Eager to remember that we have a collection to launch in eleven weeks," I correct gently. "And yes, perhaps a bit of professional focus would help balance this morning's revelations."

"Fair enough." He takes a bite of toast, chewing thoughtfully. "Though for the record, I don't regret anything I said. I believe in transparency this time around."

"I appreciate that," I say honestly. "Just... give me time to catch up, okay? Five years of convincing myself I was completely over you takes some undoing."

His smile is slow and confident. "I can be very patient when the goal is worthwhile."

The certainty in his voice both warms and unsettles me. Part of me wants to match his conviction, to dive headlong into this rekindled connection. The wiser part remembers the pain of our parting, the hard-won independence that followed, and counsels caution.

"One day at a time," I remind him, echoing our agreement from last night.

"One day at a time," he confirms. "Today being particularly promising, as I get to watch you evaluate Japanese textiles, which always makes your eyes light up in a specific way that I find irrationally appealing."

The observation—so particular, so evidently born of genuine attention—makes me laugh. "You have strange turn-ons, Carrington."

"I prefer to think of them as highly refined aesthetic appreciations," he replies with mock dignity.

We finish breakfast in companionable banter, the heavy emotional terrain of earlier giving way to the easy rapport that has always underpinned our connection. By the time we leave for the studio—separately, by mutual agreement—I feel both unsettled and anchored, a contradiction that seems to characterize this entire New York chapter.

At the studio, Midna is already present, organizing the newly delivered fabric samples with efficient precision. She looks up as I enter, her expression carefully neutral as she takes in my changed outfit from yesterday.

"Morning," she says, revealing nothing of whatever conclusions she's drawn. "The Japanese silk-wool blends just arrived. They're even more spectacular than the swatches suggested."

"Excellent." I set down my bags, immediately moving to examine the fabrics. "Any word from the Italian mill about the jacquards?"

"Delayed by two days," she reports. "I've already adjusted the production timeline to accommodate."

Her efficiency continues to impress me, even as Ethan's warnings about her ambition linger in the back of my mind. "Thank you. That's helpful."

When Ethan arrives thirty minutes later, we maintain our agreed-upon professional distance, though I catch him watching me with private warmth whenever Midna's attention is elsewhere. The day proceeds productively—fabric selections finalized, production orders placed, preliminary marketing materials approved.

By late afternoon, we've made significant progress, leaving only the final design details to resolve before full production begins next week. As Midna excuses herself for a supplier meeting, Ethan approaches my worktable.

"Dinner tonight?" he asks, voice low. "Your choice of venue this time."

The temptation to say yes is strong, but some instinct for self-preservation asserts itself. "I should probably have an early night," I say. "And catch up on some Midnight business that I've been neglecting."

Disappointment flickers across his face before understanding replaces it. "Space," he nods. "Understood."

"Not space, exactly," I clarify. "Just... balance. This is all happening very quickly, and I need to make sure I'm maintaining perspective."

"Of course." His smile is genuine if a bit restrained. "Take whatever time you need. I'll be here when you're ready."

The absence of pressure, the respect for my boundaries—it's another marked change from our previous dynamic, where my need for independence was often met with hurt or attempt at persuasion.

"Thank you," I say simply. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Absolutely. The photographer is coming at ten to discuss concept shots, right?"

I nod, gathering my things. "Jax promised to behave himself around you, so it should be relatively painless."

"I appreciate his restraint," Ethan says dryly. "Though I understand his protective instincts where you're concerned."

"He means well." I shoulder my bag. "Goodnight, Ethan."

"Goodnight, Ella." He remains where he is, allowing me to leave first—another small courtesy that speaks volumes.

Back at my hotel, I spend the evening as promised—catching up on Midnight business, reviewing financial projections, and responding to emails I've neglected during the intensity of collection development. Around nine, I draw a bath, sinking into the hot water with a much-needed glass of wine.

As the warmth seeps into my muscles, I allow myself to finally process the whirlwind of the past few days. Ethan's declaration this morning—that returning to me has been his North Star—continues to reverberate through my consciousness. The sincerity in his voice, the vulnerability beneath his usual confidence... it was a side of him I glimpsed only rarely in our previous relationship.

The question now is whether I'm ready to trust this evolution—in him, in myself, in what we might create together beyond fashion. Five years ago, I left because staying meant

diminishment, meant subordinating my vision to the Carrington empire. Now, having proven myself independently, would reunion mean compromise or completion?

I don't have an answer yet. But for the first time since returning to New York, I'm allowing myself to genuinely consider the possibility of a future that includes both my hard-won independence and the man I never quite managed to excise from my heart.

Some fabrics wrinkle. Some hearts do too. The good ones always smooth out with proper care.

The question is whether we've both learned enough about proper care to make it work this time.

## **CHAPTER 12**

The next several days pass in a blur of creative productivity, with Ethan and I maintaining a careful balance between our rekindling personal connection and our professional collaboration. We spend nights together twice more, each time growing more comfortable with the rhythm of this new, evolving relationship. During work hours, we maintain professional boundaries, though occasionally our hands brush longer than necessary or our eyes meet in moments of private understanding.

Midna proves herself invaluable as production preparations intensify, handling logistics and supplier communications with impressive efficiency. My initial wariness about her surprise arrival has largely subsided, replaced by genuine appreciation for her contributions to the project.

A week before initial samples are due to arrive, Jax schedules concept photography for the collection lookbook. The morning of the shoot finds the three of us—Ethan, Midna, and myself—preparing the studio, arranging key fabric samples and design sketches as visual references.

"Remember that Jax can be... intense," I warn them. "His creative process looks chaotic to outsiders, but there's genius in his madness."

"I've worked with him before," Ethan reminds me. "I know to just let him do his thing and stay out of his way."

"I've never met him," Midna says, arranging mood boards with careful precision. "But I've studied his work extensively. His use of light is extraordinary."

As if summoned by our discussion, the studio door bangs open to admit Jax, trailed by two assistants laden with equipment. As always, he makes an entrance—combat boots despite the warm weather, camera already in hand, expression critical as he scans the space.

"The light has improved since I was last here," he announces by way of greeting. "Someone finally adjusted those blinds properly."

"Good morning to you too, Jax," I reply dryly. "Yes, we're all well, thanks for asking."

He grins, unrepentant, then nods to Ethan. "Carrington. Still monopolizing my friend's time, I see."

"Hunter." Ethan's tone is cordial but cautious. "Still taking stunning photographs while acting insufferably superior, I see."

To my relief, Jax laughs. "Accurate assessment. You've grown less uptight since our last collaboration. Interesting development."

Before Ethan can respond, Jax's attention shifts to Midna, his photographer's eye assessing her with professional interest. "You must be the assistant manager. Good bone structure. You ever model?"

Midna blushes slightly. "No, just design and production."

"Pity. You've got an interesting look." He turns to his assistants. "Set up by the north windows. We'll start with the fabric textures, then move to the design boards."

For the next three hours, Jax works his particular magic—capturing the essence of our creative process through detail shots of fabrics, hands arranging swatches, pencils sketching on paper. He directs us to recreate moments of collaboration, his camera documenting the intimate creative connection between Ethan and me without crossing into overtly personal territory.

"Stand closer," he instructs at one point, as Ethan and I examine a draped piece of midnight blue silk. "I need to capture the contrast between your approaches—Ella's intuitive handling of the fabric against Ethan's more structured vision."

As we adjust our positions, Ethan's hand brushes mine beneath the silk, a private touch that sends warmth spreading up my arm. Jax, missing nothing, smirks but says nothing as his camera captures the moment.

By early afternoon, he's gathered enough material for the concept portion of the lookbook, with actual garment photography to follow once samples are complete.

"That's a wrap for today," he announces, reviewing images on his camera. "I'll send selects by tomorrow."

As his assistants pack up equipment, Jax pulls me aside. "Lunch? I promise not to interrogate you too harshly about the Carrington reunion tour."

"Liar," I accuse, but agree nonetheless. "Let me just wrap up here."

I inform Ethan and Midna of my lunch plans, receiving a knowing look from the former and a neutral nod from the latter. "I'll be back around three to continue work on the accessory specifications," I tell them.

"Take your time," Ethan says. "Midna and I can handle the preliminary spec sheets."

"Don't worry, boss," Midna adds. "I'll make sure everything stays on track."

Something about her tone—the faintest hint of presumption—triggers my earlier unease, but I dismiss it as oversensitivity. Midna has proven herself repeatedly over the



past week; my lingering wariness is likely just protective instinct toward a collection that feels increasingly personal.

Jax chooses a hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese place several blocks from the studio, well away from fashion industry haunts. As we settle with steaming bowls of pho, his expression turns serious.

"So. You and Carrington. Again."

I sigh, stirring my soup. "Is this where you remind me how devastated I was five years ago?"

"No, this is where I ask if you're sure about what you're doing." He fixes me with his direct gaze. "Because from where I'm sitting, you've fallen back into his orbit awfully quickly for someone who spent years building an independent identity."

The observation stings, partly because it echoes my own occasional doubts. "It's different this time."

"How?" His question is genuine, not challenging.

I consider this carefully. "We're different. I don't need his validation professionally anymore. And he seems to have done genuine work on his need for control."

"Seems to have," Jax repeats. "That's not exactly a ringing endorsement."

"Nothing is certain," I acknowledge. "But I'm not the same person who left five years ago. I won't lose myself in his shadow again."

Jax studies me, his photographer's eye missing nothing. "For what it's worth, I did notice a difference in how he interacts with you. Less proprietary, more... partnered."

The assessment surprises me. "That's unusually positive coming from you."

He shrugs, taking a slurp of his soup. "I call it like I see it. And what I see is that you both seem more centered in yourselves, which might actually make you better together this time around."

"That's uncommonly insightful, Jax."

"Don't sound so shocked. I'm not just a pretty face with an exceptional eye for composition." He grins before turning serious again. "Just promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"If he starts trying to direct your life again, even subtly, you'll notice it before you're in too deep."

The request touches me—concern disguised as gruffness, typical Jax. "I promise. My eyes are wide open this time."

"Good." He changes subjects with characteristic abruptness. "Now, about your assistant manager—what's her story?"

"Midna?" I'm surprised by the question. "She's been with Midnight for two years. Started as an administrative assistant, worked her way up through sheer determination and skill."

"Huh." His expression is thoughtful. "There's something about her that seems... calculated."

The observation reinforces my own intermittent unease. "Ethan said something similar. You think I should be concerned?"

"Not concerned, necessarily. Just aware." He gestures with his chopsticks. "She watches you and Carrington with this intense focus when she thinks no one's looking. Studying you, not just learning from you."

"She's ambitious," I allow. "But that's not necessarily a bad thing. I was ambitious at her age too."

"Different kind of ambition," Jax insists. "Yours was about creation. Hers feels more about... acquisition."

The distinction resonates uncomfortably. "I'll keep an eye on it," I promise. "But she's been nothing but helpful with the collection."

"I'm sure she has." He doesn't press further, but I can tell he's not entirely convinced of Midna's benign intentions.

After lunch, I return to the studio to find Ethan and Midna engrossed in discussion over the accessory designs. They've made significant progress, with detailed specification sheets nearly complete for the entire accessories line.

"You've been busy," I observe, examining their work. "These look great."

"Midna had some excellent suggestions for the handbag construction," Ethan says, sounding genuinely impressed. "Her knowledge of leather goods is impressive."

"I spent a summer interning at a leather atelier in Florence before joining Midnight," Midna explains, looking pleased at the recognition. "It was an invaluable education in traditional techniques."

"It shows," I acknowledge, studying the detailed specifications she's created. "These modifications will make production more efficient without compromising the design integrity."

The afternoon progresses smoothly, with the three of us finalizing the last technical aspects of the collection before sample production begins in earnest. Around six, Midna excuses herself for a dinner engagement, leaving Ethan and me alone in the studio.

"Productive day," he observes, coming to stand beside me at the worktable. "The concept shoot went well."

"Jax was on his best behavior," I agree. "Minimal provocation."

"I consider that a personal victory." His smile is warm as he leans against the table. "Plans tonight?"

"Nothing specific," I admit. "You?"

"Dinner with an incredibly talented designer, I hope." His eyes hold mine. "Maybe at that little Italian place you used to love in the Village?"

The invitation is tempting, but something in me hesitates—a need to process my conversation with Jax, to ensure I'm maintaining the balance I promised myself.

Ethan reads my hesitation instantly. "Or not. No pressure, remember?"

"It's not that," I assure him. "I just... I think I need a quiet night to catch up on some things."

His expression remains understanding, though I detect a hint of disappointment. "Of course. Another time."

As I gather my things to leave, my phone buzzes with an incoming text. To my surprise, it's from Duchess Tremaine:

**From: Duchess Tremaine**

Darling, I simply must have dinner with you while you're in town. Tomorrow night, 8 PM, Le Bernardin. Non-negotiable. We have matters to discuss

I stare at the message, a mixture of curiosity and wariness washing over me. Duchess has never been one for casual dinners—if she wants to meet, she has an agenda.

"Problem?" Ethan asks, noting my expression.

"Duchess wants to have dinner tomorrow night," I show him the text. "Says it's 'non-negotiable.'"

His eyebrows rise. "Intriguing. And potentially troublesome."

"My thoughts exactly." I slip the phone back into my bag. "But I'm curious what she wants. And Le Bernardin is hard to turn down."

"Would you like company?" he offers. "I could join you, run interference if needed."

The offer is tempting, but instinct tells me to handle Duchess alone. "Thanks, but I think this is a conversation she wants to have one-on-one. I'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will." His confidence in me is evident. "But dinner tonight might fortify you for tomorrow's Duchess encounter."

His persistence makes me smile. "Nice try, Carrington."

"Can't blame a man for trying." He steps closer, his hand gentle at my waist. "One kiss before you go?"

I glance toward the door, ensuring we're truly alone, then rise onto my toes to press my lips to his. What I intend as a brief goodbye deepens immediately, his arms pulling me closer as mine wrap around his neck. When we finally part, both slightly breathless, his eyes have darkened.

"You're making a strong case for reconsidering my evening plans," I admit, still held in the circle of his arms.

"That's the idea." His smile is mischievous. "Is it working?"

For a moment, I'm tempted to surrender to the pull between us. Then my conversation with Jax resurfaces—the importance of maintaining my independence even while exploring this reconnection.

"Rain check," I say finally, stepping back. "But a very enthusiastic rain check."

He accepts this with grace, releasing me without protest. "I'll hold you to that."

As I leave the studio, I feel a curious mixture of emotions—desire pulling me back toward Ethan, prudence urging me to maintain space for reflection, and an underlying anxiety about tomorrow's dinner with Duchess. Something tells me her sudden interest in reconnecting has little to do with familial affection and everything to do with the buzz surrounding my collaboration with Ethan.

I built a business on midnight inspirations because that's when truth has nowhere to hide. As I return to my hotel, I wonder what truths Duchess might reveal tomorrow night—and what agenda she's carefully concealing beneath her sudden desire for my company.

## **CHAPTER 13**

Le Bernardin gleams with understated luxury—a temple to fine dining where the fashion elite regularly worship. Duchess has chosen our meeting place strategically, as she does all things. Here, she knows, we'll be seen by exactly the right people, our conversation protected by the discreet spacing of tables and the reverent hush that pervades the restaurant.

She's already seated when I arrive, precisely on time. As always, Duchess Tremaine presents an impeccable façade—ash blonde hair swept into an elegant chignon, diamonds winking at her ears and throat, black Chanel suit tailored to perfection. At fifty-five, she remains striking, her features sharpened rather than softened by age.

"Ella, darling." She rises slightly, offering her cheek for the obligatory air-kiss. "Punctual as ever. One of your few inheritances from your father, I suppose."

The backhanded compliment is classic Duchess—acknowledging a positive trait while simultaneously suggesting a deficit. I take my seat, determined not to rise to the bait.

"It's nice to see you, Duchess. You look well."

"Survival requires constant maintenance." She gestures to a waiter hovering nearby. "I've taken the liberty of ordering champagne. We're celebrating, after all."

"Are we?" I accept the flute poured for me. "What exactly are we celebrating?"

"Your triumphant return to New York, of course." Her smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. "And your... reconnection with Ethan Carrington. Both professionally and, if the gossip is to be believed, personally as well."

Of course she knows. Duchess has always maintained an extensive network of industry informants, her finger perpetually on fashion's pulse.

"The collaboration is going well," I say neutrally. "The collection launches in ten weeks."

"Yes, yes, the collaboration." She waves dismissively. "A shrewd business move, I'll grant you. But let's not pretend this is only about hemlines and distribution networks."

I sip my champagne, refusing to be provoked into discussing my personal life. "What can I help you with, Duchess? I doubt you arranged this dinner simply to discuss my professional choices."

She studies me appraisingly, a slight smile playing at her perfectly lipsticked mouth. "Direct as ever. Another trait from Edward. Your mother was all charm and social grace—qualities you might have benefited from inheriting."

The mention of my parents—my gentle, artistic mother who died when I was twelve, my driven, visionary father who followed five years later—sends a familiar pang through me. Duchess knows exactly which buttons to press.

"My mother taught me plenty," I say evenly. "Including how to recognize when someone is avoiding a direct question."

This earns me a genuine laugh. "Touché, darling. Very well, I'll be equally direct. Tremain Collections is preparing to relaunch with a new direction, and I want you to be part of it."

The statement confirms my suspicions about her motives, even as it surprises me with its timing. "I'm currently focused on the Carrington collaboration."

"Of course you are." She leans forward slightly. "But that's a temporary arrangement. What I'm offering is a chance to reclaim your father's legacy. To bring Tremain Collections back to prominence with fresh vision—your vision."

The waiter interrupts with menus, giving me a moment to consider her words. Tremain Collections was once Edward Vatore's pride—a respectable fashion house known for wearable luxury with artistic touches. After my father's death, Duchess had systematically dismantled his aesthetic in favor of flashier, trend-driven designs that alienated the brand's loyal customers without attracting enough new ones.

"You dismissed my design concepts repeatedly when I worked for Tremain," I remind her after the waiter departs. "What's changed?"

"Circumstances change. Markets evolve." She sips her champagne. "And you've proven your commercial viability with Midnight Designs. Your aesthetic—which I once found too... restrained—has clearly found its audience."

"So this is a business decision," I clarify. "Not a sentimental family reunion."

"Business and family have always been intertwined for us, Ella." Her expression softens slightly, a calculated display of vulnerability. "Your father would have wanted Tremain to remain part of his legacy to you."

The appeal to my father's wishes is masterfully deployed, but I've grown immune to such manipulation. "If you truly respected my father's legacy, you wouldn't have dismantled his design philosophy the moment he was gone."

A flash of genuine emotion—anger, perhaps, or guilt—crosses her features before the mask returns. "I did what I thought was necessary to keep the company relevant. Perhaps I was... overzealous in my approach."

The closest thing to an admission of error I've ever heard from Duchess Tremaine. Interesting.

"The current fashion landscape favors authenticity and craftsmanship over flash," she continues. "Values your father always championed, and which your work at Midnight exemplifies. Together, we could restore Tremaine to its proper place in the industry."

"While leveraging my current visibility from the Carrington collaboration," I add, seeing the strategy clearly now.

She doesn't deny it. "Timing is everything in fashion. Your profile has never been higher."

Our first courses arrive—delicate seafood creations that cost more than most people's daily wages. We eat in silence for a few moments, the conversation paused but not concluded.

"What exactly are you proposing?" I ask finally. "That I leave Midnight Designs to rejoin Tremaine?"

"Not leave," she corrects. "Merge. Midnight Designs becomes the contemporary division of Tremaine Collections. You assume the role of Creative Director across both lines, with complete design autonomy."

The offer is shrewder than I expected—acknowledging my need for creative control while attempting to fold my independent success back into the Tremaine umbrella. Five years ago, such an offer might have tempted me. Now, it feels like a gilded cage.

"And your role would be?" I probe.

"Business operations. What I do best." Her smile is sleek. "You create, I sell. We both profit."

"And my team in London?"

"Retained, of course. With potential expansion as we grow."

I take another bite of my food, using the moment to organize my thoughts. The proposal isn't without merit from a purely business perspective. Tremaine still has name recognition and an established infrastructure that would take Midnight years to build independently. But the personal dynamics—working alongside Duchess again, subjecting my team to her particular management style—gives me serious pause.

"It's an interesting proposal," I say neutrally. "I'd need to review the specifics before considering it seriously."



"Naturally." She reaches into her designer handbag, extracting a slim folder. "I've prepared some preliminary projections. Take your time reviewing them. But don't take too long—the relaunch is planned for spring."

I accept the folder, tucking it into my own bag without opening it. "Why now, Duchess? Tremaine has been struggling for years. Why approach me at this particular moment?"

Her eyes narrow slightly. "As I said, your profile is at its peak. The timing is advantageous."

"Because of my connection to Ethan," I clarify. "You're hoping to capitalize on the attention surrounding our collaboration."

"I'm a businesswoman, Ella. I recognize opportunities." She takes a delicate sip of wine. "The Carrington name still carries tremendous weight in this industry. If you're wise, you'll leverage that fact rather than run from it."

The parallel to my past decision to leave Carrington Designs—to prove myself independent of Ethan's influence—is unmistakable. Duchess is suggesting I'm making the same mistake twice if I reject her offer.

"I've built Midnight Designs on my own terms," I remind her. "Successfully."

"In a modest way, yes." Her dismissal of my achievements is characteristic. "But why settle for boutique success when you could have global impact? Together with Tremaine's infrastructure and your relationship with the Carringtons, we could create a formidable presence in the market."

The emphasis on "relationship" makes her strategy even clearer. She's not just interested in my design skills or Midnight's growing reputation—she's calculating how to benefit from my rekindled connection with Ethan.

"My personal relationship with Ethan is separate from my professional decisions," I state firmly.

"Nothing is ever separate in our world, darling. You know that." She sets down her utensils precisely. "Personal, professional, romantic—all threads in the same fabric. The wise designer knows how to incorporate every thread to create something extraordinary."

The metaphor is heavy-handed but effective. Before I can respond, Duchess signals for the main course to be served, effectively pausing our conversation as waiters swarm to exchange plates and refill glasses.

"Let's set business aside for the moment," she suggests as the waiters withdraw. "Tell me about the collection you're creating with Ethan. I hear it's quite... innovative."

The sudden shift to casual conversation feels strategic, an attempt to disarm me after the intensity of her proposal. "It's coming together well," I say cautiously. "We've finalized the designs and production begins next week."

"Godiva Fairweather is handling some of the specialty textiles, I understand." Her tone remains conversational, but I sense her gathering information. "Always had a remarkable eye for fabric development, despite her eccentric methods."

"Goddie has been invaluable," I acknowledge, deliberately vague about specifics. "Her Japanese silk imports are central to several key pieces."

"Hmm." Duchess takes a bite of her perfectly cooked fish. "And the face of the campaign—Cindy Ashton, correct? Interesting choice. Very current, though perhaps a bit... ubiquitous."

"She embodies the aesthetic perfectly," I defend, though I'd had similar reservations initially. "And brings a fresh energy to the visual narrative."

"Of course." Her smile is knowing. "Nothing to do with her rumored history with Ethan, I'm sure."

The insinuation catches me off guard. "Her selection was based entirely on professional considerations."

"Naturally." Duchess doesn't press further, having successfully planted the seed of doubt. "The industry is quite excited about the launch. Roderick Coachman mentioned it in his column last week—called it 'the most anticipated reunion since McQueen returned to London.'"

The mention of Roderick—fashion's most influential and cutting critic—quickens my pulse slightly. "I didn't realize he'd commented on the collaboration."

"Oh yes. He's been quite vocal about his expectations." Her eyes gleam with what might be amusement. "Quite high expectations, actually. He remembers your work with Carrington very fondly."

The implicit warning is clear—Roderick's favor, once given, can be withdrawn just as swiftly. A bad review from him can damage even established brands.

"We're confident in the collection," I say, projecting more certainty than I feel. "It speaks for itself."

"Everything always does in the end," Duchess agrees. "Which brings me back to my offer. Take some time to consider it, Ella. But remember—your moment is now. Strike while the spotlight is brightest."

The remainder of dinner passes in less charged conversation—industry gossip, updates on mutual acquaintances, careful avoidance of deeper family matters. By the time dessert arrives, we've established a cordial *détente*, neither of us pressing our respective agendas further.

Outside the restaurant, Duchess pauses before entering her waiting town car. "It was lovely to reconnect, darling. Do give my proposal serious consideration. Family businesses have a way of calling us home eventually."

"I'll review it," I promise noncommittally. "Thank you for dinner."

"One more thing," she adds, her voice dropping slightly. "Be careful with Ethan. Not because he isn't worthy—he's a brilliant businessman—but because the industry loves nothing more than building up a reunion story only to tear it apart for sport. You're both targets now."

The warning, unexpected from Duchess, seems almost genuine in its concern. Before I can respond, she's sliding into her car with practiced elegance, leaving me on the sidewalk with her words echoing in my mind.

Rather than returning immediately to my hotel, I find myself walking, needing movement to process the evening's revelations and propositions. The night air is cool against my skin, the city's energy pulsing around me as I navigate blocks without conscious destination.

Duchess's offer is calculated but not without merit. The chance to reclaim my father's legacy holds emotional appeal, even as the practical realities of working with my former stepmother raise red flags. More unsettling is her implicit suggestion that my success remains tied to Ethan—that both professionally and personally, I'm defined by my connection to him.

I've worked so hard to establish independent identity, to prove that Ella Vatore can succeed without the Carrington name attached. Yet here I am, back in New York, collaborating with Ethan, falling back into his arms... am I undoing everything I fought for?

My phone buzzes with an incoming call—Ethan.

"How was dinner with the dragon lady?" he asks when I answer.

"Illuminating," I say, continuing to walk as I talk. "She wants me to merge Midnight Designs with Tremaine Collections. Become Creative Director across both lines."

A pause. "That's... unexpected. And not a terrible business proposition, actually."

His neutral response surprises me. "You think I should consider it?"

"I think you should evaluate it objectively," he says carefully. "Tremaine still has international distribution channels that would take Midnight years to develop independently. But working with Duchess comes with obvious personal complications."

The balanced assessment reinforces how much he's changed. Five years ago, Ethan would have immediately discouraged any business arrangement that didn't directly benefit Carrington interests.

"She also mentioned that Roderick Coachman has commented on our collaboration," I add. "Apparently his expectations are quite high."

"Ah. That explains the meeting request from his office." Ethan's tone shifts to slightly concerned. "He wants to preview the collection next week."

"What?" I stop walking, pulse quickening. "That's earlier than we planned to show anyone."

"Much earlier," Ethan agrees. "But Roderick's favor can make or break the launch publicity. We should consider accommodating him."

"But the samples won't be ready for presentation," I protest. "He'll be seeing incomplete work."

"We'll show him the complete design boards and the fabric samples. Perhaps one or two pieces that will be furthest along in production." Ethan sounds calm, strategic. "It's a calculated risk, but potentially worth taking."

I resume walking, mind racing. "I'd rather wait until we have the full sample collection ready."

"Normally, I'd agree. But Roderick specifically requested an early look. That suggests someone else has been talking to him about what we're creating—building expectations."

"Duchess," I realize immediately. "She's manipulating the situation, creating pressure."

"Possibly." Ethan's voice is thoughtful. "What exactly did she say about Roderick?"

I recount Duchess's comments as precisely as I can remember them. When I finish, Ethan is silent for a moment.

"She's playing a double game," he concludes finally. "Pressuring you with Roderick's expectations while simultaneously offering a safety net through Tremaine. If Roderick praises the collection, she benefits from your association. If he doesn't..."

"Then her offer becomes more attractive," I complete the thought. "Clever."

"She always is." His tone darkens slightly. "Where are you now? You sound like you're outside."

"Walking," I admit. "Needed to clear my head."

"Want company?" The offer is gentle, not presumptive. "I could meet you."

I consider this, realizing suddenly how much I want to see him, to process these developments together rather than alone. "Yes," I decide. "But not for a walk. Can I come to your place?"

"Of course." The warmth in his voice soothes my agitated nerves. "I'll be waiting."

Thirty minutes later, I'm stepping into Ethan's loft, the familiar space offering unexpected comfort after the evening's manipulations. He meets me at the door, concern evident in his expression as he takes my coat.

"You look tired," he observes. "Dealing with Duchess will do that."

"She's exhausting," I agree, following him to the living area where he's already poured two glasses of red wine. "Calculating every word, every implication."

"That's her superpower." He hands me a glass, gesturing for me to sit beside him on the sofa. "Always three moves ahead in a game only she knows the rules to."

I take a grateful sip of wine, feeling tension begin to dissipate. "She mentioned Cindy. Implied there was history between you two."

Ethan sighs. "There isn't. We had a few dinners during last year's campaign shoot, strictly professional with her agent present. But Duchess would naturally imply otherwise."

"I figured as much." I lean back against the cushions, suddenly weary. "It's just one more attempt to create doubt."

"Are you doubting?" His question is direct but gentle, his eyes searching mine.

"Not about you and Cindy," I clarify. "But about myself. About whether I'm compromising everything I've built by being back here, working with you, being with you."

He's quiet for a moment, considering. "Do you feel compromised?"

"Not when we're creating together," I admit. "The collection feels right—the perfect blend of both our visions. It's the external perceptions I'm struggling with. Duchess seeing me as leveraging our relationship, the industry treating us as a romantic narrative rather than creative partners."

"Those perceptions exist whether we're actually together or not," he points out. "The narrative was established the moment we agreed to collaborate."

"I know." I set my wine glass down. "I just don't want to be defined by my relationship to you again. That's why I left five years ago."

"You're not the same person who left," he says softly. "You've established your voice, your brand, your success independent of me. Nothing can erase that now—not our collaboration, not our personal reconnection, not industry gossip."

His certainty in my accomplishments touches something deep within me. "When did you become the voice of reassurance in my moments of doubt?" I ask, a small smile finally emerging.

"Somewhere between therapy session twenty and forty," he admits with self-deprecating humor. "Turns out supporting someone's autonomy is actually more satisfying than trying to control their choices. Who knew?"

I laugh despite myself, the tension of the evening finally breaking. "You've really changed, haven't you?"

"In the ways that matter, I hope." His expression turns serious. "I lost you once because I couldn't separate loving you from needing to direct your path. I'm not making that mistake again."

The sincerity in his voice moves me. I lean forward, closing the distance between us to press my lips to his—a kiss of gratitude, of connection, of something deeper that I'm not quite ready to name.

When we part, he studies my face. "Stay tonight?"

"Yes," I decide, no longer wanting to overthink every moment between us. "I'd like that."

Later, tangled in his sheets and the comfortable aftermath of reunion, I find myself thinking about paths chosen and paths diverted. Five years ago, leaving seemed the only way to find myself. Now, returning doesn't feel like losing that self but rather enhancing it with a connection that's evolved alongside me.

Fairy tales end at 'happily ever after' because no one wants to hear about the morning breath. Real relationships—the ones worth building—begin where fairy tales end, in the messy, complicated reality of two separate people choosing each other day after day.

As I drift toward sleep in Ethan's arms, I realize that whatever doubts Duchess attempted to plant have only clarified what I already knew: the path forward isn't about choosing between independence and connection, but finding the courage to claim both simultaneously.

## CHAPTER 14

The following week brings a flurry of activity as the first production samples begin arriving at the studio. Each completed garment represents a tangible manifestation of our creative vision—sketches transformed into three-dimensional reality, fabric choices proved right or wrong, construction details finalized or reconsidered.

"The blue evening dress needs adjustment in the shoulder seam," I note, examining the first sample critically. "The drape isn't falling quite as designed."

Midna circles the dress form, taking photos from various angles. "Agreed. I'll contact the sample room and have them revise the pattern."

Ethan studies the garment from across the room. "The color is perfect though. Exactly the midnight blue we wanted—deep but still luminous under light."

I nod, running my fingers over the Japanese silk-wool fabric that gives the piece its distinctive character. "Goddie's textile development team outdid themselves. This is even better than the sample swatches."

We work methodically through each arrival, noting necessary adjustments, celebrating successful executions, refining details that will elevate the collection from excellent to extraordinary. It's the most satisfying part of the design process—seeing concepts materialize, making the small but crucial decisions that transform good design into great.

By Friday afternoon, we've received and evaluated nearly half the collection. The emerging aesthetic is exactly what we envisioned—a perfect synthesis of Ethan's architectural sensibility and my textile innovations, structured yet fluid, sophisticated yet accessible.

"Roderick confirmed for Wednesday," Ethan announces, checking his phone. "Eleven AM."

The mention of the influential critic sends a ripple of anxiety through me. "We'll only have about two-thirds of the samples by then."

"It's enough to convey the concept," Ethan assures me. "And we'll have the complete lookbook from Jax's concept shoot to fill in the gaps."

"I've scheduled the steamer and garment prep for Tuesday afternoon," Midna adds efficiently. "Everything will be presentation-ready."

I nod, appreciating her thoroughness while still harboring reservations about showing incomplete work to fashion's most exacting critic. "Let's make sure we're strategic about



which pieces we highlight. We want to show our strongest work, even if it's not the full collection."

"Already on it," Midna says, consulting her tablet. "I've drafted a presentation sequence that showcases the most innovative textile applications first, followed by the key silhouettes that define the collection's aesthetic."

Her initiative continues to impress me, even as I occasionally sense Ethan watching her with the same quiet assessment he mentioned during our earlier conversations. If he has specific concerns about her, he hasn't shared them beyond his general wariness of her ambition.

As we're wrapping up for the day, my phone buzzes with a text from Stephi:

**From: Stephi**

Drinks tonight? Have industry gossip you'll want to hear. The usual place, 8 PM?

I confirm, curious about what information my former stepsister deems important enough for a face-to-face meeting rather than our usual phone calls.

"Plans tonight?" Ethan asks as we gather our things, his tone casual but interested.

"Drinks with Stephi," I reply. "Apparently there's gossip I need to be briefed on."

"Ah, the fashion intelligence network at work." His smile is wry. "I have a dinner with some potential retail partners that I can't reschedule, otherwise I'd suggest joining you afterward."

The easy way we discuss our separate plans, respecting each other's commitments without pressure or expectation, feels like another sign of our matured relationship. "Tomorrow night?" I suggest. "My hotel has an excellent room service menu that we've yet to explore."

"Is that a euphemism?" His eyes crinkle with amusement.

"Maybe," I admit with a small smile. "But the food is actually good too."

"A compelling offer." He steps closer, voice dropping so Midna, occupied across the room, can't overhear. "I'll look forward to a thorough exploration of the... menu."

The promise in his tone sends a pleasant shiver through me. "Eight o'clock?"

"I'll be there." He brushes his fingers discreetly against mine—a professional substitute for the kiss we both want but maintain boundaries about in the studio.

At eight sharp, I'm sliding into a booth opposite Stephi at our favorite speakeasy-style bar in the Flatiron district—dark enough for privacy, exclusive enough to ensure we won't be overheard by industry rivals.

"You look disgustingly happy," she observes by way of greeting, pushing a martini toward me. "I take it the Carrington reunion tour is going well?"

I accept the cocktail, neither confirming nor denying. "You didn't summon me here to discuss my personal life."

"No, but it's written all over your face." She leans forward, lowering her voice. "For what it's worth, I approve. He's different with you this time—less controlling, more partnership-oriented."

"That seems to be the consensus," I acknowledge, thinking of Jax's similar observation. "But you mentioned gossip I should know about?"

"Right." Stephi's expression turns serious. "Two items of interest. First, Duchess has been meeting with several major department store buyers, presenting what she's calling 'a new creative direction for Tremaine Collections, in association with an established independent designer.'"

I frown. "She's implying I've already agreed to her proposal."

"Precisely." Stephi sips her drink. "She's leveraging your name without commitment, creating industry expectations that will pressure you to accept."

"Classic Duchess," I sigh. "I should have expected this."

"You should have," Stephi agrees bluntly. "She's desperate. Tremaine's last three collections have been commercial failures. The brand needs your credibility to survive."

I absorb this, mentally filing it away as leverage in any future negotiations with my former stepmother. "And the second item?"

Stephi hesitates, which is unusual for her. "This one's potentially more problematic. There's talk that details of your collaboration with Ethan have leaked. Specifically, design elements that haven't been publicly revealed."

This gets my full attention. "What kind of details?"

"Technical specifications for some of the more innovative textile applications. Construction methods for the architectural pieces." She looks troubled. "Information that wouldn't be common knowledge, even within your respective companies."

A cold sensation settles in my stomach. "How detailed are we talking?"

"Detailed enough that it couldn't be casual observation or general knowledge." Stephi's expression is grim. "Someone with access to your development materials is talking."

My mind immediately races to potential sources—Ethan's design team, my London staff, sample room workers, fabric suppliers. And Midna, with her comprehensive knowledge of every aspect of the collection.

"Any idea who?" I ask, though I suspect Stephi would have led with that information if she had it.

"Not yet. But I'm following the breadcrumbs." Her eyes narrow slightly. "Who has complete access to all development materials?"

"Ethan and me, obviously. His core design team, though they've only seen portions relevant to their specific responsibilities. Midna..." I trail off, thinking of her constant presence in the studio, her meticulous organization of all our materials.

"Your assistant manager who conveniently appeared in New York just as the collection was taking shape," Stephi observes with her typical bluntness. "Timing worth noting."

"She's been with Midnight for two years," I defend, though my own unease about Midna resurfaces. "She's proven her loyalty repeatedly."

"Everyone's loyal until a better offer comes along," Stephi reminds me. "Or until someone leverages the right pressure point."

The cynical assessment is very Stephi, but not without merit in our industry. "I'll keep an eye on the situation," I promise. "Any idea where these leaked details are surfacing?"

"That's the concerning part. They seem to be circulating among several up-and-coming design houses—specifically those that compete in your market segment." She leans forward. "It feels targeted, Ella. Like someone is deliberately arming your competitors with information about your innovations before you can launch them."

The implications are disturbing. Fashion is built on novelty—being first to market with a new technique, a new silhouette, a new approach to familiar materials. If competitors could prepare similar innovations concurrently with our launch, it would dilute the collection's impact significantly.

"I need to tell Ethan," I decide, reaching for my phone.

"Already texted him," Stephi admits. "Asked him to meet us here after his dinner. Hope that's okay."

"Of course." I'm relieved, actually, that she's already involved him. This potential threat affects both our brands.

"Now," Stephi signals for another round, "while we wait for your prince charming, tell me about Duchess's merger proposal. I assume that was what the Le Bernardin dinner was about?"

I fill her in on the details of Duchess's offer, including her calculated timing and attempt to leverage my renewed connection with Ethan. Stephi listens with the shrewd assessment of someone who understands the fashion industry's power dynamics intimately.

"It's not the worst business proposition," she acknowledges when I finish. "Tremaine still has infrastructure and distribution that would benefit Midnight. But Duchess is a viper. She'll promise creative control and then systematically undermine you once the contracts are signed."

"That's my concern," I agree. "I've worked too hard to build Midnight on my own terms to surrender that independence now."

"Smart girl." Stephi raises her glass in approval. "Though if you were inclined to consider it, this would be the time to negotiate from strength. Duchess needs you more than you need her."

Before I can respond, Ethan appears at our table, looking concerned behind his polished exterior. He slides in beside me, his thigh pressing reassuringly against mine beneath the table.

"I came as soon as I could," he says, nodding to Stephi before turning to me. "What exactly has leaked?"

I defer to Stephi, who outlines what she's learned with precise efficiency. Ethan listens intently, his expression growing increasingly troubled.

"The Japanese textile development details are particularly concerning," he says when she finishes. "Those innovations are central to the collection's uniqueness."

"Exactly," Stephi agrees. "If competing brands incorporate similar techniques in concurrent collections, it undermines your market advantage."

"And Roderick's review," I add, the pieces connecting. "If he sees our 'innovations' and then immediately sees similar approaches from other designers, he'll question our originality."

Ethan's jaw tightens. "We need to identify the source of the leak."

"Already working on it," Stephi assures him. "I have contacts at most of the houses where the information has surfaced. We may be able to trace it back."

"In the meantime, we should consider implementing additional security measures," Ethan suggests. "Limited access to the studio, restricted distribution of technical specifications, compartmentalized information sharing."

"Agreed," I say. "Though it may be closing the stable door after the horse has bolted."

"Not entirely," Ethan counters. "The most innovative pieces are still in development. We can protect those, at least."

"And accelerate production on the key items," I add, thinking strategically. "Get them completed before competing versions can be rushed to market."

Stephi watches our rapid-fire exchange with raised eyebrows. "And they say romance kills business efficiency. You two are terrifying when you sync up like that."

Ethan's hand finds mine beneath the table, a small gesture of unity. "We've always worked well together under pressure."

"Among other circumstances," Stephi mutters into her drink, earning a warning look from me.

We spend the next hour developing a containment strategy—identifying which information may have leaked, prioritizing protection of remaining innovations, and mapping out an accelerated production timeline for the most distinctive pieces. Throughout, I'm struck by how seamlessly Ethan and I collaborate, our thought processes complementing rather than competing with each other.

When Stephi excuses herself to the restroom, Ethan turns to me directly. "We should consider the possibility that Midna is involved."

I sigh, having anticipated this. "I know. Ethan's warnings about her have been echoing in my mind since Stephi first mentioned the leak."

"She has access to everything," he continues, keeping his voice low. "And the leak seems to have started after she arrived in New York."

"Correlation doesn't prove causation," I point out, though my own suspicions are growing. "But yes, we should be careful what information she has access to going forward."

"I can have someone look into her more thoroughly," he offers. "Discreetly."

The suggestion makes me uncomfortable—investigating my own employee feels like a breach of trust. Yet the potential damage to both our brands if the leaks continue is substantial.

"Let's start with increased security measures," I decide. "If the leaks continue despite those precautions, we'll consider more direct investigation."

He nods, accepting my more measured approach. "Fair enough. Though we should move quickly on those security measures."

"First thing tomorrow," I agree.

When Stephi returns, we wrap up our discussion with assignments for each of us—Stephi will continue tracking the spread of leaked information, Ethan will implement enhanced security protocols at his end, and I will carefully monitor access to the remaining development materials.

As we prepare to leave, Stephi pulls me aside. "Watch that assistant of yours," she murmurs. "Something about her sudden appearance never sat right with me."

"I will," I promise, though it pains me to suspect someone I've trusted with so much responsibility.

Outside, Ethan offers to share his car service. "Can I drop you at your hotel?"

"Actually," I find myself saying, "I'd rather go to your place tonight. If that's okay."

His eyebrows rise slightly in surprise—I've rarely been the one to suggest extending our time together. "More than okay."

In the car, he maintains a respectful distance, sensitive to my preoccupied mood. "We'll figure this out, Ella," he says as we navigate the city's nighttime traffic. "The collection is strong enough to withstand some leaked information."

"I know." I stare out the window at passing lights. "I just hate the idea of someone I trusted potentially betraying that trust."

"It's still circumstantial," he reminds me gently. "Let's not convict Midna without evidence."

His fairness, even toward someone he's been wary of from the beginning, surprises and touches me. The old Ethan might have seized on suspicion as fact if it confirmed his initial judgment.

At his loft, I shed my coat and shoes with the ease of growing familiarity. Ethan moves to the kitchen, uncorking a bottle of red wine without asking if I want some—a presumption based on intimacy rather than control.

"What are you thinking?" he asks, handing me a glass and joining me on the sofa.

"That I'm not sure what bothers me more—the potential damage to the collection, or the possibility that someone I trusted is responsible." I take a sip of wine, letting the rich flavor ground me. "I've always prided myself on being a good judge of character."

"You are," he assures me. "But the most skilled manipulators can deceive anyone. If Midna is behind this—and that's still a big if—it doesn't reflect on your judgment."

His support soothes something raw within me. "When did you become the reasonable, measured voice in this relationship?" I ask, a small smile finally emerging.

"Shocking development, isn't it?" His own smile is wry. "Five years of therapy will do that."

I lean against him, allowing his arm to wrap around my shoulders. "Thank you. For the perspective, and for not saying 'I told you so' about Midna."

"Would I do that?" he asks innocently.

"The old Ethan would have led with it," I point out. "Complete with smug expression."

"Well, the new Ethan is far too evolved for smugness," he declares. "Though he reserves the right to feel quietly vindicated if his suspicions prove correct."

I laugh despite the seriousness of the situation, feeling tension release from my shoulders. "Duly noted."

We sit in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the warmth of his body beside mine offering comfort that words couldn't. Finally, I set down my wine glass and turn to face him fully.

"Distract me," I request softly. "I don't want to think about leaks or betrayals or fashion politics anymore tonight."

His eyes darken with understanding. "I can do that."

What follows is both escape and connection—his hands and lips erasing worry with each touch, my body responding with an abandon that surprises even me. We don't make it to the bedroom, instead discovering that his living room sofa is perfectly adequate for more immediate needs. Later, tangled together in a satisfying daze, I

realize this is the first time I've sought him out specifically for comfort, for shelter from a storm rather than just pleasure or companionship.

It's another shift in our evolving dynamic—me allowing myself to need him in a way I've carefully avoided since returning to New York. The realization should frighten me, but instead it feels like setting down a heavy weight I've been carrying too long.

"Stay the weekend," he murmurs against my hair as we finally make our way to his bed. "We can implement the security measures tomorrow morning, then take some time away from everything. Regroup."

The suggestion is tempting—a brief escape from mounting pressures, a chance to strengthen what's growing between us away from professional complications.

"Okay," I decide, surprising myself again. "But I'll need to grab some things from my hotel in the morning."

His pleased smile warms me from within. "We can stop there on the way to the studio."

As I drift toward sleep in his arms, I find myself thinking about security in all its forms—the measures we'll implement to protect our creative work, yes, but also this feeling of safety I've found with him again. A different kind of security than before, built on mutual respect rather than dependency.

I'd rather be the villain in someone else's story than a supporting character in my own. Five years ago, I chose my own story over the comfort of being part of Ethan's narrative. Now, perhaps, we're writing a new story together—one where neither of us is supporting character or villain, but equal protagonists in something worth protecting.

Tomorrow we'll face whatever threats have emerged to our collection. Tonight, I'll take comfort in the knowledge that whatever challenges come, we'll face them as partners—both professionally and personally.

That certainty follows me into dreams, a shield against whatever battles morning may bring.



## **CHAPTER 15**

The weekend passes in a blend of professional focus and personal reconnection. Saturday morning finds us implementing enhanced security protocols at the studio—changing access codes, securing design files, creating a visitor log, and establishing new procedures for handling sample garments. By afternoon, we've done everything reasonably possible to protect the remaining confidential aspects of the collection.

True to his suggestion, we then retreat from work entirely—spending Saturday evening at a small jazz club he remembers I love, Sunday morning at the farmers market near his loft, Sunday afternoon walking through Central Park with coffee and conversation. It's a glimpse of what ordinary life together might look like, away from fashion industry pressures and complicated histories.

By Monday morning, I feel both refreshed and fortified for whatever challenges the week might bring—primarily Roderick Coachman's critical eye on Wednesday and the continuing investigation into information leaks.

"Morning," Midna greets as I enter the studio, looking up from her tablet. "How was your weekend?"

"Productive," I reply noncommittally, setting down my things. "Yours?"

"Good. I explored some Brooklyn neighborhoods, did some vintage shopping." She gestures to the garment rack where several new sample pieces hang. "These arrived late Friday after you left. I've logged them and prepared condition reports."

"Thank you." I move to examine the new arrivals, noting with satisfaction that they've captured our design intent beautifully. "These look excellent."

"The ivory suit is particularly successful," she observes, joining me at the rack. "The fabric development team nailed the texture exactly as you specified."

As she continues detailing the weekend deliveries, I study her with new awareness, searching for any sign of duplicity. Nothing in her manner suggests anything amiss—she's the same efficient, enthusiastic Midna she's always been, her knowledge of the collection comprehensive but appropriate for her role.

When Ethan arrives, we maintain our professional distance, though I catch his eyes lingering on me when Midna isn't looking. We spend the morning finalizing the presentation order for Roderick's visit, selecting which garments to highlight and which design elements to emphasize.

"The blue evening gown should lead," Ethan suggests. "It's the strongest demonstration of our textile innovations."

"Agreed," I nod. "Followed by the structured day dress with the architectural shoulder detail—it showcases the contrast between fluidity and structure that defines the collection."

"Perfect." He makes a note, then glances at his watch. "I have a quick meeting at Carrington HQ. Back in about an hour?"

"We'll continue prepping here," I assure him.

After he leaves, Midna and I work companionably, arranging garments and finalizing presentation materials. Around noon, she excuses herself for a scheduled call with our London production team, leaving me alone in the studio.

Taking advantage of her absence, I conduct a discreet check of the secured design files—finding everything in order, with access logs showing no unusual activity. Perhaps our leak came from elsewhere after all, I think with mixed relief and continued concern.

My phone buzzes with a text from Stephi:

**From: Stephi**

Updates. Good news & concerning news. Call when you can.

I step outside to return her call, not wanting to risk being overheard if Midna returns.

"What's the good news?" I ask when Stephi answers.

"The leak seems to have been contained," she reports. "No new information has circulated since we implemented the security measures."

"That is good news," I say, feeling a wave of relief. "And the concerning part?"

"We've traced some of the leaked information back to its source." Her voice turns grim. "It definitely came from someone with direct access to your development materials. And it was distributed through an anonymous email account to specific competitors."

My stomach tightens. "Deliberately targeted, then."

"Very deliberately," Stephi confirms. "And here's where it gets interesting—the emails emphasized the Japanese textile development techniques that you personally innovative, not the structural elements that would be more associated with Ethan's contributions."

The implication is clear. "Suggesting that the leak isn't targeting Carrington Designs, but specifically Midnight."

"Exactly." She pauses meaningfully. "Which narrows the suspect pool considerably."

Midna. The thought crystallizes with sickening certainty, though I still resist jumping to conclusions. "Have you identified the anonymous account?"

"Working on it," Stephi says. "But it was created through a privacy-focused service that makes tracing difficult. Whoever did this wasn't amateur."

"Keep digging," I request. "I need certainty before making any accusations."

"Will do. In the meantime, maintain those security protocols. They seem to be working."

After we hang up, I stand in the hallway for a moment, processing this new information. The targeted nature of the leak, focused specifically on my textile innovations, points strongly to someone attempting to undermine Midnight Designs particularly, not just the collaboration with Carrington.

When I return to the studio, Midna is back, organizing the accessory samples that will accompany the garment presentation for Roderick.

"Everything okay?" she asks, noting my expression. "You look concerned."

"Just focused on Wednesday's presentation," I deflect. "Roderick can make or break collections with a single column."

"He'll love it," she says with confidence. "The collection is extraordinary—it showcases both your aesthetics while creating something entirely new."

Her enthusiasm seems genuine, making it harder to reconcile with my growing suspicion. "I hope you're right."

When Ethan returns from his meeting, I pull him aside while Midna is occupied across the studio. "Stephi has updates," I murmur, quickly summarizing what she told me.

His expression darkens. "Targeting your innovations specifically—that's calculated and personal."

"Yes," I agree. "And it changes the nature of the threat. This isn't just about the collaboration; it's about undermining Midnight Designs specifically."

"Which raises questions about motive." His eyes flick briefly toward Midna. "Professional sabotage? Personal vendetta? Corporate espionage?"

"I don't know yet," I admit. "But I intend to find out."

The remainder of the day passes in outward normalcy, though I notice Ethan watching Midna more carefully, and I find myself analyzing her every comment for hidden meaning or agenda. She remains her usual efficient self, seemingly oblivious to our heightened scrutiny.

By late afternoon, we've completed preparations for Roderick's visit, with a presentation sequence designed to showcase the collection's strongest innovations and most cohesive narrative.

"I think we're ready," I say, surveying our work with satisfaction despite the undercurrent of concern about the leaks. "The collection speaks for itself, regardless of any rumors or leaked details."

"Absolutely," Ethan agrees. "Quality always rises above industry politics."

"I've prepared detailed speaking notes for both of you," Midna adds, handing us each a folder. "Highlighting the unique development process for each key piece."

"Thank you," I say, accepting the folder while wondering if this same information has already been shared with our competitors. "This is helpful."

As we prepare to leave for the day, Ethan catches my eye. "Dinner?" he asks, keeping his tone casual for Midna's benefit.

"Yes," I reply simply. "I'll meet you there."

In the privacy of his car afterward, I finally give full voice to my concerns. "It has to be Midna. The timing, the specific focus on my textile innovations, the comprehensive access she has to everything—it all points to her."

"I agree," Ethan says grimly. "The question is why. What's her endgame?"

"And who is she working with?" I add. "This level of targeted industrial espionage suggests a coordinated effort, not just personal opportunism."

"I have some contacts in corporate security who could investigate discreetly," Ethan offers again. "With the evidence mounting, it might be time to authorize that."

I consider this, weighing my discomfort about investigating an employee against the clear threat to both our brands. "Do it," I decide finally. "But keep it completely confidential. If we're wrong somehow, I don't want to damage her reputation unjustly."

"Of course." He reaches for my hand. "We'll handle this carefully. And in the meantime, we focus on Roderick's visit—presenting our work with confidence, regardless of what information may have leaked."

The following day passes in final preparations, with garments steamed, accessories arranged, and presentation spaces perfected. I notice Midna taking photos of several key pieces "for the London team's reference"—an action that now raises red flags where previously it seemed routine.

By Wednesday morning, the studio has been transformed into a presentation space worthy of our collection. Sample garments hang in perfect sequence, accessory displays showcase our attention to detail, and lighting has been adjusted to highlight the textural qualities that distinguish our work.

"He's here," Midna announces at precisely eleven, having greeted Roderick in the lobby.

Roderick Coachman enters the studio with the deliberate pace of a man accustomed to being waited for. At forty, he's fashion's most influential critic—known for incisive analysis that can elevate a collection to must-have status or consign it to commercial failure with a few carefully chosen words.

"Ella. Ethan." He nods to each of us in turn, his expression revealing nothing. "Thank you for accommodating my schedule."

"We're honored you wanted an early look," Ethan replies smoothly. "We value your perspective."

"Indeed." Roderick removes his jacket, handing it to Midna without looking at her. "Shall we begin? I understand time is limited, as these are development samples."

"Exactly," I confirm, moving toward the first garment. "We wanted to share our vision while it's still evolving, to give you insight into the creative process."

What follows is a carefully choreographed presentation, with Ethan and I alternating commentary on each piece, highlighting our innovative approaches and the synthesis of our design philosophies. Roderick observes with clinical detachment, occasionally examining a fabric more closely or questioning a construction detail, but offering no evaluative comments.

"The textile development is particularly noteworthy," I explain, showing him the midnight blue evening gown. "We've created a silk-wool blend with the Japanese mill that achieves both structure and fluidity simultaneously."

"Interesting." He touches the fabric, assessing its hand. "Similar to techniques I've seen emerging from several smaller ateliers recently."

My heart sinks at the confirmation that our innovations have indeed been copied. "Similar in concept, perhaps," I say carefully. "But our execution combines elements that haven't been integrated before."

He makes a noncommittal sound, moving to the next piece. Throughout the presentation, he remains inscrutable, neither overtly impressed nor visibly disappointed. His occasional questions are precise and technically sophisticated, demonstrating his deep knowledge of construction and design evolution.

After viewing the entire presentation, he stands silently for a moment, surveying the collection as a whole. "The synthesis is evident," he says finally. "This isn't simply Carrington aesthetics with Vatore textiles, nor Vatore draping with Carrington structure. It's genuinely collaborative."

The observation, delivered in his typical neutral tone, nonetheless feels like high praise. "That was our intention," Ethan acknowledges. "To create something neither of us could have achieved independently."

"Success in that regard," Roderick nods slightly. "Though I'm curious about the timing."

"Timing?" I repeat, uncertain of his meaning.

"Why now?" His gaze shifts between us. "After five years of separate evolution, what prompted this particular collaboration at this particular moment?"

The question catches me off guard—personal rather than technical, probing our motivations rather than our design choices. Ethan answers before I can formulate a response.

"The timing felt right creatively," he says simply. "We've both developed our individual voices to the point where collaboration enhances rather than dilutes them."

Roderick studies him for a moment, then turns to me. "And you, Ella? After establishing Midnight Designs as distinctly separate from Carrington influence, why return to this partnership?"

I consider my answer carefully, aware that my response may shape his perception of the entire collection. "Independence was necessary to define my vision clearly," I say finally. "But true creative confidence includes knowing when collaboration elevates both parties."

Something like approval flickers across his usually impassive features. "Well put."

"And the collection speaks to that evolution," Ethan adds. "It honors both our separate journeys and creates something new from their convergence."

"Indeed." Roderick collects his notebook, having made periodic notations throughout the presentation. "I appreciate the preview. My column will run after the official launch, of course, but this early perspective is valuable."

"And your initial impressions?" I can't help asking, though I know he rarely offers preliminary opinions.

He pauses, considering. "You've created something authentic in an industry drowning in calculated collaborations. Whether that authenticity translates to commercial appeal remains to be seen, but the creative merit is undeniable."

Coming from Roderick, this constitutes effusive praise. I exchange a quick glance with Ethan, seeing my own relief reflected in his eyes.

"As for the leaked design elements circulating in the industry," Roderick continues, surprising us with his directness, "I can distinguish between innovation and imitation. Others with less discernment may not."

So he knows about the leaks. Of course he does—nothing in fashion escapes Roderick's notice for long.

"We appreciate your discernment," Ethan says carefully. "The collection's development has been... closely watched."

"Indeed." Roderick's gaze sweeps the studio, lingering briefly on Midna, who has remained silently efficient throughout the presentation. "Industrial espionage is fashion's oldest tradition. The best defense is simply to stay ahead of the copycats."

With that cryptic observation, he allows Ethan to help him back into his jacket. "I'll see myself out. Thank you for the preview."

After he leaves, a moment of tense silence fills the studio before Ethan speaks. "That went better than expected."

"Much better," I agree, relief evident in my voice. "He recognized the authenticity of the collaboration."

"And acknowledged the leaks without dwelling on them," Ethan adds. "That's as close to a positive endorsement as Roderick gives before publication."

Midna, who has been arranging the presentation materials, approaches with an inscrutable expression. "He seemed impressed. Though his comment about leaks was concerning."

I study her face, searching for any hint of guilt or discomfort. Her expression reveals nothing beyond appropriate professional concern.

"The fashion industry thrives on rumors," I say neutrally. "What matters is that he saw the collection's merits clearly."

"Absolutely," she agrees readily. "The strength of the work speaks for itself."

The rest of the day passes in post-presentation assessment and continued production preparation. By evening, we've debriefed thoroughly on Roderick's visit and adjusted our launch strategy to emphasize the authentic collaborative process he recognized.

As Midna prepares to leave for the day, I notice her taking photos of several technical specification sheets "for production reference." The action, once routine, now triggers alarm bells.

"Actually, Midna," I say smoothly, "let's hold off on sending those to production until we've made the final adjustments we discussed today."

"Of course," she replies, though I notice she doesn't delete the photos she's already taken. "First thing tomorrow?"

"Perfect." I smile, revealing nothing of my suspicions. "Have a good evening."

After she leaves, Ethan approaches from across the studio. "Did you see—"

"Yes," I interrupt quietly. "The photos. Even after we implemented protocols about documentation leaving the studio."

His expression darkens. "That's pretty blatant, considering the current circumstances."

"Almost as if she doesn't think we suspect her," I agree. "Or doesn't care if we do."

Ethan checks his phone. "My security contact should have preliminary information by tomorrow. Until then, we should assume anything she has access to is potentially compromised."

I nod, heart heavy despite the successful presentation to Roderick. "I trusted her, Ethan. For two years, I trusted her with everything from production details to financial projections."

"Don't blame yourself," he says gently. "Betrayal is never the fault of the person who offered trust."

His words offer small comfort as I contemplate the potential scope of Midna's actions. If she's been systematically collecting Midnight's proprietary information, the damage could extend far beyond this collaboration.

"Come home with me tonight," Ethan suggests, correctly reading my troubled expression. "You shouldn't be alone with these thoughts."



The offer of comfort is tempting, but something in me needs solitude to process this situation. "Actually, I think I need some time to think. To prepare for whatever we learn tomorrow."

He accepts this without protest. "Of course. Call if you change your mind, no matter how late."

"I will," I promise, touched by his understanding.

Back at my hotel, I draw a bath and sink into the hot water, attempting to soothe both body and mind. The day has been a study in contrasts—the success with Roderick balanced against the growing certainty of Midna's betrayal. As I replay every interaction, every seemingly innocent question, every "helpful" suggestion she's made over the past two years, I find myself questioning my own judgment.

My phone rings—Jax, rather than Ethan as I expected.

"Heard Roderick's preview went well," he says when I answer. "Thought you might be celebrating."

"How did you hear that already?" I ask, though I shouldn't be surprised. Fashion's gossip network moves at light speed.

"I know people who know people," he says vaguely. "So why do you sound like someone kicked your puppy instead of someone who just impressed fashion's most unimpressable critic?"

I sigh, debating how much to share. Jax has always been a trusted confidant, but this situation involves potential corporate espionage. "It's complicated."

"Ah." His tone shifts to understanding. "The assistant manager situation."

"How did you—" I start, then stop. "Stephi told you."

"We may have had drinks last night," he admits. "And she may have mentioned concerns about your suspiciously helpful assistant."

"Great. Is there anyone who doesn't know about this potential security breach?"

"Hey," his voice turns serious. "We care about you. And we both noticed something off about Midna from the beginning. Those hungry eyes watching everything you do? Classic warning sign."

His description echoes my own initial unease about Midna's intense observation of both Ethan and me. "We should know more tomorrow," I say. "Ethan has someone looking into it."

"Good." Jax pauses. "Want company tonight? I can bring ice cream and bad movies."

The offer touches me—Jax's particular brand of friendship has always included showing up with comfort food when I'm troubled. "Thanks, but I think I need some quiet tonight. Processing time."

"Understood. But the offer stands if you change your mind."

After we hang up, I sink deeper into the cooling bath, contemplating the support system that has materialized around me since my return to New York. Ethan with his steady presence and newfound patience. Stephi with her brutal honesty and strategic mind. Jax with his protective loyalty and unfiltered observations. Whatever tomorrow reveals about Midna's actions, I'm not facing it alone.

Ambition and love aren't fabric opposites. They can be worn together if you know how to style them. Five years ago, I believed I had to choose between professional independence and personal connection. Now, surrounded by people who support both aspects of my life, I'm beginning to see a different pattern emerging.

Whatever tomorrow brings—confirmation of betrayal, difficult decisions, potential damage control—I'll face it with both professional confidence and personal support. That realization follows me into dreams that, despite the day's complications, are surprisingly peaceful.

## **CHAPTER 16**

Thursday morning arrives with a sense of impending revelation. I wake early, unable to sleep past dawn despite a restless night. By seven, I'm at the studio, wanting time alone to gather my thoughts before confronting whatever information Ethan's security contact has uncovered.

The space feels different somehow—less sanctuary, more contested territory. I walk the perimeter slowly, examining garments we've worked so hard to create, touching fabrics selected with such care. Whatever Midna's actions have been, they can't diminish the quality of what we've built here.

Around eight, Ethan arrives, his expression grave. "You're early," he observes, setting down a tray with two coffee cups. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Not really." I accept the offered coffee gratefully. "Any word from your security contact?"

"He'll be here at nine with a full report," Ethan confirms. "I asked him to come in person given the sensitive nature of the information."

"Good thinking." I take a bracing sip of coffee. "What time does Midna usually arrive?"

"Nine-thirty or ten, typically." His gaze is assessing. "How do you want to handle this, Ella? It's your employee, your company primarily affected."

The consideration touches me—the old Ethan might have taken charge automatically, assuming his approach was best. "Let's hear the security report first," I decide. "Then determine next steps based on what we learn."

He nods, accepting my lead. "For what it's worth, I think you're handling this remarkably well. Many designers would be falling apart at the prospect of their innovations being compromised."

"Five years of building a business from scratch teaches you crisis management," I say with a small smile. "Though I'll admit, betrayal from someone I trusted is a new category of crisis."

"The worst kind," he agrees, his expression suggesting personal experience with such betrayals. "But also the kind that ultimately makes you stronger, once you're past it."

We spend the next hour reviewing production updates and finalizing launch logistics, maintaining normal operations despite the underlying tension. At precisely nine, Ethan's phone buzzes.

"Security's here," he says, moving toward the door.

The man who enters is not what I expected—no bulky ex-military type, but rather a lean, unremarkable-looking individual in his forties, dressed in a standard business suit that would blend seamlessly in any corporate environment.

"Ms. Vatore, Mr. Carrington," he introduces himself with a slight nod. "Marcus Hendricks, corporate security consultant."

"Thank you for coming in person," I say, gesturing toward the conference area of the studio. "We appreciate the discretion."

Once seated, Hendricks opens a slim laptop. "I'll get straight to the point. My investigation has confirmed that your employee, Midna Knight, has been systematically collecting and distributing proprietary information from both Midnight Designs and this collaborative project."

Despite expecting this confirmation, hearing it stated so definitively sends a cold sensation through my chest. "You're certain?"

"Beyond reasonable doubt," Hendricks affirms. "The evidence is comprehensive."

"What exactly has she been sharing, and with whom?" Ethan asks, his tone professionally neutral though I can sense his underlying tension.

"Primarily technical specifications, innovative development processes, and strategic marketing plans." Hendricks turns his laptop to show us a series of emails, the sender's address anonymized but the content clearly containing detailed information about our collection. "These were sent to seven competing design houses over the past three weeks."

I scan the emails, recognizing specific details about my textile development processes—proprietary techniques I've refined over years of experimentation. "These are extremely detailed," I observe, the betrayal cutting deeper with each word I read. "Comprehensive enough for someone to replicate our innovations with minimal trial and error."

"Exactly," Hendricks confirms. "This isn't casual information sharing. It's calculated industrial espionage."

"And who is she working for?" Ethan presses. "Someone must be coordinating this."

Hendricks' expression turns grimmer. "That's where it gets interesting. The financial trail leads to a holding company that, through several layers of corporate structure, connects back to Tremaine Collections."

The revelation hits me like a physical blow. "Duchess," I breathe, the pieces suddenly aligning with sickening clarity.

"We can't confirm her personal involvement definitively," Hendricks cautions. "But the corporate connection is clear. Tremaine Collections is ultimately financing this operation."

"Midna has been working for Duchess all along," I say, the realization crystallizing. "Possibly from the moment she joined Midnight two years ago."

"That timeframe aligns with the financial records we've uncovered," Hendricks confirms. "Regular payments to an offshore account connected to Ms. Knight began approximately twenty-six months ago."

"Just before she applied to Midnight," I note, feeling like a complete fool. "She was placed there deliberately, as a long-term operative."

"Corporate espionage is rarely impromptu," Hendricks observes. "The most effective operations involve patient positioning of assets within target organizations."

Ethan's hand finds mine beneath the table, offering silent support as I absorb this betrayal. "What are our options legally?" he asks Hendricks.

"You have grounds for both civil and potentially criminal action," the security expert advises. "The evidence of intellectual property theft is substantial. However, litigation is public, lengthy, and often difficult to prosecute successfully, particularly across international boundaries."

"And in the meantime, our innovations are already compromised," I note, thinking practically despite my shock.

"Exactly." Hendricks closes his laptop. "Many companies in this situation opt for immediate containment and damage control rather than protracted legal battles."

"What would containment look like?" Ethan asks.

"Immediate termination of the employee, comprehensive security overhaul, accelerated production timeline to get your innovations to market before copies can be finalized," Hendricks outlines efficiently. "And potentially, a strategic counter-move against the orchestrating entity."

"Duchess," I say, anger beginning to replace shock. "She offered me a partnership while simultaneously undermining my business. The merger proposal was just another angle of attack."

"Classic pincer movement," Hendricks observes. "Weakening your market position while offering a 'rescue' that would ultimately give her control of your innovations."

The calculated nature of the strategy is breathtaking in its audacity. "She's been planning this for years," I realize. "Placing Midna at Midnight, gathering intelligence, waiting for the right moment to exploit it."

"The collaboration with Carrington likely accelerated her timeline," Hendricks suggests. "Creating both threat—your potentially strengthened market position—and opportunity—access to even more valuable innovations."

"So what happens now?" I ask, mind already racing ahead to containment strategies.

"That depends on how you wish to proceed," Hendricks replies. "I can provide recommendations, but ultimately these are your companies, your reputations, your intellectual property."

Ethan and I exchange a look, communicating silently as we've always been able to during crisis moments. "We need a few minutes to discuss this," Ethan tells Hendricks. "Could you give us the room?"

"Of course." The security consultant stands, collecting his materials. "I'll wait in the hallway. Take whatever time you need."

After he leaves, I exhale shakily, the full weight of the situation finally hitting me. "Two years, Ethan. She's been gathering information about Midnight for two years."

"I know." His hand squeezes mine gently. "It's a profound breach of trust."

"And Duchess." I shake my head, anger building. "Offering me that sanctimonious partnership proposal while actively trying to undermine everything I've built. The sheer audacity of it."

"Strategic," Ethan acknowledges grimly. "If the leaks damaged Midnight's market position enough, you might have felt pressured to accept her offer as a lifeline."

"Never," I say firmly. "But she wouldn't know that. She's always underestimated my determination."

"So what do we want to do?" Ethan asks, clearly trying to focus on the practical path forward. "Legal action? Immediate termination? Something else?"

I consider our options, weighing emotional satisfaction against business pragmatism. "Legal action would be public, messy, and potentially damaging to both our brands—highlighting the security breach rather than containing it."

"Agreed," Ethan nods. "And immediate termination without explanation might prompt Midna to accelerate distribution of whatever information she still has access to."

"So we need a third approach," I say, thinking strategically now. "One that contains the damage while sending a clear message to Duchess that her scheme has been discovered."

Ethan's expression shifts from concern to something almost admiring. "You have something in mind."

"I do." I outline my emerging plan—direct but controlled confrontation with Midna, strategic information control, and a calculated response to Duchess that turns her strategy against her. As I speak, Ethan's smile grows increasingly appreciative.

"Brilliant," he says when I finish. "Absolutely brilliant. You're not just containing the damage; you're redirecting it right back at its source."

His genuine admiration warms me despite the crisis circumstances. "I didn't build a successful business by folding under pressure," I remind him. "Duchess should have remembered that before she came after Midnight."

"Remind me never to underestimate you," he says, a hint of wonder in his voice.

"I thought you'd learned that lesson five years ago," I reply with a small smile.

"Apparently I needed a refresher." He squeezes my hand once more before releasing it. "Shall we bring Hendricks back in to implement this plan?"

I nod, straightening in my chair and mentally shifting into crisis management mode. "Yes. We have a lot to accomplish before Midna arrives."

The next hour passes in focused preparation—Hendricks securing digital evidence, Ethan arranging for additional security measures, me preparing for the confrontation to come. By the time the studio door opens to admit Midna at precisely 9:45, we're ready.

"Good morning," she calls cheerfully, setting down her bag. "Traffic was terrible today. Some kind of accident on—" She stops abruptly, noticing Hendricks sitting quietly in the corner, and the unusual formality of our postures. "Is everything okay?"

"Please sit down, Midna," I say, gesturing to the chair we've positioned opposite us. "We need to have a conversation."

Her expression flickers briefly—concern? Wariness? Calculation?—before settling into composed curiosity. "Of course. What's going on?"

"We know about the information leaks," I state directly, watching her face closely. "We know you've been sending proprietary details about our textile innovations to competing design houses."

For a beat, she maintains perfect composure, then attempts an incredulous laugh. "What? That's ridiculous. Why would I do that?"

"For approximately seven thousand dollars per month, deposited to an account in the Cayman Islands," Ethan supplies calmly. "Payments that began shortly before you applied to work at Midnight Designs."

Her composure slips further, eyes darting between us. "I don't know what you're talking about. This is crazy."

I slide a folder across the table containing printouts of the evidence Hendricks has compiled—emails, financial records, transmission logs. "It's all here, Midna. Comprehensive and irrefutable."

She glances at the documents, her expression hardening as she realizes the extent of the evidence against her. "This is a misunderstanding," she attempts, though her voice lacks conviction.

"No," I counter firmly. "This is industrial espionage, coordinated by Tremaine Collections, executed by you over a period of more than two years. What I'm trying to determine now is whether you have anything to say that might mitigate my response to this betrayal."

Something shifts in her demeanor—calculation replacing denial as she reassesses her position. "What exactly are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting that you have approximately thirty seconds to decide whether to cooperate fully with us—revealing every detail of what you've shared and with whom—or face the full legal consequences of your actions," I state clearly. "Which include potential criminal charges for theft of intellectual property across international boundaries."

She stares at me, measuring the seriousness of the threat. Then, surprisingly, a small smile appears. "You won't pursue legal action."

"You seem very confident about that," Ethan observes.

"Because legal proceedings would make public exactly what information has been compromised," she explains, her composure returning. "You'd be announcing to the industry which innovations have been copied before your collection even launches. That damages both your brands far more than it hurts me or Tremaine."

Her assessment is accurate, which makes it all the more infuriating. "You've thought this through," I acknowledge.



"I was hired to do a job," she says, dropping all pretense now. "I did it very well for over two years. The fact that you never suspected anything until now proves that."

The cold calculation in her voice stuns me momentarily. "You were my assistant manager. I trusted you with everything from production oversight to financial projections."

"And I executed those duties flawlessly," she counters. "While also fulfilling my primary responsibility to Tremaine. It's just business, Ella. Nothing personal."

"Betraying someone's trust is always personal," I reply, anger sharpening my tone. "But you're right about one thing—legal action isn't my preferred approach."

She relaxes slightly, interpreting this as weakness. "So what happens now? You fire me, I leave quietly, end of story?"

"Not quite." I lean forward. "You're going to tell us exactly what information you've shared, when, and with whom. You're going to provide complete access to your communication channels with Tremaine. And you're going to cooperate fully with our security consultant in tracing every piece of compromised data."

She laughs, though it doesn't reach her eyes. "Why would I do any of that?"

"Because," Ethan interjects smoothly, "while public legal proceedings might damage our brands temporarily, they would absolutely destroy your future in this industry. Corporate espionage makes for sensational headlines, and fashion has a long memory for scandal."

"No design house would touch you, no fashion business would risk hiring you," I continue. "You'd be unemployable in the industry you've worked so hard to infiltrate."

Her confident expression falters slightly. "That's assuming the case would be proven. Courtrooms are unpredictable."

"This evidence isn't," Hendricks speaks for the first time, his quiet voice carrying absolute certainty. "I've built prosecutions on far less substantial documentation."

Midna's gaze shifts between us, recalculating her position with visible reluctance. "And if I cooperate? What do I get?"

"A confidential separation rather than public exposure," I offer. "No industry-wide blacklisting, no criminal charges. You walk away from fashion permanently, pursuing opportunities in other sectors where your particular talents might be more ethically applied."

The practical reality of my offer sinks in slowly. She's silent for several moments, weighing her options with the same calculated assessment I once mistook for analytical skill rather than manipulative strategy.

"Duchess won't be pleased," she says finally. "She's invested considerable resources in this operation."

"Duchess's displeasure is not my concern," I reply. "Your future, however, depends entirely on what you decide in the next sixty seconds."

Another long pause as she makes her calculation. Then, with a slight nod, she capitulates. "Fine. I'll cooperate. But I want the terms of separation in writing, with specific protection against future litigation."

"We can arrange that," Ethan confirms, glancing at Hendricks, who nods. "Provided your cooperation is complete and verified."

What follows is three hours of meticulous debriefing—Midna detailing every piece of information she's shared, every contact at Tremaine, every strategic objective she was tasked with. Hendricks documents everything, occasionally pressing for clarification or additional details when her answers seem incomplete.

The breadth of the espionage is staggering. Beyond the current collection, she's transmitted financial projections, supplier relationships, client lists, and proprietary development techniques—a comprehensive blueprint of Midnight's business operations and competitive advantages.

"Duchess's ultimate goal was acquisition, not collaboration," Midna explains, her clinical detachment chilling. "Weakening Midnight in the marketplace while positioning Tremaine as a necessary lifeline. Your collaboration with Carrington accelerated the timeline, creating both risk and opportunity."

"Risk because it might strengthen Midnight's market position," I deduce. "Opportunity because—"

"Because it gave access to even more valuable innovations," she completes. "And because the public reunion narrative made you potentially vulnerable to emotional manipulation."

The calculated exploitation of both business and personal vulnerabilities is breathtaking in its comprehensive strategy. "Duchess planned this from the beginning," I realize. "From the moment she placed you at Midnight two years ago."

"Yes," Midna confirms without remorse. "Though the Carrington reconnection was an unexpected variable. That created new possibilities that required adaptation of the original strategy."

By early afternoon, we've extracted and documented everything of value. Hendricks accompanies Midna to collect her personal belongings, ensuring she retains nothing containing proprietary information. At the studio door, she pauses, looking back at me with an expression I can't quite read.

"For what it's worth," she says, "the collection is genuinely extraordinary. That wasn't just manipulation when I said so."

I study her face, searching for sincerity and finding only calculated performance. "Goodbye, Midna."

After she leaves, escorted by Hendricks to ensure her departure from the building, Ethan and I are left alone in the suddenly quiet studio. The emotional weight of the morning crashes over me all at once—shock, betrayal, anger, and lingering disbelief combining in a wave that leaves me momentarily unsteady.

Ethan moves to my side immediately, his arm around my shoulders providing welcome support. "You handled that brilliantly," he says softly. "With more composure than most CEOs I know would have managed."

"I don't feel composed," I admit. "I feel violated. Everything I've built, everything I've created—she had her hands in all of it, taking what wasn't hers to share."

"I know." His voice is gentle. "But she didn't take your talent, Ella. She didn't take your vision or your ability to create. Those remain entirely yours."

The reassurance touches something essential within me. "Thank you for that perspective."

"And for what it's worth," he continues, "watching you manage this crisis has been... illuminating. The strategic thinking, the balanced approach between emotional response and practical solution—you've become an extraordinary business leader, not just a gifted designer."

His genuine admiration helps steady me. "We still have damage to contain," I remind him, refocusing on the challenges ahead. "And a collection to launch despite Duchess's best efforts to undermine it."

"Yes," he agrees, his expression shifting to determined resolve. "And now we add one more element to our strategy—a very specific message to Duchess Tremaine that her scheme has been discovered and neutralized."

"Exactly." My own determination resurges, anger transforming into focused energy. "She came after what I've built. Now she gets to discover that I'm not the same woman who once feared her disapproval."

As we begin mapping out our response strategy, I find strength returning with each decisive step forward. The betrayal still stings, the violation still angers, but neither will define what happens next. That power remains entirely mine.

Sometimes the most courageous design choice is simplicity. Same goes for apologies. In this case, there will be no apology from Duchess, no acknowledgment of her scheme. But my response will be equally simple and equally courageous—moving forward with increased determination rather than dwelling in the shadow of betrayal.

The collection will launch as planned. Midnight Designs will continue to thrive. And Duchess Tremaine will discover that her calculated attack has only strengthened my resolve to succeed on my own terms.

That, perhaps, is the most fitting response of all.

## **CHAPTER 17**

The two weeks following Midna's departure pass in a blur of focused determination. With her betrayal now confirmed and contained, Ethan and I throw ourselves into collection preparation with renewed intensity. We accelerate the production timeline for key pieces, implement additional security protocols around remaining development work, and carefully manage information distribution to our production partners.

The absence of Midna is both relief and challenge—her efficiency had become integral to our workflow, even as her ulterior motives poisoned the foundation of trust. I find myself working longer hours to compensate, stubbornly refusing to let her betrayal impact our launch schedule.

"You need to rest," Ethan observes one evening as the studio clock approaches midnight. We're reviewing final production samples, making last-minute adjustments before approving the full manufacturing run. "You've been here since six this morning."

"I'm fine," I insist, though exhaustion pulls at my edges. "These approvals need to be completed tonight if we're going to maintain the production timeline."

He studies me for a moment, then sets down his pen decisively. "Fifteen-minute break. Non-negotiable."

"Ethan—"

"Ella." His tone is gentle but firm. "Driving yourself to collapse won't undo what Midna did. It will only give her—and by extension, Duchess—another victory."

The observation lands with uncomfortable accuracy. "That's not what I'm doing."

"Isn't it?" He moves to the small kitchenette, preparing tea—a habit he's developed during our late-night sessions. "You've been pushing yourself beyond reasonable limits since she left. Taking on her responsibilities, double-checking everything, working from dawn until midnight."

"The collection needs—"

"The collection needs its designer at full creative capacity," he interrupts, returning with two steaming mugs. "Not exhausted and running on stubbornness and caffeine."

I accept the tea, recognizing the truth in his assessment. "I hate that she made me question everything. Every decision, every production detail, every supplier relationship—I'm constantly wondering what else she might have compromised."

"I know." He sits beside me, our shoulders touching in casual comfort. "That's the insidious nature of betrayal. It doesn't just damage what was actually harmed; it taints everything with suspicion."

The understanding in his voice soothes something raw within me. "How are you so calm about this? It affects Carrington too."

"Oh, I'm furious," he assures me, surprising me with his frank admission. "I've had moments of wanting to burn everything to the ground and start over. But I've also learned that rage, while satisfying in the moment, makes for poor strategic decisions."

"When did you get so wise?" I ask, a small smile finally breaking through my exhaustion.

"Somewhere between therapy session fifty and sixty," he replies with the self-deprecating humor that has become familiar. "Or possibly when I realized I'd lost the most important person in my life because I couldn't control my need for control."

The reference to our past brings a comfortable weight rather than renewed pain. "We've both learned some hard lessons, haven't we?"

"The hardest." His eyes hold mine, serious despite his light tone. "But perhaps necessary ones. I'm not sure we could have created this collection—or rebuilt this relationship—without them."

The simple truth of his observation settles between us, neither heavy nor light but simply real. We finish our tea in companionable silence before returning to work with renewed focus.

By the time we complete the final approvals, it's nearly two in the morning. "Stay at my place," Ethan offers as we gather our things. "It's closer, and you're too exhausted to go all the way back to your hotel."

The suggestion holds no subtext or pressure—just practical care that I find myself grateful for. "Okay," I agree, too tired to overthink the decision.

At his loft, we move through nighttime routines with the easy familiarity of people who have found their rhythm together. He lends me a t-shirt to sleep in, I use the spare toothbrush that has somehow become "mine" in his bathroom, and we fall into bed with the comfortable certainty that sleep, not intimacy, is the primary need of the moment.

Just before consciousness slips away, I feel his arm wrap gently around my waist, his body curved protectively behind mine. "We're going to be okay," he murmurs against my hair. "The collection, Midnight, us—all of it."

The conviction in his voice follows me into dreams, a shield against lingering doubts and fears.

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One week before the collection launch, Roderick Coachman's column appears in Fashion Weekly. As the industry's most influential critic, his assessment carries weight that can elevate or diminish a collection's reception before it even reaches consumers.

"Have you seen it?" Ethan asks, calling earlier than usual on Sunday morning.

"No," I admit, still half-asleep. "I just woke up."

"Check your email. I've sent you the link."

Fully alert now, I reach for my tablet, navigating to the message from Ethan. The column's headline immediately catches my attention: "SYNTHESIS: When Collaboration Transcends Commercial Calculation."

"Is it good?" I ask, suddenly nervous about reading further.

"It's Roderick," Ethan replies cryptically. "Read it yourself."

I scroll to the article, heart racing slightly as I begin reading:

*In an industry oversaturated with superficial collaborations engineered by marketing departments rather than creative vision, the upcoming "Synthesis" collection from Carrington and Vatore emerges as a rare authentic partnership between two distinct design voices.*

*Five years ago, Ella Vatore departed the Carrington empire to establish Midnight Designs, a boutique label that has earned respect for its innovative textile applications and understated elegance. Many viewed her departure as both professional and personal schism—fashion's favorite power couple divided by ambition and creative differences.*

*What makes their reunion compelling is not the gossip-worthy personal narrative (though the industry has certainly indulged in that speculation), but rather how their separate evolutions have enhanced rather than diluted their collaborative aesthetic.*

*In an exclusive preview of the collection, I observed something increasingly rare in fashion: genuine creative synthesis. This is neither Carrington aesthetics with Vatore textiles, nor Vatore draping with Carrington structure. It is something entirely new, born from the intersection of two mature design vocabularies.*

*The result transcends the commercial calculation that drives most industry partnerships. Here, technical innovation serves emotional resonance rather than mere novelty. Garments that could easily have become exercises in avant-garde excess instead achieve that elusive balance between innovation and wearability.*

*Particularly noteworthy are the textile developments—Japanese silk-wool blends that simultaneously achieve structure and fluidity, architectural silhouettes that move with rather than against the body. These innovations have apparently attracted attention throughout the industry, with several competing houses attempting similar techniques in hastily assembled collections.*

*These imitations—transparent to the educated eye—only emphasize the authenticity of the original vision. Innovation can be approximated, but the emotional coherence of true creative partnership cannot be replicated through industrial espionage or rushed development.*

*When "Synthesis" launches next week, discerning consumers will recognize the difference between calculated collaboration and genuine creative convergence. In a fashion landscape increasingly defined by disposable partnerships, Carrington and Vatore have created something with the potential for lasting impact—not unlike the personal reconnection that industry observers have noted between the designers themselves.*

*Some relationships, both creative and personal, require separation before their full potential can be realized. "Synthesis" suggests that sometimes, the most meaningful reconnections occur when both parties have evolved into their strongest individual selves.*

I read the review twice, absorbing its nuanced praise and particularly its pointed reference to "industrial espionage"—a clear acknowledgment of the leaked information without diminishing the collection's significance.

"He knows," I say when I finally pick up the phone again. "About Midna, about the leaks. He specifically called out the 'imitations' as transparent and inferior."

"And emphasized the authenticity of our partnership," Ethan adds, sounding genuinely pleased. "Both creatively and personally."

"It's as close to a rave as Roderick ever writes," I acknowledge, relief washing through me. "This will set the tone for the collection's reception."

"Exactly. And his mention of the copied techniques actually works in our favor—positioning any similar innovations from competitors as pale imitations rather than concurrent development."



The strategic value of this framing isn't lost on me. "He's essentially inoculated the market against our competitors' versions before they even launch."

"And sent a very clear message to Duchess that her scheme has not only been discovered but neutralized," Ethan adds with satisfaction. "All without explicitly naming names."

"Roderick always was the master of the elegant knife twist," I observe, remembering instances where his subtle critiques ended design careers without ever directly attacking them.

"Indeed." Ethan's voice warms. "So, celebration brunch? We should mark this victory properly."

The invitation tempts me, but I have other plans forming. "Actually, I think there's something else I need to do today. Something I've been putting off."

"Duchess?" he guesses immediately.

"Yes." I've been considering this confrontation since Midna's departure, waiting for the right moment. "Roderick's review provides perfect timing—approaching her from a position of strength rather than reactive anger."

"Want company?" he offers. "I'm happy to provide backup."

The offer is tempting, but this feels like something I need to handle alone. "Thanks, but I think this conversation needs to be between her and me. Some family business to settle."

"Understood." No pressure, no questioning of my decision—just support. "Call me after? Dinner tonight?"

"Definitely," I promise. "I'll text when I'm done."

After showering and dressing with particular care—armor rather than fashion, selecting pieces that make me feel confident and powerful—I call Duchess. As expected, she attempts to evade an immediate meeting, citing "prior commitments" that I suspect don't actually exist.

"This isn't a request, Duchess," I say firmly. "Either we meet today, on my terms, or our conversation happens through lawyers. Your choice."

The threat of legal involvement, with its potential for public exposure, achieves the desired effect. "Fine," she concedes with poorly concealed irritation. "My penthouse, two o'clock."

"The Gramercy Park café," I counter, unwilling to cede home field advantage. "Public enough for civility, private enough for honesty."

A pause, then grudging agreement. "Three o'clock. I have a lunch that cannot be rescheduled."

"Three it is," I confirm. "Don't be late."

The hours before our meeting pass in focused preparation—reviewing the evidence Hendricks compiled, refining my approach, and centering myself emotionally for the confrontation to come. By the time I arrive at the café, selecting a discreet corner table with good sight lines but limited visibility from other patrons, I feel calm and controlled, anger transformed into strategic determination.

Duchess arrives precisely at three, immaculately dressed in Tremaine's signature style—expensive but understated, projecting old-money confidence rather than nouveau riche ostentation. Her expression reveals nothing as she approaches my table.

"Ella," she greets coolly, taking the seat opposite me. "This melodramatic urgency is hardly necessary. Whatever concerns you have could have been discussed during normal business hours."

"Industrial espionage doesn't observe normal business hours," I reply quietly, watching her face for reaction. "Neither does betrayal."

A brief flicker in her eyes is the only indication that my words have landed. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Midna Knight," I say simply. "Your corporate spy, placed at Midnight Designs two years ago. Currently unemployed, with a very comprehensive separation agreement that shields her from prosecution but offers no such protection to the person who orchestrated her activities."

Duchess maintains perfect composure, though I notice her hand tightens slightly around her water glass. "You've always had a vivid imagination, Ella. It served you well in design, less so in business relationships."

"This isn't imagination," I place a slim folder on the table between us. "It's evidence. Financial transfers through shell companies that ultimately lead back to Tremaine. Email communications. Strategic objectives. A comprehensive operation designed to undermine Midnight Designs while positioning Tremaine for acquisition under duress."

She doesn't touch the folder, her expression remaining impassive. "If you had actual evidence of wrongdoing, we wouldn't be having this conversation in a café. We'd be meeting in a courtroom."

"That option remains available," I assure her. "But I thought I'd offer you the courtesy of a private resolution first. Professional respect, if not familial consideration."

"How generous," her tone drips with sarcasm. "And what exactly does this 'private resolution' entail?"

I lean forward slightly, keeping my voice measured. "You will cease all attempts to access, replicate, or undermine Midnight Designs' intellectual property. You will terminate any other operatives you may have placed in my organization or supply chain. And you will issue a public statement announcing Tremaine's interest in acquiring my textile innovations was respectfully declined."

A thin smile appears on her perfectly lipsticked mouth. "And if I find these terms unacceptable?"

"Then I release the evidence to industry publications, regulatory authorities, and legal counsel," I state simply. "Your reputation—personal and professional—would be unlikely to survive the resulting scandal."

"You're bluffing," she challenges, though I detect the first hint of uncertainty beneath her composed exterior. "You wouldn't risk the publicity. It would damage Midnight's market position, highlighting vulnerability rather than strength."

"Perhaps," I acknowledge. "But Midnight would recover. Would Tremaine? The brand is already struggling. Add a public scandal involving corporate espionage, and I suspect your remaining retail partners would terminate their relationships immediately."

The calculation is visible in her eyes—weighing potential damage against the satisfaction of continued hostility. "You've become quite ruthless," she observes finally. "Your father would be surprised."

"My father would be appalled by your actions," I counter. "He built Tremaine on design integrity and authentic craftsmanship. You've reduced it to corporate subterfuge and stolen innovation."

Something flashes across her features—anger? Guilt? Regret? It's gone too quickly to identify with certainty. "Edward was a romantic idealist," she says dismissively. "The industry has changed."

"Not as much as you think." I gesture to the newspaper on a nearby table, open to Roderick's review. "Authenticity still matters. Innovation that serves mere novelty ultimately fails. That was true in my father's time, and it remains true today."

Her gaze shifts to the paper, recognizing Roderick's column. I know she's already read it—Duchess would never miss an assessment from fashion's most influential critic—but

the pointed reminder of our collection's success despite her interference lands precisely as intended.

"What do you really want, Ella?" she asks finally, her tone shifting to something almost genuine. "Beyond these 'terms' you've outlined."

I consider the question seriously. "I want what I've always wanted—to create on my own terms, to honor my father's legacy through my own vision rather than through the brand that bears his name but no longer reflects his values."

"And that's it? No revenge? No pound of flesh?" Her skepticism is evident.

"Revenge is exhausting," I say simply. "And ultimately unproductive. I'd rather focus my energy on creation than destruction."

She studies me for a long moment, reassessing with the calculating precision that has always defined her approach to both business and personal relationships. "The public statement," she says finally. "It would need careful wording. Something that preserves Tremaine's market positioning."

"Of course," I agree, recognizing the beginnings of capitulation. "Professional dignity maintained on both sides."

"And the evidence?" She gestures to the folder still lying untouched between us.

"Remains secured," I assure her. "Unless further action becomes necessary."

Another long, evaluative pause. Then, with the slightest inclination of her head: "I find your terms acceptable. With the understanding that this concludes all matters between us, personal and professional."

"Agreed." I signal for the check, our business concluded more efficiently than I anticipated. "I'll have my PR team coordinate with yours on the statement wording."

As we prepare to leave, Duchess pauses, something almost vulnerable flickering across her usually guarded features. "Your father would be proud of you, Ella. Not for the designs—though they are exceptional—but for the spine. Edward always said you had his determination beneath your mother's gentle exterior."

The unexpected acknowledgment catches me off-guard. "Thank you," I say simply, unsure how to respond to this rare moment of apparent sincerity.

"Don't mistake this for sentimentality," she adds quickly, mask returning. "Merely professional respect for a worthy adversary."

The qualification makes me smile slightly. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Outside, as we prepare to go our separate ways, she offers one final observation. "Carrington has changed. The arrogance has been tempered with something almost... reflective."

"Yes," I agree, seeing no reason to deny the obvious. "He has."

"Be careful nonetheless," she advises, her tone impossible to categorize as either genuine concern or continued manipulation. "Men like that never change completely."

"Perhaps not," I acknowledge. "But neither do I. The difference is now we're both changing by choice rather than necessity."

She accepts this with a slight nod. "Goodbye, Ella."

"Goodbye, Duchess."

As I watch her walk away, elegant and upright as always, I feel an unexpected sense of closure. Not reconciliation—too much has happened for that—but resolution of a chapter that has haunted the edges of my professional journey since my father's death.

I text Ethan:

**To: Ethan**

Mission accomplished. Surprisingly civilized.

His response is immediate:

**From: Ethan**

Never doubted you for a second. Dinner at 7?

I reply, already looking forward to sharing the details of this confrontation with someone who understands both its professional and personal significance.

**To: Ethan**

Perfect

As I walk through the city toward my hotel, I find myself reflecting on the journey that brought me to this moment—from Goddie's basement sorting fabric scraps, to Carrington design protégée, to independent success, to this new synthesis of partnership and autonomy. None of it has followed the path I initially imagined, yet somehow each detour and challenge has contributed to something stronger than my original vision.

People say you can't go home again. They never mention you can build a better one. Five years ago, I left New York believing I had to choose between connection and independence. Now I'm discovering that the strongest foundations accommodate both—creating space for individual growth while supporting shared visions.

The collection launches in one week. Duchess has been neutralized. Midna's betrayal has been contained. And whatever future awaits beyond these immediate milestones, I face it with both hard-won independence and freely chosen connection.

This time, I'm writing the fairy tale, and it begins exactly where the old one ended—at midnight, with both shoes firmly on my feet.