

# SANCTUARY

*by*

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*Cursed, the bright angel fell, and as it plummeted, its wings grew dark  
and tarnished.*

*Upon the ground, tired and damaged, it tried to stand and ascend  
again, but there was no sunlight to feed it and the mud and grime lay  
too heavy on its wings.*

*For the longest time, it struggled valiantly to shake its burden and to  
soar once more, but the mire could not be moved, and in time, with  
too little to sustain it, the angel grew weary and could do no more.*

*Spirit broken, it wrapped its wings around itself for warmth, and  
alone in its dark place, it grew wretched.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### *New York Fashion Week*

It had been a grand banquet hall once. A place adorned by beautiful cornices and marbled pillars which, not so long ago, had been no stranger to elegant gentry waltzing to the popular music of the day. A majestic room then, but no more. The once imposing hall had fallen upon hard times and was no different from the rest of the neglected hotel to which it belonged, all now subjected to the humiliation of modern day.

Today, its chambers debased, it was flooded with psychedelic strobe lights, mind-blowing music that pulsated with an undercurrent of heavy beat, and some four hundred audience members comprised of fashion designers, their cohorts, the media, and the public. Fashion models snaked around the floor, their runway performance over, slithering amidst eager onlookers, promoting the latest outfits they were paid to wear. As usual, these events seemed surreal but were one of the best ways for design houses to show off their latest collections to customers eager to part with money, and retailers hungry to cash in on every trend.

Bernard Bressinger, the fashion editor of *Nouveau Rich* magazine, and occasional fashion correspondent for the large national newspapers, always felt just a little jaded at these functions, but tonight he couldn't believe his luck. For the first time ever, two of the most talented names in female fashion were actually present at the same show. Barely able to contain himself, he looked over at tall, blond Dita Newton, a woman with eyes like a Siberian timber wolf, intense and ice blue. Though

the color might suggest a cold nature, she had a reputation for being generous, graceful, and genuine. Bernard was certain she would grant him an interview. All he had to do was drag her away from his rivals in the fashion press.

He knew exactly what they were saying, word for gushy word. The sycophantic flattery and pandering, the demands for exclusive comments about what had made her choose particular designs and fabrics, her divine color scheme, and so on. Dita Newton was a rising star of the fashion world and the hit of tonight's show. She was both designer and manager of Seraphim, a long-established, but until recently, not very successful small Boston fashion house. However, since Newton had taken over its management six years ago, the business had blossomed under her clever direction and stunningly refreshing designs. Tonight's outstanding collection heralded her arrival as an immense talent.

Bernard planned an interview with a slightly different slant, maybe something more personal about her being thirty, slow success, the hard road, but the wait being worth the magnificence and quality of her designs. He decided to wait before he approached her, and to let some of the hangers-on drop off. In the meantime he couldn't help but notice the other designer who interested him. Cate Canton, the publicity-shy owner of competing fashion house, Zabor. This was one of the designers he liked, professionally, admiring the way she remained true to her fashion ideals and had not been caught up in building her own myth as so many fashion gurus were. Bernard couldn't imagine Canton turning bohemian and promoting the most garish, outlandish styles in order to impress an adoring public. No, she had stuck to the classic principles of "less is more," and her understated design values had turned Zabor into one of the fastest growing fashion houses in the U.S.

Despite her status, Canton stood alone on the periphery of the crowd, her attention focused solely on her rival, Dita Newton, a strange, unreadable expression on her slightly flushed face. Bernard found himself taking a deeper breath than usual as he cast an appreciative eye over her. Not stunningly good looking, but most definitely attractive, she was one of those women a man could enjoy looking at.

Her shiny shoulder-length auburn hair caught the light, which picked out the fine, fairer streaks. She was hardly a tall woman, but slim and immaculately dressed, exuding an air of quiet, classic sophistication. Everything about her spoke restraint, from the simple pearl earrings

and matching necklace, to the plain but flattering black and white dress. Unable to stop his base tendencies, he took in the shapely lean legs beneath the fine hosiery and the beautifully manicured nails on the delicate fingers of her equally slender hands. If Canton had dressed to be inconspicuous, she was not, but at the same time she possessed a quality that warned others to be wary. She was beautiful, but also predatory and dangerous.

Bernard saw such women as a challenge and, but for the fact he'd heard she was gay, he might have tried to get to know her better. Perhaps her social leanings explained why she remained aloof from her admiring public, dismissive of their insatiable curiosity. In all the many years he'd attended these shows, the mysterious Cate Canton never put in a physical appearance, leaving her front man, Saul de Charlier, to handle things. To say she was reclusive was an understatement. There was more information out there on the Yeti.

He wondered why she was here tonight, for equally unusual, this year for the first time she had not promoted Zabor's collection at the show. Normally, this was where her latest designs were unveiled, frequently undermining those of her rivals. This event wasn't at the top end of the business, or bristling with international names. It was a show place for smaller designers who had cornered a lucrative segment of the ready-to-wear market, customers who demanded quality, style, and chic at an affordable price. Dita Newton and Cate Canton were the leaders of this particular pack, and Bernard couldn't believe for one minute that Canton was skipping the show because her insuperable talent had run dry.

Something had brought her here, but what? He suspected, as did many in the fashion circle, that the unpleasant business rivalry between her and Dita Newton was a factor in her isolation. There were all manner of rumors about the circumstances of their falling-out, but neither had ever commented publicly on the rift. Bernard could smell a juicy story, if only he could persuade one of the two to go on the record. Like every other fashion journalist looking for a front page headline, he had done some digging but all he'd managed to turn up was the old news that Dita Newton was at the helm of the fashion house built by Cate's family because William Canton had placed her there. No one was sure of his reasons. There was speculation about the traffic accident that had killed Cate's sister, but who could say? The response from the

Canton people to that particular line of questioning was invariably “no comment.” Interrupted from his thoughts, Bernard saw an opportunity to get Cate’s attention. “Miss Canton. What a pleasure.”

The woman slowly turned her head, the chin rising in question. Her sharp dark blue eyes focused on him.

Bernard bestowed his most charming smile. “Miss Canton, I’m Bernard Bress—”

“I know who you are.” The response was bereft of warmth.

This was one interview unlikely to fall easily into his lap. Refusing to be put off, Bernard widened his smile and mustered his charm. Attempting suave nonchalance, he said, “I see my reputation precedes me.”

The deadpan expression remained. Cate was clearly unimpressed. He occasionally came across people who arrogantly thought themselves above giving interviews to the press they expected to publicize their work. Then there were those who were simply uncomfortable talking about themselves. He suspected Canton was one of the latter, which could explain why she shied away from the public. This behavior was unusual in the fashion world, but not entirely unknown. No matter how talented some people were, it didn’t necessarily follow that they would be engaging and charming too.

“I just wanted to ask you a few—”

“I don’t do interviews, Mr. Bressinger, as you know. Please put your questions to Saul de Charlier. He’ll be happy to address them.”

Bernard knew hornets’ nests that were more approachable than Cate Canton, but he wasn’t going to be put off. He hadn’t made it to his managing editor position by being restrained and submissive. As Cate started to walk away, he altered the direction of his questioning. “I merely wondered what you thought of Dita Newton’s new collection.”

Success! The reluctant interviewee turned back to look at him, her face now cast in a more contemplative mood, the cold eyes warmer. She hesitated for a moment and then spoke, this time not in a hurried, curt manner, but with a softness and richness to the husky timbre of her voice.

As if she was suddenly transported miles away, she said, “A wonderful collection. Very innovative, very...creative. It’s a winning collection from an inspired designer.” She paused and something wistful entered her expression. “Beautiful clothes from a beautiful woman.”

There was no cynicism or animosity in her reply, in fact she seemed to have a genuine appreciation and respect for the other designer. Bernard had expected quite a different tone. Weren't these two women supposed to be ruthless business opponents? He wondered if he'd allowed himself to buy into rumors of a catfight because the alternative was pretty boring. If Cate Canton and Dita Newton were nothing more than business rivals seeking to outdo each other, what would he write about in the succulent exposé feature he was planning? Before he could dig deeper, Canton excused herself and walked away, cutting across the floor toward Dita Newton, who had just finished talking to a group of journalists.

Dita almost intuitively sensed Cate Canton's approach. Her stomach churned. She'd been shocked to learn that her adversary was actually in the audience and had been preparing herself ever since she arrived for the unpleasantness bound to take place. Determined not to let Cate spoil the day she'd waited so long for, she mentally composed herself and inwardly chanted the mantra, *Control. Control. Control.* She would be calm and restrained when she greeted Cate, not like the last time, when she'd let her self-control slip.

"Canton," she said, coolly acknowledging the unwanted presence.

Cate merely responded with a half-smile. As she came to a graceful halt before Dita, they both took a while to study each other. Dita found it difficult to interpret Cate's seemingly affable smile and unguarded stance, but that was nothing new. She didn't need to seek out what lay beneath the veneer. She already knew Cate's treachery and was more than prepared.

"You look well," Cate said.

"I am." Dita would have accepted the comment as genuine from anyone else, but nothing Cate said could be taken at face value. Why was she here? What sordid little trick was she up to this time? Dita wanted this encounter over, and fast. The last thing she needed was stress or strain, and the fatally alluring woman in front of her who had once drawn her like a magnetic compass, could deliver both in bucket loads.

"Recovered completely?" Cate's eyes roamed over her with an odd mixture of compassion and desperation.

"Unfortunately for you," Dita chipped back edgily. The cutting

response removed Cate's smile. "They say I'm doing exceptionally well, better than expected and ready to meet the challenges again. *All of them.*"

Cate nodded slowly and looked down at her feet, anything to avoid the intense glacial blue gaze. Dita's eyes seemed locked onto her like the stare from one of those museum portraits, unnervingly following her no matter where she went in the room.

"Hopefully, you'll encounter fewer problems than you expect," she said quietly.

"Somehow I doubt it." Dita couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice and it drew Cate's eyes back up to hers. Surprisingly, she heard herself say, "I see you haven't entered anything for the show."

Dita wondered why she'd brought it up; she wasn't the slightest bit interested in the answer. Nothing about this woman interested her anymore. She considered how strangely reticent Canton's behavior seemed this evening. It was the way she looked at her, as if Cate wanted to lay everything on the line to save something...something that seemed to mean everything to her. But Dita wasn't fooled for one minute. *Trust her at your peril.*

"I've been busy," Cate replied.

"Yes, on an unscrupulous business venture that didn't pay off." Dita referred directly to Cate's failed attempt to mercilessly interfere and block the success of Seraphim.

"Oh, I got something out of it," Cate said candidly.

She found herself fighting an unpleasant backwash of memories, all of which reminded her of what she'd recently learnt and at what personal cost. She allowed her gaze to rest on Dita's taller and willowy form, soaking in her natural beauty. She was too thin, and despite declaring her good health, she looked pale. Perhaps she had returned to work too soon. The strain of this show must have placed an enormous burden on her.

"I doubt that. You're not used to failure."

"Failure?"

"Not getting what you want," Dita clarified. "But then I've always believed success shouldn't favor the wicked. I find it gratifying that someone like you, born into privilege, can't assume life owes you anything. What matters is how a person uses an initial advantage they were born to. Of course, you wouldn't know what I'm talking about."

If the stinging remark hit home, Cate didn't show the effects, except in the slight pursing of satin soft lips. "I only came to see the show and to wish you success, but I don't think you're going to need it."

"Not from you."

Cate was silent for several seconds. "There was a time when things didn't look good for you, when I thought—"

"When you thought you were going to get everything you wanted."

Haunted interrogative eyes stared back at her. "No." The denial was fast and adamant. "No, I *never* thought that. I'm glad you're better, feeling well again and that things look...good for you."

She sounded so sincere, Dita almost laughed, having learned first hand what Cate was capable of. She let her unveiled skepticism show. "If you'll excuse me, I'm busy and have better places to be, more important things to do."

Not waiting for any acknowledgment, she marched away toward Bernard Bressinger, who hovered patiently nearby to interview her. Cate called out to her by name, and something in her voice brought Dita to a halt. She looked back for a second before steeling herself and continuing on.

Unforgiving as the gaze had been, that one last look had meant everything to Cate. It was probably her last opportunity to commit the beautiful woman's image to memory, a last look she would cherish forever as she watched Dita Newton disappear into the crowd. If their paths were to cross again, it would be by accident, no longer orchestrated, and would always be something unwanted by Dita, who had made her feelings for Cate crystal clear. But then, what could Cate expect after everything she had done?

Moving back into the crowd, Cate spotted Marcus Abner, Dita Newton's marketing director, who for some reason had arrived late and was now trying to push his way through the mill of people to reach his boss. Cate intercepted him.

"Marcus, wait."

The slightly stooped, gray-haired man in his mid-fifties had worked for Seraphim long before Dita Newton took over, and knew Cate's mother before she died. He immediately stopped. Though clearly busy, he was one of life's intrinsic gentlemen who always made time

for people. This, coupled with his staid appearance and behavior, made him an anathema in the fashion world. But Marcus's talent lay behind the scenes, where he kept the accounts and marketing focused. He was one of the reasons Seraphim hadn't folded years ago. Smiling warmly, he reached out to shake Cate's hand. Well, at least someone still liked her!

Not wasting any time, she thrust an envelope into his hand. "Marcus, good to see you again, but I can't stay, and I think Dita needs your help." Sensing his confusion, she said, "I need you to give her this. Leave it for a little while, but...make sure she gets it. Please."

"Why don't you give it to her now? She's over—"

"I know where she is." Cate smiled at him and affectionately straightened his tie. In all the years she'd known him, he'd never been able to tie a decent knot. "We've already spoken...sort of, and it didn't go well." She smiled again, more for Marcus's benefit than her own. "I came here to give her that letter, but I chickened out. So, please give it to her when things are quieter. Okay?"

For a moment, they merely eyed each other, communicating so much more than words. Then Cate snatched the envelope back. In a fraction of a second, it had dawned on her that the contents would never be understood and would not even partially heal the rift—the chasm—that lay between her and Dita. Perhaps her words would only inflame the whole wretched situation. Why not just acknowledge that all was lost and move on? She met Marcus's bewildered gaze.

"Sorry, change of plan. It was a silly idea, anyway. Maybe some things are better left unsaid." Unable to smile anymore, Cate feigned indifference as she tapped his arm gently. "Go give the poor woman a hand." She shoved him into the crowd before he could object. "Oh, and Marcus? Look after her."

As he walked away, Cate could barely control a wave of emotion that rose like a colossal wave battering a harbor wall. She covered her mouth to halt an involuntary sob. Damn it. Where was the exit? She had to get out of here and fast if she was going to avoid breaking down in a room full of photographers. She hadn't cried in years and she wasn't going to start now, in public.

She quickly retrieved her coat and, still clutching the letter, ran out into the street. The winter wind that should have left months ago still

whispered the promise of more heavy snow. She pulled her coat around her tightly as crystal white flecks stuck to her face and hair.

Moving through the light flurries toward a sidewalk trash can, she dropped the unopened envelope inside. People bustled past her, well-wrapped New Yorkers accustomed to the climatic vagaries of February. Lingered, she stared down into the grimy receptacle. Guilt settled on her shoulders for the thousandth time. There was so much she wanted to say but never would, because Dita was not going to listen, and she only had herself to blame for that.

She raised her hand above her head and hailed a taxi. “I’m sorry, Dita,” she whispered. “So very sorry.”