

FOCAL POINT

Ella hated the bag.

It was hideous, and tacky, and made her think the designer was a third grader.

It was *perfect*.

Considering her entire wardrobe consisted of black, navy and the occasional maroon, no one would expect Ella Gold to be caught dead with a rainbow bag, much less willingly carry it around.

She paid the street vendor, keeping her eyes downcast to avoid being recognized. After the recent drama with Callum, she just needed a paparazzi free day. As a kid, she had loved the Winter Carnival Parade, but she'd stopped attending several years back when her first song made the Top40.

That year she had spent more time dodging cameras than futilely trying to win oversized stuffed animals and choking down the fried, heart-attack inducing junk they called food.

She was determined not to get recognized today. Even if she had to make regrettable fashion sacrifices. After tossing her Chanel clutch in the considerably cheaper tote, she slung it over her shoulder and started towards the entrance.

She wasn't sure what made her glance back, maybe after so many years she had developed some sort of sixth sense, but it was almost like she felt the click of her photo being taken. She turned to see a man staring down at a camera.

For a moment, she considered letting it go, not wanting to make a scene and draw even more attention. If he posted it though, or whoever he worked for was fast enough, her entire day would be ruined.

“Hey!” she called, stalking over.

He was younger than she thought, she noticed when he looked up. He seemed her age, or close to it, with shaggy blonde hair swooping down to cover bright gray eyes and a tall, lanky frame.

“Did you take a picture of me?” she demanded.

He gave a shrug, his cheeks tinged red. “Sort of.”

A blushing paparazzi? Ella convinced herself it was from the cold.

“Delete it, please,” she asked, keeping her tone mild. The last thing she wanted was a harassment story.

“You’re not the focal point. You’re not in it.”

“What?”

“I mean, you are but- here you can see.” He handed the camera to her.

First she went forward and back to make sure this was the only photo he had of her. Once she saw it was, she examined the picture more closely. He had caught her mid-stride, face turned away. The background, and even some parts of her, were a blur. The main focus was on the hideous rainbow bag.

Maybe he works for a fashion magazine and this’ll be in the next celebrity don’ts, she thought. It’ll be hard to prove it’s me though.

“See, that bag’s the focal point, not you,” he said.

She glanced up and took a closer look at her assumed paparazzi. *Photo student or hobbyist more likely.*

“Sorry,” Ella apologized. “I thought you worked for someone.”

“No problem,” he gave her a curious look. “Are you in the witness protection program? Wanted by the mafia or something?”

She wasn't arrogant enough to assume that everyone knew who she was. "Not exactly," she said, then laughed when his face fell.

"Well, if I'm not going to get gunned down," he stuck out a hand. "I'm Theo."

She hesitated for a moment, then shook his hand. "Ella."

Since he didn't ask about the photo thing again, Ella convinced herself that it was okay to spend the rest of the day with Theo. Even when she became the focus of his lens again.

They'd just gotten off one of the rides. Her hair was a mess and her insides felt like mush, but she couldn't stop laughing.

"Shit, sorry. You, um, looked really happy, carefree," he said, lowering the camera when she stiffened. "Habit to capture beautiful things."

It was cheesy enough to belong in a chick flick, but it made her giggle, even more when he realized what he said and turned bright red.

"I mean- Not like- You are- But," he stammered.

She laughed harder, then surprised herself by saying, "I don't mind."

Theo's face lit up. "Seriously?"

In some part of her mind, she realized that if he was some kind of paparazzi in disguise, she had played right into his hand. But high on cotton candy and delirious from spinning tea cups, it was the last thing she wanted to consider.

Ella was having more fun than she expected. Theo, surprisingly, was into exchanging dares, or *tit for tat* as he called it. It was how she found herself trying fried butter, catching pneumonia while dressing up as a Vegas showgirl and doing horrible impressions of Taylor Swift.

It was all worth it, though, to watch him choke down a Pickle Popsicle, try on a French maid costume and butcher a One Direction song.

Okay, maybe she was a little cruel in her payback.

“She totally thought you were a creep!” Ella barely managed to say between her gasping laughs as she handed Theo his camera. They flopped onto the grass below a tree as they struggled to catch their breath. Since he had made her ride the spinning tea cups three times in a row and she’d scarcely managed through it without throwing up, she had dared him to sneak onto the kids only bouncy castle.

“I’m not surprised. It was me and a bunch of five year olds,” he replied. He lifted the camera to his face, catching her mid-laugh.

She took a minute to calm herself. “So, what got you into photography?”

“My dad was a war photographer,” he explained. “He was killed by a stray bullet a couple years back while he was documenting the Libyan crisis.”

Ella sucked in a deep breath. “I’m so sorry.”

“He was proud of what he did.” Theo gave her a faint smile. “He wanted me to try photography, so he left me a camera and a lesson book he wrote for me. I’m on the last lesson.”

“What’s it about?” she asked curiously.

“Focal points,” he said.

“Like the thing with the bag earlier?”

He nodded. “First photo I’ve taken where I got the right setting with the right subject and following the rule of thirds.”

She blinked. “Is it that hard?” She had never considered the other side of the camera more than occasionally snapping a cityscape photo to post on Instagram so her fans knew where she was.

“It’s one of the most important things,” Theo said with a shrug. “You can’t have a perfect photo without a perfect focal point.”

When Theo lifted his camera as they exited the carnival, Ella didn’t hesitate to stick out her tongue and make a face at him.

He laughed and lowered his camera to examine the newest photo. “Cute.”

It was strange, how comfortable she had grown with him taking pictures of her. She hadn’t felt so easy around a professional camera like his in a long time.

“It alright if I post a photo from today?” he asked, looking up.

Then, just like that – her good mood crashed and she struggled to maintain the smile on her face. “Yeah, it’s fine,” she replied, even as she thought of the PR disaster some of the photos he had might cause.

There was the video of her butchering one of Taylor’s songs that would definitely start a media war. Or the one from the costume booth that would anger the parents of her younger fans. Then there was the one where her glassy eyes would lead to the assumption that she was shooting up on drugs in her spare time.

“Hey,” he said, pressing a card into her hand. “That’s my photo blog. You should check it out when it’s up.”

No thanks, I'm sure I'll see it on some magazine soon enough, she thought. But it wasn't the inevitable backlash she'd get no matter what photo he posted that left the bitter taste in her mouth as she said goodbye. It was that the happiest day she'd had in a long time would be shared with the whole world.

But when days passed without an emergency meeting with her marketing team, or even so much as a scolding call from her agent, she got curious.

She pulled out the rainbow bag from its place of banishment in the back of her closet and found Theo's card.

After she typed in the address, she couldn't help closing her eyes before the page loaded. A million reasons ran through her head, each more ridiculous than the last.

He decided not to post a photo.

He lost his camera.

He fell off a cliff and died.

Before she began entertaining the idea of alien abduction, she forced herself to open her eyes.

And burst out laughing.

It wasn't her stuffing her face, or about to throw up, or half naked.

The focal point wasn't even her.

It was that hideous, tacky, *perfect* rainbow bag.