

[To save pagecount, this scene was condensed into a page and a half in the current Chapter 49. Some of the content survived, but some of the action changed.]

Chapter 49

The reception's in the *Stealing Beauty* gallery. We arrive fashionably late.

Other partiers are milling through the space, men in suits, women in cocktail dresses with hems directly proportional to their ages. The crowd skews older, as I'd expect for this kind of do; all the hot, trendy young things are somewhere the art is younger than they are. I'm probably in the lowest ten percent of the age range.

I swipe a pair of Champagne flutes off a passing tray and hand one to Julie.

She takes it like she owns it. She's slipped right back into Gillian's attitude. She's also slipped back into Gillian's wardrobe: a Carolina Herrera sheath, emerald green to her hips, then white to her knees, with contrasting brushstrokes in both color fields. It looks great on her, and I'd say that even if I didn't know exactly what was making all those curves in the dress.

She nibbles on the bubbly for a while as we drift through the exhibit. Julie's focused straight ahead, head up, her neck arched like Dorotea's. She's barely looked at me since she came out of her room. She's really good at the cold-shoulder thing. "Where's Ms. Carson?"

"Distracting the competition. Cousin Ron hasn't said anything about having people check up on us?"

"No. Is someone else really trying to steal Oma?"

"I have no idea. Carson says we're being watched, and I know better than to question her judgment."

"But you can question mine." The icicles rattle in her voice.

God, I hate this. "I'm sorry. I'll keep saying 'I'm sorry' until you hear me."

"You should keep saying it until I believe it. What's Gillian supposed to be doing now?"

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“She’s Gillian. She mingles.”

“What do you do?”

“I hang back and wait for her to call for me.”

Julie stops and turns to face me (finally). Her contacts have turned into kevlar. “That sounds about right. You should do that.” Then she swivels and strikes up a conversation with a fiftyish couple a few paces away.

Okay, I’m being put in my place. I guess I deserve it. The little voice that’s usually right says she’s overplaying it, but the voice I usually listen to says I hurt her and I’m scum.

So I trail along behind Julie as she works her way through the crowd. Fallbrook catches us in “Motherhood” and pumps her hand in both of his, burbling about how brilliant the new camera will be. I fade into the background like a good lackey and let Gillian charm him, which she does surprisingly well.

Me? I’m watching the photographer. He’s drifting through the crowd with a Mainwaring redshirt, snapping happy party animals. The security cameras are one thing—I’ve never seen a still from one that wasn’t a piece of shit—but a focused, well-lit, full-face color portrait is a whole other thing. Julie may not need to end up on the museum’s website, but I totally can’t afford the publicity. It turns into a dance, with me pivoting away from the front of his lens and Julie mastering the just-in-time head-turn.

I check my phone for the umpteenth time. After 7:30 and still no Carson. Is she pissed enough at me to hang me out to dry? I’d hoped we’d gotten past that, but...

It seems like it takes both forever and no time at all to get to Dorotea Tovorovsky’s there, of course.

Julie heads straight toward him. “Mr. Tovorovsky! How nice to see you again.”

After the air-kisses, Tovorovsky says, “Miss Hardwick, is a pleasant surprise. Or are you ‘Mrs. Hoskins’ still?” He’s done some research. I’ve got a bad feeling about this. At least the photographer’s back at the other end of the exhibit.

“I stopped using that name when I stopped living with that man. But please, call me Gillian.” She gives him a coy smile. “Are you guarding your painting, Mr. Tovorovsky?”

He shows his top teeth. It may be a smile, or he may be airing

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out his fangs. “Please, I am Arkady. Is it wrong to, as you say, guard my painting? You want to take it, perhaps?”

A rock drops into my stomach.

Julie makes a big show of peeking around him at Dorotea. She coos, “She’s so beautiful. I wouldn’t mind having her on my wall.”

Jesus, stop! Just stop!

Tovorovsky’s almost-smile doesn’t twitch. “I cannot allow that, of course.”

Julie sighs. “Well, it was worth a try.” She bats her lashes. Is she flirting with him?

He’s giving her the same look he did in the museum’s conference room, that I-know-you-from-somewhere question mark, all eyebrows and pursed lips. He taps the side of his index finger against his mouth. “Gillian.” *Geeleahn*. “You are familiar to me. We have met, yes?”

Julie puts her hands on her hips and gives him her *really?* look. “Of course we have. Six weeks ago? Gordon introduced us?”

He waves the finger. “No, no. Before, not here. I see you, I think. Where do I see you?”

Aw, shit. I’ve gotta get her out of here. The longer he looks at her, the sooner he figures out who she is. But how do I pry her away without making him more suspicious?

Julie goes into thinker pose—arm around her waist, elbow on her wrist, a finger propped against her cheekbone. “Hmm. Art Basel, maybe?” Gillian probably wouldn’t go to Art Basel, but Tovorovsky wouldn’t know that. Anyway, he shakes his head. “I know. Do you get *Town & Country*? It’s a magazine. I was in there once or twice when I was still married.”

Where’s this coming from?

Now Tovorovsky looks puzzled. “I... no, I do not read it.”

She waves his words away. “Oh, no one actually *reads* it. They just look at the pictures to see if anyone they know is in them.”

All right, this is over. I slide up behind Julie and whisper in her ear, “We’re outta here.”

Julie smiles at Tovorovsky. “Can you excuse me for a moment, Arkady?” Then she whispers to me, “Why? I’m having fun.”

“Any minute now, he’s going to recognize you. Then the fun’s over. Let’s go before that happens.”

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She gives me a flat stare. Then she sticks on a smile and holds her hand out to Tovorovsky. “Arkady, I’m so sorry, but someone’s looking for me. It’s been nice chatting with you again.”

Tovorovsky’s eyes flick from her to me and back again. He nods. “Of course. Is very good also to see you again.” He takes her hand in both of his. “Perhaps another time.”

“You never know.” She steals another peek at Dorotea. “Take good care of your painting. It’d make me sad if something happened to her.”

I haul her away while Tovorovsky watches. There’s a mix of confusion and amusement on his face, which makes him look a little less like a running-dog Putinista. Once we’re out of earshot, I growl at Julie, “Stop. Poking. The bear.”

“Someone has to do it.”

My phone buzzes before I can scrape up a reply. It’s Carson: Lobby.

We meet up with her at the exhibit’s start. Her fitted black cocktail dress isn’t nearly as extreme as the clingy blue jersey one in Milan, but it’s eye-catching anyway: knee-length, sleeveless (her arms are as chiseled as her calves), slit neckline. She’s a very healthy woman.

She drops her phone into her pleated black-satin clutch. “Took you two long enough.”

“They’d notice if we ran through the gallery.” I do the air-kiss thing with her for the benefit of the dozen or so people loitering around us. I whisper, “Lose them?”

“For now.”

We shadow Julie as she works the room, trying to keep her in the exhibit’s front half, far away from Tovorovsky, while we also try to stay behind the photographer. Julie shakes hands with people she hasn’t already schmoozed, chatting, gushing over the art.

I murmur to Carson, “What’s the plan?”

Carson’s eyes glance up every time we pass under a camera bubble. Maybe she’s counting them, or marking them. “She leaves at nine. Out the front, cameras see her go. Left.” We swivel to the left. A flash silhouettes us against the wall as the camera dude gets a great shot of our backs. “Princess drives to the hotel, changes, waits ‘til 11:30, comes back. We hit the stairwell at 8:45, go to the

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basement, cover 'til midnight.”

“Julie should go first. I had to stop her from baiting Tovorovsky. I don't trust her to stay away from him if we leave her unsupervised.”

Carson frowns. “Wonderful. Okay, she goes at 8:45, we go right after.”

“What happens at midnight?”

“Tell you later. Right.” Flash.

I score another couple Champagnes—my fourth—and pass one to Carson, who manages to not slam it. She's behaving herself, fitting in as well as she can given that she's taller than a few of the men and has more muscle than most of them. When we stop to admire a pretty Velasquez, Carson crosses her ankles and props her drink elbow on her forearm, just like half a dozen other women we've seen in the last few minutes.

The photographer finally wanders off. Carson cuts Julie out of the herd at 8:45. They stand closer than I thought they could without exploding and bend their heads together without head-butting each other, though they don't look happy. Carson discreetly slips car keys into Julie's hand. They have a brief stare-down, then Julie marches away toward the entrance. She doesn't even glance at me as she passes by. Now I *really* feel like shit.

Carson drifts over to me as she watches Julie stalk off. She grumbles, “You piss her off?”

“Yeah.” No point denying it.

She sighs. “She's taking the Beemer. Shadows'll follow her back to the hotel. She'll catch a cab to the Volvo later.”

The second car—the one I drove Julie here in—is a white Volvo station wagon. “How's the copy get here?”

“Already in the Volvo. Loaded it when the car showed up.”

“It's just sitting out there?” I have to fight to keep my voice down. All the things that could happen to Boutelle's forgery pile through my brain. “You better hope it doesn't get towed. Or stolen.” A thought hits me. “How'd you get it out of Julie's room?”

“Time for you to go. Take the stairs to the ground floor. Wait for me in the stairwell.”

“Where will—”

“Right behind. Go. It's real now.”