

Book One: Chapter Four

“Oooo! Here it is!” Katherine excitedly cooed as she dragged Julius into the newly opened art gallery.

Though its grand opening was still a week away it was open for business. Located along East Houston Street it enjoyed proximity to several other galleries and ensured a steady stream of curious visitors. His father might not have much experience when it came to art but he knew a good location so Julius was not surprised; however, it still didn’t explain why his father bought the art gallery in the first place.

He sighed. It had only taken a day for Katherine to recover from his father’s public rejection. Julius hated to admit it but she had some fortitude. She probably thought it earned her sympathy from him but he couldn’t care less, if she wanted to punish herself by irritating his father that was her business.

Julius glanced around him to distract himself from her irritatingly shrill voice. Gray Studio Gallery’s mission was to be the premiere proprietor of M. Gray’s work: both past as well as current. Gray’s new show was set to debut exclusively at this location and promised to garner quite the reception during its grand opening. It was rumored the illusive artist in question would even be making a personal appearance. No effort was spared to present a sophisticated atmosphere in the gallery including the rather odd addition of a grand piano.

Julius didn’t have an eye for art but as he looked at the various photographs his interest was piqued. There was something captivating in the compositions whether in color or in black and white. Lighting, angle and focus all harmonized to create subtle but intriguing moods. Images were raw when they were meant to provoke the viewer and soft where they meant to inspire. He could see why M. Gray was touted as a ground breaking artist. The praise was definitely earned.

“Excuse me, where is the gallery director?” Katherine inquired from one of the gallery’s personnel.

“She’s right over there,” the worker nodded to a woman dressed in a formal suit and skirt.

Katherine proceeded onward without as much as a thank you Julius was dragged along behind her as she maintained a grip on his arm. He was irritated being unable to study the photographs at his own pace. Reaching the woman she had been directed to Katherine loudly announced, “Hello! Are you the art director?”

“Curator,” the woman corrected with a forced smile. Her brown eyes studied Katherine with an undisguised look of disdain.

Though the gallery had yet to celebrate its grand opening she had already been inundated with several amateur art experts. Some came merely to ogle and some to haggle. A few of the more annoying ones insisted they knew the artist which should guarantee them a discount. Most wanted to add to their collections in an effort to prove they were on the cutting edge of the art scene not because they had any genuine appreciation for the artwork itself.

Having seen so many, the curator quickly placed the woman approaching her into the same superficial category. The man, she wasn’t quite certain about. He seemed to be reluctant to even be there though his gaze kept drifting to the artwork on display.

“I’m Sylvia Adwin. How can I help you?”

“We’re planning our wedding and I thought M. Gray could be our photographer. He would make it so magical!” Katherine announced in a rather loud voice hoping to impress the other patrons.

“I’m very sorry but Gray does not accept commissions.”

“Excuseme?” Katherine scoffed. “Our wedding will be the social event of the year! Gray should feel honored we even considered him. We’ll pay of course though he should do it for free!”

Sylvia grimaced, “Ma’am you see this picture…”

Katherine looked to see a black and white piece depicting a small tree alone in a plain of grass. The simple composition evoked loneliness, introspection and ultimately hope.

“...This piece is worth \$100,000 and we’ve sold three prints since we opened,” Sylvia said carefully letting her words sink in. “Gray is an artist...not some amateur photographer.”

“Why you...do you have any idea who I am?” Katherine demanded.

“No. And I don’t really care. This gallery was founded solely to showcase and promote Gray’s work. It is not an advertisement seeking employment. It is a celebration of someone’s unique artistic eye and style.”

“I suggest you drop the attitude,” Katherine warned. “I can have this whole place shut down like that!”

She snapped her fingers to reiterate her point. Katherine expected the curator to crumble and beg for forgiveness as most did. Instead she was met with an unperturbed stare as the curator said, “You are welcome to try.”

“What?” Katherine scowled.

“M. Gray does not accept commissions. If you insist, you are welcome to submit your request in person. Gray will be here for the grand opening but I can say with certainty the answer will be the same.”

“You haven’t heard the last from us. Right Julius?” Katherine turned only to find he had slipped away.

Blushing with embarrassment she rushed out of the gallery looking for him. The curator watched her go with an amused look. She had seen him slip away but he hadn’t headed outside. Curious she circled around one of the false walls to find Julius captivated by a series of black and white photographs.

The series consisted of six photographs. Each depicted a model, her torso only. In each photograph the model wore less and less clothing until in the final piece she was completely nude, her breasts covered only by her posed arm while the other cradled her large belly. The composition and slow removal of clothing were all in service to highlight her swelling abdomen. Beside each photograph was an ultrasound picture depicting the developing baby within courtesy of the Hôpital de Paris Beside the final photograph the ultrasound depicted two fetuses cradled together revealing the meaning of the series title: Two Hearts

“It’s an impressive series, isn’t it?” the curator asked standing beside him. “It’s one of Gray’s masterpieces, the first really.”

Julius nodded not taking his eyes off the final piece. Would Macey have looked like that in her final month? What would it have been like to hold her then? To know their baby was soon to emerge.

“People often make the mistake of thinking men have all the power but in truth woman do; after all, only a woman can create life.”

Slowly Julius’s raging thoughts calmed. Only then did he feel ready to return to work. Before he left he bought the entire Two Heartseries, only the third to do so from the gallery’s exclusive fifty print run.

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Augustus scowled as the meeting droned on. He glanced at his youngest son who seemed distracted but better composed than he had been the last few days. Glad Julius seemed a little more collected Augustus hadn’t complained when his son returned from lunch late pushing back the start of the bi-monthly, Board meeting. But because they started late they were now running long and he would miss a much anticipated arrival.

Giving Stephen a pointed look Augustus received a nod in return. Stephen extricated himself without anyone noticing his departure. That was the advantage of constantly shadowing his employer. People were used to ignoring him and thus no one marked his passage as he retreated to the garage where the company’s vehicle fleet was stored. Selecting one of the limos he headed out arriving at JFK an hour later.

Parking the limo in the pick-up area Stephen headed in. His gaze went to the board announcing arriving international flights then he headed to the Air Francecheck in area. The flight was on time and he didn’t have to wait long. Even customs seemed to be operating efficiently and soon the passengers were steadily streaming into the terminal.

Among them was a woman crowned with a mane of brilliant red curls. Her clothing was simple: jeans, tank top and denim jacket that hugged her trim form. She strode through the airport with confidence. Her confidence and serene expression caused many heads to turn as she dragged her wheeled carry-on containing her expensive camera equipment along. Trailing her was a set of twins.

Brother and sister, they were dressed in loose clothing comfortable for flying. The girl wore bedazzled jeans and a sweater with a unicorn on it while her brother wore a long-sleeved t-shirt with jacket. Both also wore a backpack in which their travel distractions and snacks for the flight were stored. They had no trouble keeping up with their mother’s even pace until they spotted a tall figure they were all too familiar with.

“Stephen!” the girl suddenly exclaimed before running forward dragging her brother along.

“Greetings Miss Aria, Master Caden,” Stephen smiled warmly at the exuberant twins.

“You talk so funny, Stephen,” the girl giggled.

Her brother said nothing but nodded in agreement. He was generally more reserved than his sister and often chose to remain silent. This usually meant his sister took the lead and sometimes it seemed she was just dragging him around but he was almost always in full agreement with her.

“Miss Macey,” Stephen greeted their mother.

“Really?” Macey smiled. “Stephen we’ve known each other over twenty years. How long are you going to keep addressing me so formally?”

“At least twenty more.”

She chuckled at his answer and earned a smile from him. Shadowing the DaLair patriarch meant Stephen came into contact with all sorts of nefarious and shameless characters. Macey was a breath of fresh air compared to all of them. He completely understood why Augustus cherished his daughter-in-law enough to defy his son.

“Where’s Grandpa Gus?” Aria asked.

“Unfortunately his meeting ran long and he could not be here,” Stephen apologized. “He looks forward to seeing you all tonight however.”

“Tonight?”

“He’s throwing a special party at the Baccarattonight. He’s hoping all of you will attend.”

“I don’t know,” Macey hesitated.

“Please mommy! Can we go? Can we?” the twins looked up at her with pleading gazes.

They had waited months to see their grandfather and, quite shamelessly, they enjoyed attending parties with their mother. They loved showing off their beautiful mother to everyone.

“I didn’t pack anything for a party.”

“Not a problem. Mister DaLair reserved you time at Sakso find some options,” Stephen announced.

“Of course he did,” Macey sighed.

“Please mommy!” Aria pleaded. “I like it when you wear pretty dresses!”

Macey hesitated a moment longer before admitting defeat, “All right. Let’s get our luggage first.”

Stephen escorted them to baggage claim and helped carry their five bags back to the car. Once they were situated in the limo he drove them directly to the store. Augustus hadn’t just arranged them time to shop but had in fact reserved the whole store for their exclusive use. Security stood outside the doors allowing Macey to shop unperturbed by other shoppers aside from her overly eager twins. The situation made Macey uncomfortable but she decided to roll with it. She knew from experience how overbearing Augustus could be when he wanted something but his heart was usually in the right place.

Sifting through the racks Macey eventually found one that piqued her interest. Taking it back to the changing room she emerged wearing the hunter green evening gown. It had a high neckline leaving her back and shoulders bare though it covered her chest. It fit her like a second skin hugging her curves and left very little to the imagination to despite its coverage. Its snug fit continued down her thighs before flaring out giving her legs freedom of movement.

Macey used an alligator clip to give herself an up-do similar to one she planned for the evening. Such gatherings had never been her favorite but she had learned styling her hair up and keeping it off her neck kept her much cooler and comfortable as the night progressed.

“Well, what do you think?” she looked to her children.

“You look just like a princess, mommy!” Aria exclaimed clapping her hands. She loved it when her mother dressed up.

Caden smiled equally pleased. In his mind no woman was more beautiful than his mother and it was important everyone agreed with him. Anyone who disagreed was clearly wrong.

“You two really like this one that much?” Macey laughed. “All right. I’ll get this one.”

“You might want a couple more,” Stephen reminded.

“Why?” Macey asked.

“Well there is the show at the end of the week and I imagine Mister DaLair might want to take you to other outings as well.”

Macey sighed. It wasn’t as if she didn’t anticipate this. Augustus was a caring if overbearing father-in-law. Being separated from family was not something he was used to or tolerated. He loved the twins and supported her through everything so she could hardly argue with him wanting to spend time with them.

“Mommy, do you think they have a dress for me to match yours?”

“You want to match me?”

“Yes!”

“We might have something close to that color,” the saleswoman said. “Shall we check?”

“Yeah!”

The saleswoman chuckled. When she originally learned the store had been reserved for a single shopper she had been apprehensive. Normally clientele capable of such a feat were unbearable, rude and obnoxious. But this trio politely, refreshing and adorable.

“What about me?” Caden asked. “I don’t want to wear a suit.”

He scowled. Caden hated formal events requiring clothing that was restrictive and uncomfortable. Well aware of his preference Macey smiled apologetically before saying, “I don’t think you need a suit sweetie. A pair of dress pants and a collared shirt should be more than enough.”

Caden brightened at the suggestion. That much he could do as long as the shirt wasn’t itchy. He took his mother’s elegant hand and followed her to the children’s section. When they found their suitable choices the kids disappeared into the changing room and emerged in their party clothes.

Aria wore a sleeved party dress. The top was a similar green to her mother’s gown and made of soft velvet. Her skirt was satin white layered with lace. Caden wore black dress pants with a white, button-up shirt. The shirt had green buttons which he liked since it also matched his mother and sister. It was cotton ensuring his comfort as well.

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As the trio modeled their party clothes for each other Katherine and her two closest friends marched toward the store entrance only for security to block her path. Startled Katherine backed a step then fury flashed in her eyes.

“What do you think you are doing?” she suddenly demanded.

“We’re sorry ma’am, but this store had been reserved by a private party,” one of the guards informed her.

“Excuse me?” Katherine scoffed. “Do you know who I am?”

The security officer didn’t answer. His orders were very simple. No one was to enter while the party currently inside the store remained. The actual time limit was nominal. If the shoppers took longer the patron who reserved the store promised to pay more thus ensuring they could shop in peace without interruption for as long as they wanted.

Katherine took out her phone. “If you refuse to be reasonable I’ll just have to call my father. He’ll have you fired. Are you sure you can handle that?”

“I’ll be fine, ma’am,” the guard informed her. “Are you sure you can handle the consequences?”

Katherine felt her face warm as she angrily dialed her father. As soon as he answered she began her tirade, “Daddy! I’m outside Saksand they won’t let me in! They say the store has been reserved but this is the only time I can get my dress!”

“Okay, okay,” her father sighed with slight irritation for being called out of his meeting. “Let me call the store.”

Katherine waited impatiently tapping her foot as the minutes ticked by. The security personnel remained unperturbed. Just when she was out of patience her father finally returned to her.

“Come back to the store later.”

“What! But daddy I need my dress now!”

“Leave it and come back later!” her father yelled. “We can’t afford to irritate the client who reserved the store!”

“But...”

“No buts!” her father hung up and Katherine was left without recourse. This was the second time she was left without satisfaction. After complaining about the rude curator she berated her father to have them fired only to be met with much the same excuse.

There were only a handful of people capable of reserving an entire store and a select few of those had the clout to ensure no interference. If she was on better terms with Augustus DaLair she could enjoy the same preferential treatment but she dared not even call Julius after the debacle at the gallery. He made no effort to assist her in securing their photographer and then disappeared without a word.

“Come on!” Katherine snapped at her waiting entourage. “Let’s go!”

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