



Caught in His Gilded World (Harlequin Presents)

By Lucy Ellis

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The show must go on...

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Though he admires her passion, Khaled believes Gigi is just another gold digger. But when her attempts to get his attention are caught on camera, the powerful Russian must usher Gigi into his world.

With Gigi at his side, Khaled's womanizing reputation is down and his stock is up! But how long can he keep this free-spirited bird in his gilded cage?

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Caught in His Gilded World (Harlequin Presents) By Lucy Ellis Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #393168 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-12-01
- Released on: 2015-12-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lucy Ellis has four loves in life: books, expensive lingerie, vintage films and big, gorgeous men who have to duck going through doorways. Weaving aspects of them into her fiction is the best part of being a romance writer. Lucy lives in a small cottage in the foothills outside Melbourne.

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'Gigi, get down from there. You're going to break your neck!'

Suspended two metres in the air, gripping the stage curtain between the tensed toes of her feet and using her slender muscled arms to propel herself upwards, Gigi ignored the commentary and made quick work of scaling the curtains alongside the four-metre-high fish tank. It was the same tank in which she would be swimming tonight, in nothing more than a G-string and a smile, with two soporific pythons: Jack and Edna. That was if she didn't get fired first.

The ladder, which would have made this easier, had been folded away, but she was used to shimmying up ropes. She'd been doing it from the age of nine in her father's circus. The velvet stage curtains were a doddle in comparison.

Now for the hard part. She grabbed hold of the side of the tank with one hand and swung a leg over, straddling the ledge and locking herself in place.

There was an audible sigh from below.

When Susie had yelled, 'Kitaev's in the building—front of house, stage left,' pandemonium had broken loose. While the other girls had reached for their lipstick and yanked up their bra straps, Gigi had eyed the tank and, remembering its superb view once you were up there, hadn't hesitated.

Susie had been right on the money, too. Down below, among the empty tables and chairs, deep in conversation with theatre management, was the man who held their future in his powerful hands, surrounded by an entourage of thugs.

Gigi's eyes narrowed on those thugs. She guessed when you were the most hated man in Paris it helped to have minders.

Not that he appeared to need them. His back was to the stage but she could tell his arms were folded because

his dark blue shirt was plastered across a pair of wide, powerful shoulders and a long, equally sculpted torso.

The man looked as if he broke bricks with a mallet for a living, not cabarets.

'Gigi, Gigi, tell us what you can see? What does he look like?'

Big, lean and built to break furniture.

And that was when he turned around.

Gigi stilled. She'd seen pictures of him on the internet, but he hadn't looked like *that*. No, the photographs had left that part out... The *I've just stepped off a boat from a nineteenth-century polar expedition, during which I hauled boats and broke ice floes apart with my bare hands* part.

A beard as dark and wild as his hair partially obscured the lower portion of his face, but even at this distance the strong bone structure, high cheekbones, long straight nose and intense deep-set eyes made him classic-film-star gorgeous. His thick, glossy and wavy inky hair was so long he'd hooked some of it back behind his ears.

He looked lean and hungry and in need of civilising—and why that should translate into a shivery awareness of her own body wasn't something Gigi wanted to investigate right now as she wobbled, gripping the side of the tank.

Not when she had to talk to him and make him listen.

He wasn't going to listen. He looked as if he would *devour* her.

Self-preservation told Gigi that a smart girl would shimmy back down the curtain and mind her own business.

'What's happening?' called up Lulu, who clearly wasn't able to mind her own business either, because she had climbed onto an upturned speaker below and was tugging on Gigi's ankle.

'I don't know,' Gigi called back. 'Give me a minute—and stop pulling at me, Lulu Lachaille, or I really will fall.'

Chastened, Lulu let go, but there was an answering hum of protest from below.

'You're not a monkey, G. Get down!'

'She thinks she's made of rubber. If you fall, Gigi, you won't bounce!'

'Gigi, tell us what you can actually see! Is it really him?'

'Is he as gorgeous as he looks in all the photos?'

Gigi rolled her eyes. At least Lulu understood that this man was not going to take his winnings seriously. But the other girls—poor fools—didn't see it that way. They were all operating under the belief that a rich guy in want of entertainment would scoop up a lucky showgirl and whisk her away to a life of unlimited shopping.

Probably alerted by all the noise, Kitaev looked up.

His attention shot to the aquarium so fast she barely had time to think. Certainly it was too late to draw herself back behind the curtain.

His gaze fastened on her.

It was like being slammed into a moving object at force. There was a buzzing in Gigi's ears and suddenly her balance didn't seem as reliable as it had been a moment ago.

She made a little sound of dismay as her belly slipped a few notches from her holding place atop the aquarium.

He was looking up at her now, as if *she* was what he had come to see.

Gigi slipped another inch and grappled for purchase.

Then two things happened at once.

He frowned, and Lulu gave an extra-hard tug on her ankle.

Gigi knew the moment she lost her balance because there was nothing she could do to save herself other than prepare for the fall. And with a little gasp she came tumbling down.

* * *

It was possible Khaled would never have known he owned this little piece of Montmartre if someone had not got hold of a list of Russian-owned properties in Paris and published them. Apparently it was fine to buy up significant real estate in the Marais and down south on the Riviera, but touch one of Paris's cabarets and lo and behold you were the most hated man in the city.

Not that Khaled paid attention to what other people thought of him. He'd learned that lesson many years ago, as the son of a Russian soldier who had destroyed his mother's life and brought shame on her family.

Growing up among people who shunned him had formed on him a tough hide, along with the ability to use his fists—although nowadays he was more likely to use his power and influence in a fight—and the wherewithal to take nothing personally.

'Emotional detachment' a woman he'd briefly dated had called it. All skill, but no heart.

Detachment had served him well. Wallowing in emotion probably would have got him killed before he was twenty in the part of the world he came from. He had grown up fast and hard and had survived because of it. Then he had flourished in the bear pit that was the Moscow business world. He knew how to get what he wanted and he didn't let sentiment cloud his reasoning.

What made him a bad bet for a woman looking to nest sent the stock prices of his companies regularly soaring. Not that he was uninterested in women. He had a healthy interest in the species—although the turnover had recently stopped. It wasn't down to emotional emptiness, or an absence of libido, but sheer boredom at the lack of challenge.

He was a hunter. It was intrinsic to his nature to take up a scent, to track, to chase, to make the kill.

Then he got bored.

He had been bored for a long time. Months now. Then he looked up.

What in *hell* was that?

When a man stepped inside one of Paris's famous cabarets he was primarily looking to see that most legendary of creatures: a Parisian showgirl.

Long-legged, alluring, topless.

That wasn't what he was looking at.

Granted, he'd been living in tents, yurts and huts for the past six weeks, bathing in rivers, eating out of cans and off the carcasses of what they could kill. A hallucination involving a woman might well be the result—although he doubted this was what his mind would come up with. Because he'd swear he'd just got a glimpse of a knobby-kneed Tinker Bell in an animal print leotard, perched on top of the tank in which he'd been told a beautiful semi-naked showgirl would be swimming tonight—with pythons.

Almost before he could account for what he was seeing, the curious apparition vanished as suddenly as she'd appeared, followed by a thump and vague female shrieks.

'Do you want to check that out?' he asked of the two Danton brothers, both of whom were clearly sweating bullets over his unannounced appearance.

Neither man moved.

'The girls are in rehearsal,' said Martin Danton nervously, as if that explained everything.

His security detail looked around, clearly expecting all twenty-four luscious Bluebirds to come can-canning across the empty stage.

'Would you like to see a rehearsal?' Jacques Danton volunteered, catching hold of the shift in male attention eagerly. A little too eagerly.

The two Frenchmen who managed the place were nervous as cats on a hot tin roof—as well they might be. Although Khaled suspected their nerves were nothing more than a natural response to having their shaky business practices put under the microscope.

'My lawyers will be in touch today,' he informed them calmly. 'I want to take a look at how the place is doing.'

'We're a Parisian institution, Mr Kitaev!' they chorused.

'So the French media have hammered home all week,' he replied, with the same measured calm. 'But it's a business, and I like to know how all my businesses are doing.'

Frankly, he wouldn't be here now if the press hadn't exploded last week with spurious accusations that he was the equivalent of the Russian Army—marching on Paris, ripping up its pretty boulevards and despoiling French culture. Turning their city into Moscow-by-the-Seine.

All because he'd won a cabaret in a card game.

Now, having pretty much run his eye over what was making it difficult for him to move around the city without security, he was ready to organise its disposal.

He had meetings lined up this afternoon, so L'Oiseau Bleu's time was almost up.

There was an interruption as a winsome girl with a mop of dark curls stuck her head through the curtain.

'Jacques...' she whispered.

The older man frowned. 'What is it, Lulu?'

'There's been an accident.'

'What sort of accident?'

'One of the girls has hit her head.'

With a Gallic gesture of acceptance, Jacques Danton muttered something that sounded like, 'Zhee-zhee,' and excused himself, pounding up onto the stage and into the wings.

Khaled's gaze flickered to the empty tank, towering over the stage. He still wasn't sure what it was he'd seen but he was interested in finding out.

He moved and his security team swarmed up onto the stage with him.

'I don't really think this is a good idea,' protested Martin Danton as he mobilised himself behind them, exhibiting the first bit of backbone Khaled had seen in either man.

He and his brother had been managing the cabaret for some fourteen years, according to the records. Managing it into the ground, Khaled suspected.

He made his way behind the curtains and through a jungle of stage props, stepping over various crates and boxes, and ducking overhanging cords and wires that probably constituted health and safety risks that would close the place down.

When he saw her she was lying sprawled on the stage floor.

Jacques Danton was ignoring her in favour of remonstrating with the little brunette. It had the effect on Khaled that all the mismanagement and blundering about hadn't yet delivered. He shouldered the Frenchman out of the way and went to her aid.

Hunkering down, he discovered that on closer inspection, despite her eyes remaining closed, he could see her delicate eyelids twitching.

His mouth firmed.

Little faker.

Looking up, he judged the height and recognised that although she'd fallen she couldn't have done much damage.

On cue, a clutch of other Lycra-clad, giggling, whispering twenty-something female dancers closed in around him. Khaled had had a similar experience only days ago, in the highlands of the Caucasus with a herd of jeyran gazelles. One minute he'd been naked, waist-deep in a clear stream, the next he'd been surrounded by knobby-kneed deer intent on drinking their fill.

He looked around to note that his security team appeared as bemused as he was feeling.

What were they going to do? Tackle them?

Obviously he'd been set up, and this was a stunt to get him backstage. But the girls appeared as harmless as the deer. He looked down at the one gazelle who'd separated herself from the herd. She lay there, unnaturally still, but those eyelids gave her away, twitching at high speed as if she'd attached a jump lead to them.

He pressed back one of the delicate folds. 'Can you hear me, *mademoiselle*?'

'Her name is Gigi.' The curly-haired brunette had crouched down opposite him and supplied the name helpfully.

He was in Montmartre, in a shabby, past-its-use-by-date cabaret, with a cast of showgirls whose cities of origin ranged from Sydney to Helsinki to London—hardly any of them were actually French. Of *course* her name was Gigi.

He didn't believe it for a second.

As if sensing his scepticism, she swept up her thick golden lashes with astonishing effect. A pair of blue eyes full of lively intelligence above angular cheekbones met his. Grew round, startled, and bluer than blue.

The colour of the water in the Pechora Sea.

He should know—he'd just flown in from it.

He watched as the points in her face—a gorgeous Mediterranean nose, a wide pink mouth and a pointed chin, all framed by wild red hair—seemed to coalesce around those same eyes.

His chest felt tight, as if he'd been kicked under the ribs.

She sat up on her elbows and fixed him with those blue eyes.

'Who are you? *Qui etes-vous*?' Her accent happily butchered the French with the sing-song cadence of Ireland blurred with something a little more international.

Qui etes-vous?

His question exactly.

He straightened up to assert a little dominance over her and settled his hands lightly on his lean muscled hips.

'Khaled Kitaev,' he said simply.

There was a ripple of reaction.

'Ladies...' he added. But he didn't take his eyes off Red as he calmly offered her his hand, and when she hesitated he leaned in and took what he wanted.

Gigi had been falling professionally since she was nine years old, but that hadn't prevented her flailing backwards and striking her head and her tailbone on the stage boards. She was currently seeing two hands and was not sure which one to take.

'Get up!' Jacques was hissing at her like a goose.

The option was taken out of her hands by Kitaev, who plucked her effortlessly off the ground and deposited her on her feet in front of him. Only the room swayed and her legs weren't co-operating.

It didn't help either that she now found herself in the invidious position of having to tilt her head back even though she was five eleven—because he was *that* big—and he was standing far too close...looking at her.

Boy, oh, boy, the way he was looking at her!

Gigi blinked rapidly to clear her vision.

Sometimes men looked at you as if all they wanted was to see you naked. Gigi accepted this as an occupational hazard even if she hated it. Sometimes they made unwanted and sleazy advances, but she'd learned to combat those too.

This man wasn't doing any of those things. His eyes weren't desperate, greedy, pulling at her admittedly ratty leotard as if seeing her naked was all he cared about.

No, this man's eyes held intent. They said something else entirely. Something no man had ever promised her. He was going to strip her naked and pleasure her body as she'd never been pleased before. And then he was going to take her job and bin it.

'You can't do that!' Gigi blurted out.

'Do what, *dushka*?' He spoke lazily, in a deep Russian accent, as if he had all the time in the world.

There was a titter among the other girls.

'Whatever it is you have planned...' Gigi's voice trailed off, because it didn't sound as if either of them were talking about the cabaret.

'At the moment,' he responded, with a flicker of something certainly beyond her experience in those dark and

distant eyes, 'not much besides lunch.'

The laughter around them drowned out any response—which was just as well, because it didn't take much imagination to see that this man had absolutely no interest in anything here—and Gigi felt her initial frustration build once more.

He didn't care what happened to this place. The other girls didn't care. They *would* care, however, when they didn't have jobs.

But it wasn't just about losing a job. This was her *home*.

The anguish that pulled through Gigi like an undertow was real. It was the only place she had ever felt she really belonged since her mother's sudden death had upended her safe, secure world.

She'd served her time with her father until she'd been able to make her leap across the Channel onto the stage boards of what had seemed then to be a dream job.

Although, to be honest, if you'd asked her last week about her job she would have rolled her eyes and complained about the hours, the pay and the lousy chorie.

The Moulin Rouge, it wasn't.

Users Review

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