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Opening Extract from...

Gallery Girl

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Chapter 1

Below the glitter of chandeliers in the ornate room, starved cheekbone hit surgeried temple as fake air kiss met fake air kiss. Celebrities and socialites had fought capped tooth and tipped nail – and that was just the men – to be in the very front, on the row of gilded and red-velvet-cushioned seats that would provide the closest view.

But the front-row seats had gone to the most powerful people in the business: the market-makers, the movers and shakers. This row of billionaires, collectors and connoisseurs, men in the main but with a sprinkling of women, were noticeably less animated than those behind them. They exchanged a few nods, a few measured words, but their eyes were suspicious, their jaws were set. They clenched their catalogues and paddles with whitened knuckles. For them alone, this was a competition, and only one of them would win.

At the front, shining brilliantly, was their prize. Mounted in the centre of the platform, before a specially contrived mirror background designed to deepen its dazzle,

the about-to-be-auctioned artwork flashed tantalisingly, turning slightly in the eddies of warm air.

Protheseus Bound consisted of five prosthetic limbs, bandaged, sprayed gold and hung along a gold-sprayed plastic washing line.

The artist behind this creation was nowhere to be seen. Rumours as to his whereabouts swept the crowd from time to time, like the wind sending ripples across the surface of the sea. He was the guest of royalty. He was sailing with a megastar. He was on location. He was staying away deliberately; a modest man, he was shunning publicity. This last rumour was the only one that no one believed.

The event was ticketed, strictly for registered bidders, but soon so oversubscribed that a satellite room had to be set up across the hallway. Here, women with beige hair and high cheekbones milled around with slim, smart men smelling of expensive aftershave.

Now the master of ceremonies appeared and a hush fell on the room. You could have heard a Van Cleef tiepin drop, or a Tiffany diamond cocktail ring bury itself in the red plush of the carpet.

Every eye was on the distinguished figure taking up his position behind the pulpit-like wooden rostrum bearing the auction house logo. He was a man whose very presence signalled, resoundingly clearly, that this was an art event of supreme importance.

Master auctioneer Jeremy Silk did not, after all, bring his gavel down on just anything. He presided only over sales which achieved into the millions. With his trademark tall figure, saturnine looks and laid-back cool, he

was almost as much of a pull as the pieces he was selling.

Jeremy was a master of rostrum theatricals. When things really got going, he danced round his pulpit like Carlos Acosta, and the way he crinkled his eyes regularly got excited female collectors bidding beyond their better judgement. His smile, it was said, could melt credit cards.

Today, as usual, he was impeccably pin-striped, side-parted and signet-ringed. His hand-made leather shoes shone like mirrors. Every aspect of his appearance had been carefully choreographed, even the inside of his suit. Especially the inside of his suit. The inside of his suit was Jeremy's sartorial tour de force. As the bidding hit the first million, he liked to mark the event with a flash of bright satin lining. It never failed to send the crowds wild.

Turning his sharp, elegant profile to the side, Jeremy now cast an eye over the brigade of assistants surrounding him on the platform. It was a look that the maestro of an orchestra might sweep over his musicians before raising his baton.

Outwardly calm, each assistant betrayed tics of tension. The suave young men with laptops, in charge of fielding internet bidders, blinked and licked their lips. The peach-skinned girls handling the phone bids, slender in black miniskirts and high heels, nervously tucked thick strands of glossy black hair behind shell-like ears.

Jeremy's dark brows drew together in a slight frown. He twisted his long, sensual lips. Were there as many girls as there should be? Wasn't one missing? Augusta? He remembered her earlier, struggling to connect to a client in the British Virgin Islands. It turned out that she hadn't switched on her mobile.

These girls were so dim. Pretty, but dim. An advance bid for a million had come through on Ariadne's phone, but she had confused the noughts and told him it was ten thousand. However, punters expected to see glamorous babes in high heels manning telephones, and so, Jeremy knew, he was stuck with them.

The giant screen behind him, which would flash up the bids as they came in in five separate currencies, lit up. USD, CHF, GBP, euro, rouble.

Where the hell *was* Augusta? Behind his calm mask, Jeremy was infuriated. Besides the small matter of her handling the Moscow bids, he liked his assistants ranged symmetrically on both sides, like the backing band they effectively were. Hugo, Milo and Romeo were on his left with their laptops, but on the right there was still only Ariadne and Anastasia.

Jerking suddenly backwards in a manner that would have had his Harley Street osteopath rolling his eyes, Jeremy beckoned Hugo. 'Tell someone to bloody well find Augusta,' he snarled.

Jeremy allowed a few minutes for the search, during which he smiled and nodded at the front row, the regular bidders. They smiled and nodded back, aware of the value of the acknowledgement in such circumstances. The art world rumour was that Jeremy Silk's levels of greeting were calibrated to what you had spent last time round. A million got you a nod, two million a nod and a smile. Five million and over got the full Silk monty: a nod and a smile plus a lean over the rostrum and a murmured word.

Working his way along the front row, Jeremy reached a

well-preserved blonde with Ivana Trump hair and a white Chanel suit.

He smiled, nodded and bent forward. 'Mrs Klumpp. Delighted to see you here,' he murmured.

The blonde's face remained expressionless, although she inclined her head and revealed, somewhat stiffly, a set of very white and very level teeth. Jeremy was experienced enough in the art of high-society facial deciphering to recognise that on anyone less Botoxed, this would be the broadest of smiles.

Mrs Herman T. Klumpp III, to use her full title, regularly spent millions of her husband's billions pursuing her interest in seeming interested in contemporary art. Along with a handful of others at the same exalted financial level, Fuchsia helped keep the art galleries and auction houses of London standing, not to mention those in Geneva and New York.

All good news for Jeremy, who had a serious vintage wine habit and a third home in Tuscany after the first and second in Chelsea and St Mawes. Currently the Tuscany place needed reroofing, and there was an Aston Martin he had his eye on as well.

He wondered if the rumours were true about Fuchsia Klumpp unfastening articles of clothing in lieu of waving her bidding paddle. Surely not. No one he knew personally had ever seen it; Fuchsia, despite being a legend in London auction rooms, at auction rooms throughout the world in fact, rarely appeared in them. Collectors at her level seldom materialised bodily, preferring to send a functionary to do the hard work of sitting and bidding.

The fact that she was here today seemed, Jeremy felt, to

confirm the art world's favourite long-standing rumour. That Fuchsia was conducting a passionate affair with the artist whose false legs now dangled tantalisingly before them all.

Behind him, Hugo murmured something. The search for Augusta, Jeremy gathered, had proved fruitless. Before him, the crowd was getting restive. The big gold clock at the back of the hall had passed eleven. In the front row, one hand patting her immaculate blonde up-do, Fuchsia Klumpp's spiked red heels were tapping with silent impatience on the carpeted floor.

The show, Jeremy recognised, had to go on. Well, Ariadne would just have to manage Moscow as well. There was no chance of Anastasia doing it: she thought CHF was something to do with China, not the Swiss franc, and imagined KFC was a unit of international currency.

He muttered the new instruction, then, maestro-like, raised his long, well-kept hands. The crowd, who had begun to murmur amongst themselves, instantly quietened down.

'My lords, ladies and gentlemen, welcome,' Jeremy began in his trademark tone – drawling, patrician and with a suggestion of amusement. 'Without further ado, Lot One.'

He raised manicured eyebrows roguishly at the front row. 'We start the bidding at one million. I have a telephone bid for one million.'

Gasps and cheers from the crowd. The screen behind him rippled with figures. Seeing the expectant eyes upon him, Jeremy lost no time obliging with his party trick. Deftly unbuttoning the front of his suit with one

practised hand, he jerked out an equally practised hip. Out swirled the side of his jacket, revealing a flash of tangerine silk lining. There was a roar of applause.

Jeremy raised his hands again. Immediately the applause died down, to be replaced by respectful silence. 'One million I'm bid. One million, two hundred and fifty thousand I'm asking . . .' He looked confidently round, revelling in the familiar feeling of being utterly in control, of having the crowd eating out of his hand.

His control wavered as he saw, below him, Fuchsia Klumpp casually unfastening the topmost of the many large gold buttons on her jacket and then fixing him with her eye. Jesus H. It was true!

Jeremy forced himself to concentrate. 'Thank you, Mrs Klumpp, for that bid.' He was always scrupulously polite. It added, he felt, the all-important personal touch. 'Three million two hundred and fifty thousand I'm bid. Three million five hundred thousand I'm asking . . .'

'Come on! *Come on!* Get your fucking wallets out!'

The impassioned growl came from some thirty feet above the Silk rostrum. Up here, unbeknown to the crowd below, the star of the show had concealed himself in a cubbyhole set behind the mouldings of the classical frieze running round the top of the main room.

From the tiny room's grille window, cunningly hidden among the Greek plaster crests, he had a grandstand view. He looked down on the excited crowd, on *Prostheseus Bound*, on the screens of the laptops, on Fuchsia Klumpp and on Jeremy Silk, who, from this angle, could be clearly seen to have a bald spot.

The artist shook back his long, straight, Apache-black hair and curled his lip, amused. He had no love for Silk. He loathed the auctioneer's ludicrous showboating, but not as much as he loathed the cut Silk's auction house took from sales. Given the publicity they got for an event like this, the artist thought, *he* should be bloody charging *them*.

As for Fuchsia, his patron and mistress, he'd like to see her put her money where her mouth was, or had recently been. Surprising, he thought, how groomed she looked now compared to the gasping, grinding, greedy cat she had been only an hour ago. It helped to have a personal hairdresser and stylist on tap at all times, of course.

'Ohhhhh. Mmmmmm.' Something warm and naked moved beneath him.

The artist blinked. In contemplation of the scene below, he had almost forgotten what he was engaged in up here, but then he had always been able to compartmentalise. The particular compartment to which he now returned his attention was an attractive, dark-haired young woman rubbing her naked body suggestively up against his.

The extent of his own undressing had been to pull open the fly of his skin-tight black jeans; now, rubbing her dark nipples with the heels of his hands, he thrust powerfully between the slender white thighs wrapped around his black-denimed buttocks.

'Oh! Ooohhhhhh!' Her head was flung back, her short black dress, ripped summarily off – he couldn't remember if by her or by him – flung on the dusty floor a few feet away.

‘I shouldn’t be doing this,’ she gasped. ‘I’m supposed to be down there. Working.’ She tossed her shining hair in the direction of the scene below and gave a snorting, rather horsey laugh.

‘You’re doing a great job up here,’ the artist grunted. Probably better than what she would have done down there. He’d found her in a back room before the auction had begun, trying cluelessly to set up some telephone link. The sight of her bottom, tightly clad in black, had provided the answer to what to do with the excess of testosterone which the prospect of a sale sent coursing through him. It had been the work of a moment to persuade her upstairs.

She was laughing horsily again. He tried to remember what her name was. Anastasia? Augusta? Aurora? A roarer was about the size of it. He was famously hot stuff in bed, but he had never heard anyone make this much noise.

‘You’re fantastic,’ groaned the girl, her eyes closed in ecstasy as he thrust into her again.

No, it wasn’t Aurora. It was something else. Augusta? What did it matter; these auction-house girls were all the same. All girls everywhere were the same. Available. When you were the bad boy of the British art scene with the looks, money and success to go with it, no one ever said no.

Silk’s assured voice drawled its way upwards. ‘Four million I’m bid. Four million, two hundred and fifty thousand I’m asking . . .’

‘Mmmmmmm,’ gasped Aurora/Augusta/whoever/who cared. ‘Amazing. No one’s ever done this before.’

He wondered briefly what was amazing her. His

technique, or the money being offered for his art? They were both pretty mind-blowing, it had to be said.

‘Five million I’m bid . . .’

‘Uhhhh. Ooohhhhh!’ Her fingers dug into his back. Her heels were excitedly bashing the sides of his calves. What did she think he was, a bloody horse?

The tension in the hall below matched the acceleration of pace in the storeroom. Jeremy was whirling his orange lining like a toreador as the bidding started to exceed even his wildest expectations. One by one the front row had dropped out, as had, to Jeremy’s fastidious relief, the spoddish man in the creased raincoat in the third row who had repeatedly stuck up his paddle as if asking the teacher if he could go to the toilet.

People were jostling excitedly, although in the main being careful not to wave their numbered paddles too animatedly. That could be an expensive business.

In fact, the only paddle moving was in the front row, attached to another well-known billionaire art collector, a large, dishevelled man in a loose white shirt. He was battling it out with Fuchsia Klumpp’s Chanel buttons and a third party on the other end of Ariadne’s phone whose identity was strictly secret.

‘Eight million I’m bid, eight million two hundred and fifty I’m asking . . .’ exclaimed Jeremy in disbelief, his famous cool rapidly evaporating. He had expected three million, tops, for *Prostheseus Bound*.

‘Yes, no . . . yes, no?’ he pressed. ‘Mrs Klumpp, are you out?’

Fuchsia Klumpp was not out, although she was certainly half out of her jacket. And while she wasn’t,

strictly speaking, Jeremy's type, there was no doubt her method was distracting.

Upstairs, the artist thrust again into the melting loins of his conquest. The white thighs clasped tighter about him. 'You've got a good grip,' he muttered into her hot, sticky neck.

'Pony Club,' she gasped, grasping the front of his black mesh vest like reins. For a moment he staggered to keep upright in his high-top, thick-soled, unlaced black trainers.

'Nine million I'm bid . . .'

There was a roar of applause as, downstairs, Jeremy Silk removed his jacket altogether. Another cheer greeted the loosening of his tie. 'Come on, Jeremy! Get 'em off!' shouted a large, overexcited lady in orange who evidently cherished the hope that he would strip completely. For his part, seeing Fuchsia now extend a stick-like leg and shake off one very high, spiked red heel, Jeremy hoped very much that *she* wouldn't.

'Ten million . . .'

The boys at the laptops were practically bouncing in their seats. The girls' lips moved fast against the telephones.

The crowd's cheers gathered strength as the numbers drove upwards. As the eleven million mark was passed, they gave a visceral roar. The room was febrile, volatile. It felt as if it could explode at the application of a lighted match.

'Twelve million I'm bid,' gasped Jeremy. It was his finest professional hour, but he was beginning to wonder if he would personally survive it. He must, though. He

could not go down in history as expiring at the sale of five gold false legs, however much of an auction record they had set.

In the room upstairs, the girl was lashing her head from side to side, whipping the artist's face with her hair.

'*Thirteen* million . . .' The man in the white shirt had dropped out. It was now Fuchsia Klumpp's buttons versus Ariadne's man of mystery.

'Oh! Oh!' Upstairs, she was bucking and thrashing beneath him. Pony Club was right. He was the rider. She was the horse. He was riding this whole damn thing, this whole auction room.

'*Fourteen* million . . .'

The artist ground into the girl. She was bouncing against him and making a neighing noise.

'*Fifteen* million . . . thank you, Mrs Klumpp.' With a teasing circle of the button with her red-tipped fingernail, Fuchsia pulled the jacket open. Jeremy's eyes skated over a bony ribcage and a very small red lace bra.

In the cubbyhole, the girl shrieked. Downstairs, the crowd roared; clapping, stamping, wanting more.

'*Sixteen* million from the telephone,' gasped Jeremy, as Ariadne nodded her glossy head. He, who never perspired, who smelled always of Trumper's West Indian Limes, was now breaking into a muck sweat. He yanked at the buttons of his shirt.

'That's the stuff!' shouted the woman in orange.

Upstairs, he drove into her. Deeply, powerfully, savagely. She rose in ecstasy. Downstairs, the crowd yelled. Mrs Klumpp extended the other leg and shook off the second shoe.

‘*Seventeen* million from Mrs Klumpp . . . do I hear eighteen million?’ Jeremy groaned. He was certain of the Aston Martin now. But would he live to drive it?

Upstairs, the artist’s bottom was a leather-clad blur. Sweat poured from him. Downstairs, Mrs Klumpp pushed her skirt up a thin thigh to reveal cream suspenders.

‘*Eighteen* million from the telephone.’ Jeremy Silk was mopping his streaming brow. ‘Do I hear . . .’ He could hardly think of the figure.

Pony Club was shrieking; her cries mingled with the noise from the crowd below.

‘*Nineteen* million from Mrs Klumpp . . .’ As the thin, red-tipped fingers rolled the other stocking off, Jeremy feared he was going to burst. His heart drummed. He could feel the veins pulsing on his forehead. Surely it could not go on much longer? Fuchsia Klumpp was practically undressed . . .

Oh, but damn it, it could. Ariadne was nodding. ‘Nineteen million five hundred thousand from our telephone bidder . . .’

Upstairs, the artist gathered his flagging strength for one last push. Pony Club bucked and shuddered beneath him. Downstairs, the auctioneer saw Mrs Klumpp start to unbutton her skirt.

‘*Twenty million*,’ he yelled. ‘All done at *twenty million*. A record for this artist at auction.’

‘*Oh Christ* . . .’ Upstairs, with the smack of Jeremy’s gavel against the desk, the artist released himself in a long, sweet, hot, triumphant rush.

Jeremy raised his shaking hands. Immediately the noise subsided.

‘My lords, ladies and gentlemen,’ the auctioneer gasped. ‘May I offer my humblest congratulations. Not only to Mrs Klumpp, who placed the winning bid, but to every one of you. Here, today, you have seen history in the making. You witness a landmark moment for contemporary art. A record sum for this artist, indeed for this auction house, has been achieved. *Protheseus Bound* by Zeb Spaw. Sold for twenty million pounds!’