

## Prelude

*Christie's Auction Rooms, Rockefeller Plaza, NYC, 2005*

The sculpture was coming up; it was five lots away, about 15 minutes to go, Felix calculated, looking over at the tall, steel-haired auctioneer standing on the podium, the screen above him showing Lot 18 – a work by Gerhard Richter. The room was packed; everyone important in the art world seemed to be there, and the auctioneer's Swiss-German accent resounded like a low French horn around the cavernous auction room. Felix's bidder, a young arts graduate he'd trained for such events, sat in a prime position ten rows from the front. This was only the graduate's second appearance at a high-profile auction and, judging from the curious sideways glances from the prominent collectors (all in their customary seats), no one had made the connection between the handsome young Chinese-American man dressed in a razor-sharp Savile Row suit (courtesy of Baum Galleries) and Felix Baum. No doubt they assumed the Asian student was a representative of the super-rich Chinese collectors, which had been the gallery director's intention. The perfect foil, Felix thought, before being interrupted by his vibrating mobile. He glanced at the incoming number: *Maxine*. He checked his watch; as usual, her timing was impeccable. Rising to his feet, he pushed his way past the seated bidders. It was only when he reached the back of the hall, out of view of the auctioneer, that he bothered to put the phone to his ear.

'So I climbed on top of the Brooklyn Bridge and I was going to throw myself off it but I decided I wouldn't make it that easy for you.' Maxine's voice was broken and slow. *Verbose and dramatic as usual – she really is an obsessive romantic as well as bipolar*, Felix noted – wondering at the background sound whistling down the phone.

'Are you there, Felix? Because I've got something on you, you bastard. Brushstrokes can tell everything historically about a painting, as can paint.'

Now he wanted her gone; closing his eyes, he imagined her falling, hair tumbling over and over, slender legs flailing uselessly in the empty air, a vaguely erotic vision. He stayed silent; his breath was a wind against the howl of the phone call. Nothing mattered. She would fall either way; he'd made sure of that.

From the other side of the room a collector and one of his major clients – Felicity Kocak, in her fifties, clad from top to pedicured toe in a pale-orange Chanel suit – glanced in his direction. Hoping she would not corner him after the auction, Felix smiled discreetly back. They were in the middle of negotiating an early Edward Hopper work – *Girl in a Yellow Square of Light* – and the greater part of the negotiation had involved an outrageous amount of flirtation on Felix’s part. As far as he was concerned it was not unlike walking a tightrope; he found the woman repellent, both physically and intellectually. But Felicity, the English widow of a Turkish shipping magnate, was immensely rich and easily influenced. What was she planning to bid for here? Felix wondered.

Panicked at the thought that someone else might be advising her, he looked to see who her companion was. To his relief, he recognised the thin, elegant woman beside her as a minor player – an art buyer who worked with several of the top interior designers. The two women were obviously hoping to pick up insignificant works to decorate Felicity’s new mansion in the Hamptons. Nevertheless, irritated at the gauche interruption, Felix decided he would put the price of his Hopper up by a half a million.

A hiss sounded from his mobile. Tentatively he placed his ear against it. The noise at the other end intensified into a high-pitched vibration. Did the Brooklyn Bridge really hum like that, a cacophony of wires vibrating in the high winds?

‘... Are you there, Felix? Watch while I nail the memory of me to the back of your brain.’ The sound of a man’s voice in the distance now cut in; Felix pressed his ear closer to the phone.

‘Go away, I’m okay... Don’t touch me!’ Maxine shouted before falling silent, and the phone cut out. Moments later the text he was expecting from another number came through:

Your porcelain doll hesitated, but now  
she’s floating

The gallery director’s only betrayal of emotion was a slight tremor of the hand holding his phone; even so, the reality of Maxine’s death was a shock. Steadying himself against the wall, he carefully began dissecting his emotional response; after all, she’d been one of his lovers. A moment passed before he concluded that, beyond a kind of sadness, his overriding sentiment was one of relief intermingled with a growing adrenalin rush he recognised as *opportunity*.

## PRELUDE

His reverie was interrupted by the auctioneer calling out Maxine's name. Looking up, Felix saw that the screen above the podium now displayed a bronze sculpture of a massive reclining black woman with Maxine's customary totem – a winged serpent, which she always used as her signature – engraved on the ankle.

'Lot 23, a large bronze sculpture entitled *Latisha Dormant* by the young British sculptor Maxine Doubleday. Do I have fifty thousand?'

As he'd instructed, the Asian student immediately put up his baton to bid. Felix relaxed; it would take at least a day for the news of Maxine's death to spread, giving him time to buy all of her work at reserve price before the announcement caused the value to soar. There were four pieces in this auction alone and he knew of several others that would be coming up for sale across the world in the next twelve hours. He had bidders at all the auctions: New York, London, Zurich, St Petersburg and Shanghai. Maxine Doubleday may have failed as an artist in life, but Felix Baum would make sure her work received the acclaim it merited in death. He would mythologise her. It was what he excelled at: a stratagem he had executed before and would do so again. There wasn't any greater aphrodisiac.

It had been another long grey London day without Maxine, her absence a niggling void at the edge of everything Susie thought or did, impossible to dismiss. Even now, as she stood at her framers, the two of them staring down at a series of preliminary sketches of a work-in-progress that Tate Modern had purchased, Susie found it difficult not to think about what time it was in New York, and what Maxine was doing. Was she happy? Was she lying naked beside someone else, using the same words she'd used with her? Emotions, gestures, the vernacular of lovers Susie had never doubted was exclusively theirs, until she'd found her gone.

The framer, a thin rake of a man whose shoulder-length white hair gave him the air of a dishevelled bohemian, murmured something about gilding and Susie forced herself to concentrate. As she followed him past walls hung with Renaissance-style frames, she felt herself being pulled further and further away until she had the sense she was floating far above the wooden angels and glistening picture frames. Suddenly a wave of dread rushed through her, causing her to stumble. The framer, catching her, helped her on to a chair.

PICTURE THIS

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, his bony fingers sharp against her arm.

‘I’m not sure.’

A second later her phone pinged: it was a text message from a journalist friend in New York. Even before she read it, she knew what it would say.

## Chapter One

*Four months later, Baum Gallery #1, Upper West Side, 2006.*

Felix stared down at the catalogue. Primordial, disturbing and profoundly erotic, the image was a photographic depiction of Rati, the Hindu goddess of sex and carnal desire. Susie Thomas, her skin covered in blue paint, sat naked in a lotus position. A smaller, younger woman straddled her, back to the camera, her slim legs wrapped around the artist. In stark contrast to the defiant gaze of the artist, this woman's face was in profile and totally covered by a mask of a cow's head. Standing on either side of the entwined women were two men dressed in the uniforms of traditional sixteenth-century Hindu warriors, one obviously Indian, the other Caucasian – both boasting beautiful sculptured physiques. The fingers of the artist's hands, which were stretched out to the left and right, encircled the erect penises of the two men. Again, both men's faces were concealed by full head-masks – one wore an elephant head, the other a horse's head. The only unmasked figure in the photograph was the artist herself, staring out at her audience – a direct gaze that was perturbing, seductive and terrifyingly confrontational.

Felix's eyes shifted to the half-naked men; he wanted to be them, to be one of them, embodied in such a powerful artwork, forever immortalised. He might be one of the most famous gallery owners in New York right then but he needed to be embedded in history, he needed to be gazed upon in 50 years, in a hundred years; his soul demanded it.

'Chloe, I'm out to everyone,' he instructed. Then, still absorbed by the open catalogue, he started to walk towards his office at the back of the gallery. Just then the phone on the desk rang.

'Good morning, Felix Baum Gallery... yes, Mr Weiss...' The gallerina glanced over; Felix stood frozen midway to the door. He gestured, indicating he couldn't take the call. 'No, I'm afraid he's out, even to you, Mr Weiss...' She grimaced in response to Felix. 'Sure, it's a great show, he really is a superb young artist, you know. *Frieze* are doing a profile next month? He's right on the crest... of course we can stay open an extra half-hour for you... And I'll let Mr Baum know that you are in town...'

Escaping, Felix slipped into his office. Once inside the hermet-

ically sealed box of marble and polished steel, the background hum of Manhattan fell away. He set down the catalogue on his gleaming walnut desk, which rolled out like an unfurling scroll. The image of the staged orgy was even more startling on closer inspection, the artist's labia and clitoris apparently painted in gold. Without realising it, Felix licked his lips. Cow, horse, elephant, goddess: the motif had resonance – a perverse Noah's Ark or Old MacDonald's Farm. The way the masks were sculpted was hyperreal. It was if a Minotaur, a centaur and a cow maiden had somehow found themselves bewildered and trapped in a compromising scenario not of their making. *Anima /animus out of control*, Felix thought, as his mind began to spin its own psychological analysis.

He'd been searching for an astounding artist to open his next gallery, Baum #2. To secure the doyenne of the new British art scene would be a huge coup. He studied the image again. *This is good; this is hot, very hot*. Like a rush of pleasure, the internal patter exploded like fireworks somewhere around his solar plexus. *I have to have her; I want that body, that mind*.

Bending his tall, lanky frame, he peered down at the photograph. There was something familiar about the girl with her back to the camera. She looked young, no more than twenty; it was impossible to see her face, but the pale skin, tiny waist and full arse tugged at his memory. Dismissing the niggling recollection as projection, he turned the page to read the essay, written by a well-known English art critic and philosopher with a doubled-barrelled name.

*'Desire as Myth' is Susie Thomas's first solo show... A reclaiming of the erotic by challenging the thin line between pornography and erotica... Susie Thomas is arguably the foremost female figure of the rising pack of Young British Artists. Fascinated by the psychology and construct of sexual desire (as perceived through a European/Western prism), she creates a whole mythology around the actual process leading up to both the installation and capturing of the final image – a tantalising 'manufactured' rumour that she and the participants engage in real orgiastic rituals in the build-up to the click of the camera's shutter. This is a comment, a media manipulation and a deconstruction of the porn industry; Thomas herself having written extensively on the subject (Artforum, Issue 457: 'The P in Porn' by S. Thomas). The artist also insists that all who work with her sign a*

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*confidentiality clause, so the authenticity of the process – ‘Is the orgy real?’ – can never be verified. ‘Feeding the tease’, as Thomas calls it, is a deliberate referencing of the projection the porn addict imposes on his/her pornography of choice – the idea that the pleasure/ing is authentic and that there is a narrative or backstory behind the finished product.*

Also slipped between the pages of the glossy catalogue were several reviews: *Frieze*, *ArtBeat*, *The Times* and *The Guardian*. All were unqualified raves. There was also a clipping from the *Daily Mail* showing a drunken Susie Thomas leaving a nightclub with a well-known but very married British pop star. ‘All you need is “Susie”’ screamed the headline. Felix smiled. His scout had done his job well.

The gallery director pressed the intercom. ‘Get me White Cube, London,’ he demanded.

It was loud. The plane. The drone of engines bore into Susie’s head, prising open the lid of her hangover, theoretically buried under two paracetamol and a whisky and soda in BA’s first-class lounge at Heathrow. Lifting the edge of the cushioned eye-mask, she peered out at her fellow passengers: a couple of businessmen who’d nestled down into their seats with the ease of regular flyers; a woman in her early thirties whose grooming and wardrobe seemed to indicate that she was the very expensive mistress of someone powerful; a B-list film star Susie vaguely recognised from a 1980s movie; and a Middle Eastern couple, the man dressed in a traditional Arabic headdress and the woman in a burka, who’d established themselves as Saudi royalty with the flight attendants, having rattled everyone’s nerves by chanting from the Koran before take-off.

Susie, a nervous flyer, had been a little disconcerted by the fervent praying. Despite being an atheist, she was superstitious and somehow felt that to pray was a perverse temptation to fate, an abduction of hard science to potential disaster. The legacy of 9/11 hadn’t helped; it had taken the artist a full hour to get through security, and even then they’d confiscated a couple of her props – a phallus remodelled in the shape of a deliriously grinning Donald Duck and a tin halo – from her hand luggage, arguing they could be used as weapons. It didn’t matter, she consoled herself; her assistant Muriel would be making most of the props, while Alfie, her production coordinator, would oversee the casting.

Muriel and Alfie were seated behind her in economy class. The three of them had spent the first few hours of the journey scanning through visual references on Susie's laptop for the paintings she intended to use as the basis for the New York photographs. The entire process, including their plane tickets, was being funded by Baum Galleries, under the auspices of Felix Baum himself.

The charismatic gallery director stared up at her from the cover of *Vanity Fair*, his famously hooded eyes (green, she now noticed) gazing sardonically, the black hair swept back behind large but well-formed ears, the long crooked nose counterbalanced by the sensuality of the full mouth, the weakness of the chin by the almost Asiatic cheekbones. The accompanying article described how Felix, who had grown up in New Mexico in a trailer park with a hippie father who had been involved in the early Chicano art movement there, had been a complete unknown on the art scene until the mid-1990s. Apparently, he had swept to power on the back of an established gallery director who had mentored him as his assistant, then upon his death bequeathed his small uptown gallery to Felix. Displaying a rare talent for befriending up-and-coming young artists and then promoting and branding them, by the end of the decade he was being heralded as one of the hottest young gallerists. Then Baum had really made his mark when he had brought to market two, until then, unheard-of early Edward Hoppers. Authenticated by one of the leading art historians of that era, the paintings had been heralded as major discoveries. Felix had subsequently sold several other Hoppers, all from the same collector, who wished to remain anonymous. The sale of these paintings propelled Felix to fame and fortune. By 2005, the Baum Gallery had come to be regarded as one of the top three galleries in New York, and its director was considered to be in the same league as Larry Gagosian.

Dressed in a high-collar designer suit that was quaintly reminiscent of the nineteenth century, Felix Baum resembled the classic Victorian dandy, evoking an Oscar Wilde character or someone one might find in a lesser known Victorian Gothic novel – an interesting choice of persona for someone born and bred in the American West, Susie thought, both surprised and annoyed at the intensity of attraction she felt looking at the photo. There was no trace of anything malevolent in his face: nothing but a kind of intelligent empathy. Susie glanced down again: celebrity, the addiction of power, corrupted beauty; they were similar beings. She knew it, had sensed it the moment she'd first heard him on the phone. She'd

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recognised that dangerously seductive blend of arrogance and hesitation, bravado threaded with a filigree of vulnerability – the need for affirmation of legitimacy.

Easily the most powerful young curator in New York and now possibly in the whole of America, Felix Baum had courted her obsessively. Determined to launch her in the US, he'd bullied and pushed every other potential representation aside. This kind of attention from Baum was unheard of; he was the kind of gallery director artists would prostitute themselves for, just to secure an invite to an opening at his gallery. But Susie Thomas was now almost as famous as Baum himself, and initially she'd refused to take his calls or answer his emails, and thrice had failed to make an appearance at meetings set up by her London gallery functioning as a broker between the two huge personalities. Only once she had negotiated a show entirely on her own terms had she agreed to a departure date – a mere three months before the show was scheduled to open. Such bald-faced audacity was remarkable, particularly when it involved someone as terrifyingly omnipotent as Felix Baum, and yet Susie's strategy had worked.

Pushing back her thick red hair, she lifted the window blind and peered out at the sky. It was darkening, the sun now a streak of crimson, a rip in the blue canvas; the inevitability of night seeped up over the horizon. Susie sighed. She hated time. It was the one thing she could not control, could not reverse, fast-forward, edit, manipulate, improve upon with artifice. Even at just 35, she'd lost a number of friends to a variety of deaths, had already seen her peers become fashionable, judged, then discarded. For her (as for many of the new wave of Young British Artists), impermanence was the mirror-twin of permanence. The very drive to shock, to jolt the establishment out of its complicity, meant courting the possibility of becoming transient, a fad. It was her secret dread: to become obsolete before she became a brand – a fear shared by everyone in her circle.

Together with a small group of contemporaries who had graduated from London art schools such as Chelsea, Goldsmiths, the Slade, she had formed a movement that surfed on a wave of frustration, class alienation and pure ambition. The members of this new wave were driven by a desire to shake off the mediocrity and crushing legitimacy of figurative painters such as Francis Bacon, David Hockney and Lucian Freud represented by the old-school Cork Street galleries. In the opinion of Susie and her peers, this set of individuals with their upper-class connections had stultified

the progress of British art for most of the twentieth century with their inward-gazing cottage industry that served the elite and perpetuated the employment of rarefied academics. The new breed of Young British Artists had set out to smash this elitist conspiracy and electrify the actual notion of art. And they had succeeded spectacularly, until (just as it had with the earlier punk movement) commerce gobbled up controversy and turned the YBAs (as they became known) into an extremely profitable commodity themselves.

Did Susie Thomas care? No. The political ethics of what she made did not keep her awake at night. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she hadn't been born into the lower middle class; her life had begun in the kind of grinding poverty that had at its core a humiliating shame, an absence of cultural stimuli and a surfeit of boredom that seemed insurmountable. The illegitimate child of a single mother, she'd grown up on a council estate on the outskirts of Manchester, where even the postman didn't like to deliver and many families were third- or fourth-generation welfare-dependent. It had been a killingly tedious place for a fiercely imaginative child to grow up in. For Susie (or 'our Sue' as she was known back then) there had never been any romanticism around the notion of starving in a garret. Ever since she could remember she'd wanted to escape, to leave behind the estate, who she was and to whom she had been born. London, like a glittering Mecca, a palpable city of Oz, danced seductively in the south, its siren song billowing out and filling the very air she breathed night and day, providing the wind to fill her sails and carry her away. To stay meant death, to leave meant certain reinvention: there was no argument. She'd hitched to London on her 14th birthday, her mother not even bothering to file a missing person's report.

And so, despite her reputation for being a maverick who deliberately courted anarchy, both emotional and sexual, and despite the stories (which appeared with calculated regularity in the scandal sheets and Sunday papers) of the drunken escapades, the parties, the addictions, the beds littered with broken-hearted lovers clutching at a memory and a wisp of red hair, Susie Thomas was a construct. The woman as an artist was always and inherently in control, a meticulous choreographer of beautifully designed chaos. There was nothing she did by accident: not one drinking session, not one seduction, not one provocation. Her scandalous cocaine habit had been carefully orchestrated in thin white lines snorted off the office

desks of the top fashion magazines, a tabloid photographer hovering within blurry distance; her bisexuality was legendary and heavily publicised, the image of her pubic hair shaved into the shape of a snake (as in the garden of Eden) omnipresent; her public temper tantrums a regular feature in the gossip columns. She'd become not so much an artist as a symbol of a way of life – a fantasy for women frustrated with their own monogamy and grey horizons. The business of art had played her and in turn she had played it – so far.

As one of the few working-class students at the Guildhall and then at the Slade, she'd learnt the power of indifference, of superficially not giving a fuck, the potency of outraging the status quo. The lesson had been reinforced when she had been labelled as part of the YBA movement – then a nebulous bunch of college students, surviving the crash of 1987, followed by the rise and rise of New Labour and the obscene moneyed orgy London had become during the nineties. She'd played history and made it her slave.

Yet for all this success, she'd loved only once in her life. Even now the memory of that nauseating vertigo, that sense of being entirely out of emotional control, was enough to send her into a panic attack. How she had given herself, how she had surrendered, totally abandoning the many narratives she'd built up around herself, the entire facade toppling in the wake of the giddy, irresistible roller-coaster ride. Inevitably it had ended in tragedy. Was that the requisite for love? A fatal attraction to the finite, or perhaps the notion that through making an impossible love work one might conquer one's own morality?

Susie stared out of the plane window, then reached into the seat pocket to pull out the digital camera she always carried with her to capture images she'd use later. Through the lens the sunset-streaked clouds below looked ethereal. It was less than a year since the death of her ex-lover and here she was, still obsessed by such questions, still grieving and incomplete. It felt strange to contemplate new work, knowing that Maxine could not be a part of it. Ironically, it had been Susie's stellar success that had awakened in her young muse a yearning to establish herself professionally, to carve out her own achievements. The sculptor had moved to New York and was just beginning to find success, having been selected to be part of a group show at Felix Baum's gallery, when she committed suicide.

Susie's eyes returned to the photograph of Felix Baum. How well had he known Maxine? Had she been just another name to him, yet another young artist in his vast stable? Had they even met?

PICTURE THIS

Susie folded away the magazine and turned on the entertainment screen. The display showed two hours to go before landing. She pulled the mask down over her eyes and snuggled into the reclining seat. Curling her mind around the roar of the engines, she fell back to sleep.