

“An Excellent Fraud”

A Story of “**Beauty and the Beast**”

By Judith Nolan ©

“Are you really sure about this, Cathy?” Charles Chandler frowned at the artworks filling the walls of the auction room. “It may be the first of April, but I hope you’re not trying to pull some April Fool’s joke on me. I mean, if you need something for your apartment, surely it’s better if I take you to any good gallery in the city. Forgeries like these just seem to reek a little of a lack of taste. And a lack of...a lack of...” He waved his hands helplessly.

“Of class...?” Catherine sighed as she turned from her inspection of a nearby canvas to look up at him. “Face it, Dad. As much as you love to, you can’t buy everything for me. This is my one chance to own a Monet or a Picasso at a fraction of the original’s price and most of them are hanging in the Metropolitan Museum.”

“I still don’t like it.” Her father frowned. “But I must admit the man who painted these was a true artist. It’s a shame he was yet another victim of a senseless homicide in Central Park. They’re becoming all too frequent. I see the proceeds from the sale are going to a good cause – his family.” He leaned closer to the excellent fake of a Van Gogh painting of two severed sunflower heads on a blue and white background. He frowned at the heavy, ornate frame. “You better be careful of this one. It looks like it might crash to the ground at any time now. Surely something smaller and more feminine would be better for your place.”

“*Vincent 87...*” Catherine mused, studying the signature. “Funny how this forgery was painted only last year, but the original is exactly one hundred years old. And yet they look the same. I’ve always liked it whenever I’ve gone to the museum. I think I’m going to bid for this one and a couple of the others. But this has such beautiful colours. It looks like a glorious sunrise.”

“Well, remember this is a silent auction.” Charles pointed to the sheet of paper pinned to the small table beneath the painting. “And it looks like someone is already really keen on owning it. They’ve outbid everyone else so far.” He whistled low and long. “And they’re willing to pay a pretty penny for it too. Cathy, I think you’d do better to bid on something else less expensive like that landscape over there.”

“The auction has only just begun...” Catherine frowned at the neat line of writing, offering the latest price and the bidder’s number beside it. “Well, I like it too.”

She picked up the pen, crossed out the previous bid and added hers. She looked around the room, but no one seemed to be taking any interest in her actions.

“Maybe you’re right, after all. I guess the office could do with a new painting or two.” Charles surveyed the rest of the room. “It is for a good cause. I wonder if the guy copied anything by Renoir or Degas – someone I might recognise...”

“Stick with me, I’ll make a believer out of you yet, Dad.” Catherine laughed.

An hour later she returned alone to view the painting once more. Her father had left to keep an appointment he couldn’t miss. Due to the intense interest, the auction had been extended and Catherine decided not to go back to the office with him. Besides she hadn’t secured her painting yet.

She looked down at the sheet of paper. Someone had crossed out her bid and replaced it with their own. And then the original bidder had outdone that one. And this time they’d substantially raised the price as well. Catherine caught her bottom lip between her teeth, trying to decide what to do. What the determined bidder offered had taken the painting well beyond what she was willing to pay. And the auction wasn’t due to close for another hour.

She looked around the room again but, as before, no one seemed to be interested in her next move. The determined bidder was very elusive indeed.

In a rash moment she picked up the pen and doubled the price. *Let them chew on that!*

She walked away, slipping into the crowd, but turned back after several steps, moving behind a fixture where she could observe and not be readily seen. She didn’t have long to wait. A well built, dark haired man of medium height approached the painting. He leaned down to stare at what Catherine had written. He looked up to scowl around the room, before turning back to the piece of paper. With firm strokes he crossed out Catherine’s latest bid and replaced it with his own.

Catherine left her hiding place, slipping up behind him as he put down the pen. She was in time to hear him mutter, “Take that, then.”

“You seem to want this painting very badly,” Catherine observed. “Do you appreciate fine art?”

The man’s head snapped around and he frowned at her. “I...no way, not me.” He huffed a short laugh. “It’s for a friend. A very good friend. He...he couldn’t make the auction. But I know he’ll like it. Great use of colour.”

“I suppose that’s as good a reason as any to pay such a large amount of money for a fake.” Catherine

extended her hand. "My name is Catherine. I'm number 63, and you just outbid me – again."

"Joe 34..." The man shook hands quickly. He shrugged, looking harassed. "But this auction is taking too damn long and I gotta be back at work soon or my boss will throttle me. I'm an assistant D.A. with the city."

"Ah, small world." Catherine smiled, shaking her head. "I'm in corporate law myself. Well, my father is and I work for his firm. But I've taken the afternoon off."

"Business must be bad if all you can afford is fake artworks." Joe grinned, before he glanced at his watch. "Say, you wouldn't like to do me a really big favour, would you? One overworked lawyer to another. I know it's a real imposition and I hate to ask, but since they've extended the auction deadline, it's going to make me late for a depositions hearing. And I really want this painting..."

"For a very good friend..." Catherine considered him closely. "And so you want me to bid on it for you."

"Geeze, you are quick." Joe threw up his hands. "I know you want the thing for yourself, but if you wouldn't mind...? I'll owe you big time. There's plenty more to choose from here."

"I guess there is." Catherine shrugged. "Since it's for an excellent cause and a good friend, I suppose there are other paintings in the gallery that would look equally as good on my wall. If you're sure you can trust me..."

"Any time. You look honest enough to me, even for a high flying corporate lawyer. Thanks, I'll owe you one, Catherine." Joe pulled a card from his inside jacket pocket and held it out. "And if you ever get tired of corporate law, then come over to the dark side and look me up. We can always use a first class brain and I promise you, you'll never be bored. My number's on the card."

Catherine shook her head. "My father would have seventy different kinds of fit if I ever tried to leave the firm. But thanks, Joe."

"Well, don't work too hard. Not that your lot ever do." Joe grinned to take the sting out of his wry observation. "And thank you. If you could arrange delivery of the painting to my office over at the Justice Building, I'd really appreciate it. Let me know what I owe you and I'll send you a check. See ya."

Catherine put out a detaining hand as he turned away. "So, what did this very good friend do for you, that he rates your going to so much trouble to give him such an expensive gift?"

"I...he saved my life one night a couple of months ago, in the park." Joe's evasive look seemed to suggest he didn't wish to impart too many details. "I was careless. There was a prime suspect in this

guy's murder case..." He waved a hand around at the paintings. "I was trying to apprehend him, when he pulled a knife on me. My friend...well, he prevented him from using it..." He frowned once more at his watch. "So I owe him big time. Look, I really gotta go. Thanks again for helping me out here."

Catherine was left to stare after him as he hurried away. She looked down at the card. *Joe Maxwell* the legend said *Assistant District Attorney Manhattan*.

She opened her purse and put the card inside. She glanced back at the painting. *Vincent 87*...she studied the signature with renewed interest, wondering what was so special about the painting that Joe Maxwell had to have it at any price...

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Eight months later...

"Go home, Radcliffe." Joe stood before Catherine's desk, his fists balled on his hips. "There's nothing here that won't wait until Monday."

"That's easy for you to say..." Catherine scowled up at him, replacing the telephone receiver in its cradle. "I've already got a dozen new cases pending on Monday and –"

"And another two dozen the day after that." Joe leaned down, resting his knuckles on the edge of her desk. "Let me give you some time honoured advice, Cathy. What you can't get done today will wait until tomorrow, because what you don't get done tomorrow will spill over into the next day. Never sacrifice your weekend if you can avoid it. All you can do is tread water and try to keep afloat. Try not to drown in the manure we all have to swim in. So go home, get some rest and I'll see you bright and early on Monday. It'll soon be Christmas after all, and I'm feeling really generous. Consider it your annual bonus."

"Since you put it so nicely, boss." Catherine stood, snatching up her suit jacket from the back of her chair. "See you later, then."

"Just make sure you're not a Cathy-come-lately next week and mess up the whole routine." Joe shook an admonishing finger at her. "We do have certain standards to maintain around here, you know."

"All right, Joe, I get the message." Catherine laughed as she opened a drawer to grab her handbag. "But what about you? Surely you're not hanging around here trying to show Moreno you're married to your work by burning the midnight oil. Need any help?"

"Nah, I've got places I need to be too." He shrugged. "Just got a few loose ends to tidy up first. With Christmas Day looming next Friday, I gotta get rosters sorted and make sure everyone gets away on

time. You know how much I love the holidays...”

“I do, Joe, I do. But...” Catherine turned back. “I’ve always wondered, but I keep forgetting to ask...did your friend like the Van Gogh you bought for him?”

“The Van Gogh...?” Joe looked puzzled for a long moment, then his brow cleared. “Oh, that’s right...I’d forgotten all about the auction. Thanks again for getting it for me.” Again his look became oddly evasive. “It’s just...I haven’t found the right time to give it to him yet. I was kinda saving it for a special occasion. I’ve got it safely stored away. What did ya buy in the end?”

“A very nice Monet...” Catherine smiled. “My poor father is convinced I’ve hung it upside down. I just wondered if your friend has even seen the original Van Gogh. It’s hanging in the Metropolitan in Central Park. It’s really something to see. You could mention it to him or maybe take him there some time.”

“It is...?” Joe blinked. “Wow, I never knew that.” He shrugged. “Nah, my friend, he, well...he doesn’t get out much, bit of a loner. But he’s into all the classics like poetry, music, the arts...you know, that sort of thing...not really my area. But, as soon as I saw the painting, I knew he’d love it. Whatever gets ya through the night, eh, Radcliffe?” He waved a hand. “I’ll be sure and let him know that though, when I give him the picture.”

“You’ve got a really good heart, even though you try to hide it.” Catherine smiled. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate it. Goodnight, Joe.”

“Night...” Joe watched her walk out of the bullpen, waiting until the doors swung closed behind her, before turning back to his office, going to the storage cupboard and opening it to stare at the brown paper wrapped parcel carefully hidden behind the files kept there. He’d been so busy, his caseload so impossible, that finding the time to deliver the painting had been a rare commodity. But Catherine’s timely reminder alerted him to the large debt he still had to pay for his life.

Soon, very soon, he would just make the time to deliver the work to its new owner. It was the weekend and he owed his good friend that much. It was past time he paid him a visit. Joe knew he needed to get away from the office and relax a little. What could it hurt? *After all, it is Christmas...right?*

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Catherine wrapped the book carefully in gold and red embossed paper. She had gone to New York’s premier bookshop to find exactly what she wanted. The book was large and heavy, full of glossy colour prints of the greatest masters. They were all here, including Van Gogh and his many versions of painted sunflowers, and the one Joe had purchased at the auction for his reclusive friend.

Catherine knew Vincent would love the book. There was so much colour, so many vibrant scenes. All the colours that were rare in his subterranean world. She had leafed through the book before wrapping it, smiling with anticipation.

Since Christmas Day fell on a Friday this year, she had the rare treat of three whole days off. Monday was a dark and distant plain of impossible cases and exhausting work, but that was far in the future. She intended to savour every moment in between.

She had gone down into her basement and tapped out a basic message, inviting Vincent to her balcony for Christmas Eve. She had set the scene with candles and fairy lights before laying out a small feast for them to share on a blanket piled with cushions beneath the shelter of the wall. She had dressed for the occasion, forgetting fashion in favour of warm, practical clothing for the cold night.

It was now marginally warmer than the day had been and that had been bitter enough to bite at her exposed flesh as she hurried along the crowded pavement, getting her last minute, Christmas Eve shopping done. Gone were the days of slow browsing and overly long lunch hours...

She smiled now as she placed her present carefully to one side, hiding it beneath a cushion. She wanted it to be a special surprise.

She sat down on the blanket to wait, huffing on her cold fingers. She turned now and then to look up at the city, at all the glowing lights, wondering when Vincent would arrive. She got up to fuss with her preparations and then sat down again, reaching to tuck the breeze-tossed fall of her hair behind her ear.

In the next moment he was there – keeping to the shadows among the plants at the end of the terrace. A larger bulk of hooded darkness against the rest, his eyes and the buckle of his belt reflecting the lights of the city. Catherine had not heard him arrive, but then she never did. And he still seemed as nervous about being with her as the first time he had come to her balcony a few months ago. Her heart leapt at the sight of him, so strong and yet so gentle. So wary and unsure of his place in her world.

“Vincent...” Catherine didn’t move, except to extend one hand, fingers outstretched, allowing him to make the decision to go or stay. “Merry Christmas. I hoped you would come. I thought we might share the evening together. I’m only sorry it can’t be tomorrow night...”

“I wanted to see you...” Vincent’s voice was low, full of reflection and yearning. He stepped down from the small dais that held the plants, coming forward slowly, finally halting before her. “I hope you are well, Catherine.”

So much the better for seeing you again, my love she wanted to say, but didn’t. “Yes...” She nodded,

smiling up at him. "And I wanted to see you too. You are always in my thoughts."

"As you are always in mine..." He answered her smile, inclining his head.

But still he seemed wary and on edge. Catherine longed to feel his arms around her, his solid warmth and strength surrounding her. But she knew enough by now to be patient, allowing him time to adjust and settle into their own private little world. Decide to stay with her of his own volition.

She lifted her shoulders apologetically as she got slowly to her feet, smoothing at her clothing. "My father is throwing a huge Christmas party tomorrow night and I'm committed to playing hostess. So I thought we would have our own festive celebration right here. You don't mind, Vincent?"

"Mind...?" He considered the word. "Of course, I do not mind." He seemed to relax then, looking around at all her careful preparations. "You have gone to a lot of trouble."

"I wanted to make it special, our first Christmas together..." She finally reached for his hand, sliding her fingers carefully through his, bringing him closer to her. "Please, come here and sit down."

She drew him, unresisting, to the blanket, dropping onto her knees and bringing him down beside her. The air was cold on the balcony, but she knew he would not consent to go inside her apartment. In the shelter of the wall it was marginally warmer, but still she couldn't prevent a small shiver running through her. Almost without thinking Vincent's arm moved to enclose her, drawing her close against him, beneath the shelter and security of his cloak, into his warmth.

He has decided to stay... Catherine relaxed then, on a small sigh of contentment, her face half-buried in the softness of his padded vest, with its vividly remembered scents of candle smoke and leather. This was where she belonged, where she felt safe and cherished.

Not stopping to consider, she burrowed deeper, throwing her arms around his body to hug him close, relaxing into him completely. Vincent stiffened slightly, before finally accepted her embrace, his arms drawing her closer still. They stayed that way for what seemed like hours...no words needed, just this silent communion of two souls inextricably interlinked and bonded for all time.

It was only later, after they had shared the simple meal she'd prepared, that Catherine decided to offer Vincent her gift. She reached for it, sitting back on her heels, drawing it onto her lap.

She glanced up at him. "I have something for you. Something I thought you might like."

"And I have something for you." Vincent slipped a hand beneath his cloak and produced a lace wrapped parcel tied with a red silk ribbon. He held it out. "Merry Christmas, Catherine."

Catherine smiled as she accepted it, her fingers stroking softly over his as she did so. “Shall I open yours first?”

“Please.” Vincent nodded, watching her face. “Mouse was most insistent that this is exactly the gift for you.”

“Then I am sure it will be perfect.” Catherine released the ribbon and the antique lace fell away to reveal the exquisite figurine of a ballet dancer balancing elegantly on pointed toe above a black marble base, with hands held poised, high over her head — her expression serene and smiling. She had been skilfully crafted in old ivory and silver. “Oh, Vincent, she’s very beautiful...”

She sat admiring the figurine for some moments, turning it in the muted light from the living room, before carefully rewrapping and placing it on the blanket beside her. She threw herself headlong into Vincent’s embrace, her arms going around his neck to hug him tightly. “I love it. It is the perfect gift, thank you.”

“Mouse will be pleased...” Vincent held her close, feeling her heart beating against his, inhaling her special perfume, the fresh scent of her hair and finally accepting that this was the one place in the whole world he would always wish to be. His doubts about coming here melted away as if they had never been. “Mouse was most insistent. He swears he didn’t take it, just found it.” His quiet laughter echoed through them both. “I must believe him. Mouse is unfailingly honest – painfully so, at times. ‘*Vincent’s Catherine deserves nothing but the very best of everything*’, he assured me.”

“Then you must thank him for me. It is exactly right.” Catherine sat up to gather the book, sliding it into his hands. “This is what I have for you. I hope you like it.”

He handled the heavy gift with ease, turning it over deftly to study it from all angles, before carefully removing the ribbon and opening the paper. He was silent for several heartbeats, staring at it pensively, forcing Catherine to search his frowning expression for some hint of his thoughts.

“Do you like it?” she asked finally, unable to stand the silence any longer.

“It is an incredible gift...” Vincent opened the cover slowly, sifting through the contents with deliberate slowness, savouring every picture in turn. “The colours are truly amazing. Thank you.”

“It was my boss down at the D.A.’s office that gave me the idea. A few months ago he bought a...a reproduction of a Van Gogh for a close friend.” Catherine quickly decided reproduction sounded better than forgery. She leaned close to sort through the pages, coming to a halt at the painting Joe had purchased at the auction all those months ago. “This one, see? Severed Sunflowers it’s called.”

She peered over his arm, tracing one finger across the signature visible in the bottom, left hand corner

of the painting. "You know, I never thought of this before... *Vincent 87*...it's almost like a good omen." She sat back on her heels to look at him. "I mean; it's almost incredible that this is 1987 and you're here with me on this special night. It's almost as if that long ago Vincent must have known something. Something amazing."

"Truly amazing..." Vincent traced the shape of the sunflowers with one fingertip. Their intense golden colour glowed in the candlelight. "Your boss at the District Attorney's office...his name is Joe, correct?"

"Yes..." Catherine frowned. "Joe Maxwell. Why?"

Vincent shook his head. "Two nights ago a good friend of mine and valued helper to our world sent down a message, asking me to meet him at the drainage tunnel entrance. He too brought me a Christmas gift." Again he traced the bright gold of the sunflowers. "He insisted I accept it in exchange for saving his life one night in the park. The night we first met."

"I don't see..." Catherine tried to make sense of what Vincent was trying to tell her and then she gasped. "Oh, Vincent, do you mean...are you saying it was Joe?"

"Joe Maxwell, yes. He brought me this very painting. He said it wasn't the original, of course. He couldn't afford that. Not on what the city pays him." Vincent looked up at her and laughed quietly. "He assured me that the original was still safe inside the Metropolitan Museum in the park. He said a co-worker of his – *'who's into that arty sort of thing'* – told him about it." He shook his head. "I never guessed that co-worker was you, Catherine."

"Good heavens..." Catherine sat back, unable to assimilate the information. It all seemed too incredible. "All this time and I never guessed...Joe, of all people. Remind me never to play poker again with that man. He truly is an excellent fraud and a wonderful friend. Wait until I see him on Monday..."

"*Vincent 87*..." Vincent traced the signature once more. "It does seem as if it was all meant to be..."

"Yes..." Catherine put the book aside before she moved in between his upraised knees, leaning down to take his face in her hands, looking deep into his incredible sapphire eyes. "It is all meant to be, all of it...all you have to do is believe..." Slowly, intently, she traced the shape of his mouth with one fingertip before stroking the backs of her fingers down the curve of his cheek, coming to rest against the strong pulse that beat in the base of his throat where her fingers became tangled in the leather laces of his shirt.

"Merry Christmas, my sweet, beautiful Catherine..." Vincent reached for her then, drawing her unresisting, down into his embrace, saying with his hands softly caressing her back and shoulders, all he could not voice in words. All his love and care for her patently obvious in his questing touch.

“Merry Christmas, Vincent...” Catherine turned her head to press a lingering kiss against his wrist, before tucking herself securely beneath his chin and letting the solid warmth of his body seep into hers. She wished she could stay like this forever. *This was where she truly belonged...always...*



END