

“Beautiful Vincent...”

A Story of “Beauty and the Beast”

By Judith Nolan ©

Catherine leaned closer, frowning at the signature in the left hand, bottom corner of the painting. She read it carefully and then once again, making sure it was correct. “Okay, I can see it now. I’m amazed.” Straightening, she smiled, shaking her head. “I never noticed that before.”

Vincent 87 the legend read. A shiver moved along her spine. It was breathtaking that a signature over a hundred years old could so reflect her life now and her deep love for one very special man. It was uncanny and also wonderfully exciting.

She glanced sideways at Elliot. He’d been watching her closely, waiting for her reaction. “See what I mean?” he asked. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s wonderful.” Catherine moved two steps back to study the Van Gogh painting hanging on the wall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “I have been here so many times before, but I’ve never given this one much thought until now. It’s amazing.”

She studied the work with a new appreciation. The painting was an extraordinary burst of colour. Two golden sunflower heads set against a blue and white background in a heavy, ornate frame. Quite unlike anything she had previously seen by the artist. *And now there was the signature...*

“I do know what Vincent means to you, Cathy.” Elliot placed a hand on her arm. “And how much you love him. I am grateful you have found someone who loves you for who you are. And when I noticed the signature the last time I was here, I knew I had to show it to you.”

“Thank you, Elliot.” Catherine covered his hand with hers. “I just wish he could see this too. It really is stunning. It will be his birthday soon, and I was wondering what to get for him. But this...it would be something very special.”

“Just what I was thinking...” Elliot glanced around, making sure they were not being overheard. “Well, where there’s a billionaire, surely there must be a way.” He grinned wryly. “Now I’ve been thinking and I’ve come up with a plan. If we made it late at night, when no one else is around...”

“Oh no, Elliot, please. It would be too risky. There’d still be the guards and what about the alarm system? Surely the whole place cannot be shut down. And even at night...” Catherine’s mind raced with a million objections beneath the swirl of hope that Elliot could somehow make her fragile wish come true.

She knew Vincent could sense her rising excitement. That he would be wondering what she was doing right now. Her heartbeat quickened with the strength of her love. She looked back at the painting. She knew how much he would want to see all the beautiful works the museum contained.

1. But, especially this one and all it meant to them both...

“Ah, where’s the trust?” Elliot grinned, spreading his hands wide. “What is money for, if not to make things happen when you want them to? For people you care about.”

“Elliot...” Catherine said warningly, not sure she fully trusted the cheeky boy-scout gleam in his grey eyes. “We do need to be so very careful here. I could never risk Vincent’s safety, not even for something as special as this...”

“I understand, of course.” Elliot nodded. “Leave it with me. Just make sure you have your best dress on and you’re waiting for me outside your apartment building at nine o’clock this Saturday night. I’ll take care of the rest of the arrangements.”

“Vincent 87...” Catherine looked back to the painting with intense longing in her eyes. “Are you sure we will be quite safe?”

“Please stop worrying.” Elliot draped an arm around her shoulders. “I would never allow anything to happen to you or Vincent. Both of you mean the world to me, you know that.”

“It would be a magical night...” Catherine dared to hope and place her trust in her good friend’s ability to pull off a miracle. “And a wonderful gift...”

“There you go.” Elliot hugged her close. “Suspend your disbelief and you’ll be just fine. So you need to go Below and tell Vincent the good news and I’ll take care of the rest of the details. Now this is what I want him to do...”

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“The Metropolitan Museum of Art...” Vincent leaned back against the barred gate before the open steel door, expelling his breath in a troubled sigh. “Even in Central Park at night, I must be careful...”

“I know.” Catherine watched him anxiously. “Elliot says he can fix it all for us. But if you’re not sure, Vincent...”

“If there could be a way...” Vincent looked down at her. “I do trust in Elliot’s judgement. He would never deliberately hurt us. But to go to the museum and to see everything it contains...” He shook his head in

disbelief. "I never dared to hope."

"Oh, you should see it, Vincent." Catherine caught his arm. "It sent shivers up my spine when I looked at it. It is so beautiful."

But she had kept the new knowledge about the signature on the Van Gogh painting to herself. She wanted Vincent to experience that with her, without any prejudgement. It was the perfect birthday gift. "Then we must trust in our friend to make it so." Vincent took a turn around the tunnel entrance, coming back to stand before her. "To see such magnificent works of art, it would be an incredible opportunity."

"Then we will put our faith in Elliot." Catherine sighed as she leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his waist beneath his cloak to hug him tightly. "It will be a very special night. Now this is what Elliot wants you to do..."

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"On time and looking very beautiful." Elliot smiled at Catherine, admiring her elegant evening gown of mulberry velvet beneath her black coat.

"It's going to be a wonderful evening, thanks to you." She took his proffered arm and he escorted her towards his limousine, parked on the curb before her apartment building. The driver held open the rear door as they entered the vehicle, shutting it behind them.

"So did Vincent consent to do everything I asked of him?" Elliot inquired, as he poured them both a flute of champagne.

"Yes." Catherine nodded, taking the glass and sipping the chilled liquid. "But I think Father is deeply worried about the whole idea. He is so concerned we will be discovered."

"Not if Vincent does everything the way I planned. Please don't worry. I've gone over every detail, again and again, and the whole thing is flawless."

The limousine drew up smoothly before the museum, but this time the driver remained seated behind the wheel, staring straight ahead through the windscreen. Elliot glanced at him, making sure the man was obeying his explicit orders. Satisfied, he opened the door and got out before turning to help Catherine, leaving the door ajar and keeping the vehicle between them and anyone who might be watching from the museum. The entrance was softly lit with spotlights trained on the building, which created a host of shadows over the surrounding landscape.

Catherine caught her bottom lip between her teeth, looking around, before turning to study the darkness, seeking any sign of Vincent. She couldn't see him anywhere. *Had he been delayed?*

"Don't look so worried." Elliot bent close to her ear. "It's all been organised. He'll be here any second now, you'll see. We've already created the illusion that he arrived with us in the limo. What could be simpler?"

"Yes, but what if something goes wrong?" Catherine frowned at him. "I mean, I do trust you, Elliot, but—"

"Catherine..."

Catherine turned quickly, looking past Elliot's right shoulder into the deepest shadows. She could just make out a darker bulk against the lights of the city. "Vincent...?"

"I am not at all sure about this outfit..." He moved slowly forward into the light and Catherine gasped, her hand rising to cover her lips.

She knew that Elliot had made all the arrangements, but the sight of her love still took her breath away. Head to toe Vincent was clad in full Arabic dress of flowing white robes with a concealing headscarf tucked securely across his face, showing only the gleam of his eyes in the diffused light from the museum's entrance.

Catherine knew she was staring, but she simply couldn't help it. He looked absolutely stunning. "Oh, Vincent...you look...I mean, you look..." Her mouth went dry. "Just amazing..."

"Not quite the effect I was going for, but I will accept it..." Vincent laughed softly, shaking his head. "Shall we...?" he asked, extending his gloved hand.

"Of course..." Catherine nodded, as she hurried forward to take his arm.

"And you don't need to worry about the guards or the alarm system." Elliot assured her, as he walked with them towards the entrance. "I've given the museum staff a paid night off and organised with Cleon Manning to have his operatives guarding the place tonight. No one gets in or out without their say so. We've got the museum all to ourselves until midnight."

"And for the record..." He looked across her to Vincent. "You're a close, personal friend. A very important, foreign oil tycoon, who wishes to remain anonymous for reasons of national security. But you asked me to arrange a private viewing, and tonight is all the time you can spare. You're flying out of JFK in your private jet first thing in the morning. Of course there is a very large gratuity in it for the museum. They were most co-operative."

"You are a miracle worker, Elliot Burch." Catherine reached to kiss his bearded cheek as they entered the museum. "We will never forget this."

Elliot smiled as he took her coat. "Go on now, I'll wait for you out here." He cupped her cheek in his palm, before turning to point into the museum. "Show him what we found. Enjoy your night, guys."

"Thanks, Elliot." Catherine nodded, turning to Vincent. "I have so much I want to show you and we only have a few hours..."

Despite her need to take him straight to her discovery, she drew him forward slowly, allowing Vincent the time and space to admire all the artworks hung on the walls, knowing this was a magical and very special time for him. But, soon enough, they were standing before the Van Gogh painting.

She turned to look up at him. "What do you think of this one, Vincent?"

"Magnificent." Vincent leaned forward to study the work. "So powerful and yet so simple..."

"I've seen it many times before." Catherine waited breathlessly as his gaze ran over the work, studying it in minute detail. "But I never truly saw it until a couple of days ago. And even then it was Elliot who showed me what I'd been missing..."

"So this is what you wanted to show me...what caused your wonderful sense of excitement the other day..." Vincent turned to frown at her. He looked back at the painting; leaning closer as she had done, down into the bottom, left hand corner..."Vincent 87..." he mused softly.

"Yes..." Catherine moved closer, sliding both hands around Vincent's arm, resting her cheek against the broad strength of his shoulder. "I know, isn't it just magic? It's as if we were always meant to be..."

"It is beautiful..." Vincent breathed, his gaze dropping to study her upturned face. "And so are you." He lifted his hand to stroke the side of her face with the backs of his gloved fingers, before sliding his arm around her waist, drawing her close against him. "It is as if that long ago Vincent knew something... something very special..." He laid his cheek against her hair.

"Yes..." Catherine sighed, returning his embrace. "Happy birthday, Vincent...I do love you."



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