

Artist, Lover, Forger, Thief

A KATE O'DADE ART CRIME NOVEL

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For Michael and Colin

Illusion is the first of all pleasures.

—VOLTAIRE

One sees what one wants to see.

*It is false, and that falsity is the
foundation of art.*

—EDGAR DEGAS

Art is what you can get away with.

—ANDY WARHOL

PART I

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

CHAPTER 1

A bad forgery's the ultimate insult.

—JOHN GRANT—

San Diego, Tuesday, October 9, 2018

When Nick McCoy spotted the nude reclining on the red divan across the spacious gallery, his heartbeat quickened. As he moved closer to the propped-up painting, his excitement fizzled.

“Ninety-five million for this babe?” Steele asked.

Nick glanced from the nude displayed on the easel to his wealthiest client. Squat, with a lumpy bald head and shrewd pinpoint eyes, Dixon Steele was the worst kind of crook—a hedge fund billionaire. As his art adviser, Nick was tempted to stick the old vulture with the mediocre forgery, but that might endanger his larger scheme.

“Is she worth it?” Steele asked.

“Not if you want a Modigliani. Your babe is a fake.”

“How can you tell?”

“The low price is a flag, plus Modigliani nudes are rare. One recently sold for a hundred and fifty-seven million. Then there’s the artistry, the feeling. Does she turn you on?”

“I’m sixty-eight, young man. Takes more than a plastic babe to move my flesh.”

“Plastic—there’s your answer. Modigliani was a sensualist. You can

feel that in every line, color, and texture of his paintings. This is no Modigliani. It's the plodding work of that phony Hungarian count."

Steele turned the bogus nude toward the wall, then strutted around the gallery, inspecting the gems in his priceless collection. The ass flaunted his ugliness like a weapon; he seemed to get off on repulsing people. Nick found this in-your-face behavior intriguing. It was easy to picture Steele as a boy scaring other kids with his Godzilla act. Nick could have used this attitude to face down his boyhood tormentors. Instead—to his shame—he ran from them and hid in museums until he was old and strong enough to fight back.

He touched his right cheek. Thanks to plastic surgery, the hideous burn scars were gone. All that was visible was a slight discoloration and tightness near his right ear. Some considered him handsome now in an exotic sort of way, but the face he saw in the mirror still looked foreign to him—his black thicket of hair and reddish-brown complexion resulting from Spanish, Black, and Celtic blood. And his old self-image as a freak still haunted him.

Nick shifted his attention to the luminous masterpieces hanging on the canvas-colored walls. He focused on one of Degas's elegant ballerina paintings. The dramatic lighting and glittering swirl of pastels washed over him, lifting him out of his dark thoughts. He appreciated the moments of silence in Steele's soundproof and well-protected gallery. Few would guess that a multibillion-dollar collection was hidden inside a dilapidated barn on a large estate in the elite community of Rancho Santa Fe.

Steele lumbered across his sight line, and Nick got a whiff of his pine-scented aftershave that momentarily overpowered the familiar odors of new varnish and weed.

The collector stopped before his most prized painting, *The Blue Room* by Picasso. Nick sidled up to him and admired the naked beauty giving herself a sponge bath in her shades-of-blue bedroom. She reminded him of Raquel, Steele's wife and his lover. The mere image of his fleshy mitts touching her delicate skin sickened him. He regretted

his inability to return Raquel's love, but she would be better off with a man who could give her a normal life. If he could risk loving a woman, it would be his brilliant former therapist who'd made his life-long grief almost bearable.

“Hey Pablo, you’re still the cock of the walk.” Steele gave the work a thumbs up and kept it up while passing Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*. Then he sneered at the next painting, jabbing his thumb down. “This one’s weak. Let’s get rid of it.”

“Weak? You’re looking at one of Monet’s famous water lily pond paintings.”

“It’s too airy-fairy, and there’s too much pink. No lovely lilies allowed in the Man’s Lair.” He thumped his chest. “Listen, my boy, I want to feel young. I need bold, virile paintings around me— injections of vitality. I have a young wife to service.”

Nick knew the Monet was a better-than-average fake, and if marketed, could raise questions and put him in the spotlight. So far, he’d managed to elude the authorities after decades of maneuvering and had finally gotten into an influential position as Steele’s adviser. He owed Raquel for helping him secure the art conservator job at the Steele Museum, paving the way for his current role as Steele’s principal consultant on all his art purchases, trades, and sales. At last, he was in the perfect position to avenge his family, but he had to complete his last scam and vanish before the FBI or Scotland Yard caught up with him. *Don’t blow it now!*

Steele usually listened to his advice, but he was fickle and rash and required canny handling. “The Monet is one of your most valuable paintings,” Nick said. “Prices are still rising on the water lily series. Might be wise to hang onto it for a while.”

“Yeah, I hear you. Let’s dump the Braque. I’m done with brown Cubist shit.”

Nick stifled a sigh. He was used to Steele playing favorites and suddenly turning on a formerly loved treasure like a petulant child. “This still life looks a bit muddy because it’s the only painting I haven’t

restored in this gallery. Let me clean off the surface grime, then we'll see how you feel."

Steele grunted his assent, lifted the Braque off the wall, and handed it to Nick. "Are you almost done with Cézanne's *Card Players* and Matisse's *Joy of Life* sketch? I've been missing them. They're my family, you know, the only ones I can count on. People never fail to disappoint and screw you over. Am I a cynic or what?"

"I'd say you're a realist, Mr. Steele. I can fix the flaws in paintings but not in people."

"Hey, Nick, you're like a son to me. It's time you called me Dix." He gave Nick's shoulder a heavy-handed squeeze.

A feeling of power surged through Nick. Finally, all his work to win Steele's trust and affection was paying off. He flashed back on Steele's role in the fire that had destroyed his home, his face, and massacred his family. He counted the days until he could break the killer's heart as his had been broken. Remembering his father's courage at the horrific end gave him the strength to put his life on the line.

"If all goes well, uh, Dix, I might be able to get the Braque, the Cézanne, and the Matisse back here in the next few days. The cleaning won't take very long."

"Good. Then the whole family will be together again, all dolled up." Steele grinned, showing off his stump-like teeth.

Steele's childish expression of affection for his paintings unnerved Nick. True love of great art was a strong but unwanted bond he shared with this infantile old man who, at times, seemed a most unlikely nemesis.

"I'll be out the next few nights and a lot of the days," Steele said.

"No problem. I've got the entry codes." Nick cleared his throat, then rolled out the lie. "I'll also need to be gone for a while after completing this job. I've got out-of-town business."

Steele scowled. "That's very inconvenient. What if I need to decide fast on a deal? You'd have to be here to evaluate the works in question."

“Consult my mate, the British art historian at UC San Diego. I’ll alert him. He knows the market and has a great eye—almost as good as mine.”

“I like your modesty, Nick, my boy.” Steele chuckled.

Nick gave him the art historian’s card, wrapped up the Braque, and headed for the gallery’s rear exit, leaving Dix to spend quality time with his family of masterpieces.

Nick was surprised and annoyed to find the inner steel door unlocked and the outer wooden door open. He never forgot to lock up or guard his back. Other than Steele, Raquel, and himself, only Steele’s rotten son, Simon, knew the code.

Nick locked the doors and strode from the cool, sheltered gallery into the dicey world of bright light, dark shadows, and October’s hot Santa Ana winds. He picked up his pace. The wind dried up his skin and everything green outside. Wildfires were due to strike. His sensitive radar picked up a more imminent threat. He scanned the surrounding pines and eucalyptus trees, his vigilant eyes alert to any movement in the dappled light. He turned the corner and spotted Simon’s red Maserati parked on the gravel beside his dusty SUV. The bloody twit was leaning against Nick’s car door, watching him through mirrored sunglasses. Nick preferred Steele’s ugly mug to his son’s sly-eyed prettiness.

“I heard you in the gallery with Pops,” Simon said as Nick approached him. “You really know how to work the old goat, don’t you? He swallows any bull you feed him.”

“You forgot to lock the doors after eavesdropping. Move aside.”

“Make me.” He rubbed his puny ass on the car door.

“What do you want, Simon?”

“I want you to leave.”

“You’re in luck; I am leaving.”

Simon kicked the gravel. “Shit, I mean for good.”

“Why? You don’t give a rat’s ass about the art collection.”

“It’s my inheritance, and I don’t want a slick Brit screwing with it. You’ve conned Dad. He thinks you walk on water, but you don’t fool me.”

“Likewise.” *Shut your face*, he told himself, but he’d had it with this spoiled parasite. “Does Papa know his son uses his allowance to deal drugs and make sadistic porn flicks?”

Simon glared at him through slitted eyes. “Tattle on me and I tell on you. You’re screwing his latest slutty wife.”

“That’s a lie.”

“I have proof from a private eye. If you don’t disappear, I’ll show the PI’s report to Pops. There’s an obscene shot of you and Raquel shagging at Rosarito Beach.”

Fury narrowed Nick’s eyes. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, shocking your old man into a heart attack?”

Simon shrugged, smirking.

Nick suspected the cold-hearted bastard’s greed included wanting his father dead. Simon no longer had to compete for the inheritance with his mother—Dix’s second trophy wife—or his older brother. Nick recalled they had died in a convenient-for-Simon car crash three years ago.

Simon strolled to his car, folded into the low-slung seat, and turned his mirrored glasses on Nick. “Take the slut and get out of San Diego, and I’ll bury the report. You have ten days to find another place to squat. Otherwise, I squeal, and you’ll be the one who stops Pop’s ticker.” Simon showed his pointy, little-boy teeth, another part of him that hadn’t matured to his thirty-something age. “But if the old cuckold survives, he’ll make sure you both croak in the worst possible way. You’re screwed, asshole.” Giggling, Simon gunned the motor.

Turning his back on the punk’s squealing wheels, Nick loaded the Braque into the back of his SUV and then slammed the door, a rush of adrenaline spurring him to run. Old man Steele incited Nick’s hatred and contempt, but his psychopathic son scared the piss out of him.

No way could he trust Simon’s deal. Most likely, he had less than ten days to pull off an intricate revenge scheme and get out of here alive. He could almost hear the clock ticking.