

# **THE MISSING MATISSE**

by

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AN EXCERPT

The Twenty-second Mystery in the Paul Zacher Series.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Although I haven't yet taken a bullet in this job—and there's probably one waiting for me out there—those people in this town who know me well understand that there are still times when I'd rather be painting than working on a case for the Paul Zacher Agency, even though that's my name on the door. Think of it as kicking back, if you wish, even though painting is usually more difficult and almost always pays more consistently.

The Agency had just wrapped up an investigation involving a lethal multi-level struggle among the claimants to an enormous pile of American dollars that went well into nine figures. It was one that had us tied in knots for weeks before we put it to bed and filed it as *The Dead Pool*. It was an appropriate case name, since more people had died than in any other case we'd ever taken on.

When a call came in from my art dealer, Ramón Rivera, just two days later, I was more than merely ready for something different, I was ecstatic. In his Galería Uno on Calle Relox in the downtown part of San Miguel de Allende, México we call *el centro*, (my hometown for the past eighteen years), Rivera does a great job of selling my paintings. Between his gallery and the other one I use in Mérida in the Yucatán, Galería Mundo Maya, my output is pretty well accounted for. Most painters aren't able to say that and look you in the eye without blinking. Of course, it helps to know what your customer likes. I've never been shy about painting a picture people will love, provided I feel that way too, and I'm not that easy to please.

The commission Rivera was calling to offer me that day was to paint a copy, specifically an undetectable reproduction, working from the four million dollar original set up on the easel next to me, of a 1931 Henri Matisse painting titled, *A Luncheon in Vence*. Vence was either the town in the south of France where he was living at that time, or a neighboring one. Ramón Rivera had told me the market value of it too, possibly to impress me with the seriousness of this project. He also explained the fact that Seguridad Reyes would come in their armored truck to deliver it in the morning for each of the four days I estimated would be required to reproduce it, and pick it up at a time I specified at

the end of each of those days. Overnight it would remain in their vault. There was no reason to be put off by their gruff armed presence coming and going in my studio; in fact, the Paul Zacher Agency had dealt with Reyes and his group in another case, one that involved our handling of a unique relic of the Mayan empire, one of the lost books, and I had full confidence in them. We had filed that case, our second, as *The Fifth Codex*.

Ramón Rivera said he had passed this commission on to me because he knew I had done a lot of copies early in my painting life, even of great seventeenth century masterpieces, and there is simply no better way I know of to learn the process of painting. To plausibly attempt one of these masterworks myself, I needed to understand in detail what the masters had done and how they'd done it. Of course, no matter how good my copies were back then, I always signed my own name on the back of the canvas.

This project was going to be different in subject, but not in fundamental skills. Rivera had called to offer me \$6,000 for a flawless copy of that Matisse, which had been owned by a discreet local collector for nearly thirty years. It had always been in his family before that. I had certainly never heard of it being here in San Miguel. Rivera volunteered to take only ten percent as a cut for his gallery for brokering the job. He was able to go that low because it would never take up any space on his walls, so the share of his operating expenses attached to the painting I was going to reproduce was virtually nothing.

In my surprise, I asked, "Why me?" Not that I wasn't pleased.

"Because you are the best painter we have today in the state of Guanajuato," he said. As he well knew, this was the proper response, although I could name six or seven others I had a lot of respect for.

Although it was not the usual commission for an original work, I was still eager to take the job. Several years earlier I had done two fantasy Matisse's for a client who lived in Guadalajara. They were speculatively based on the thirteen disappeared canvases that the local Vichy government seized from that painter's studio when they took over in the south of France in 1940. They had never been seen publicly since. People in the art world know they are still out there somewhere, and constantly wait for them to resurface, since they are now collectively worth about eighty or ninety million dollars. Perhaps even more,

since, their absence during that stretch of time has given them an inflated, almost legendary, status.

That is why for this new job I already spoke Matisse's stylistic language fluently, or more precisely, I could paint comfortably in his idiom from that specific period. I had learned on those others to think like he did. The knack lies in understanding his brushstroke and color design, as well as the apparent naiveté of his concepts. While his work is always more masterful than it appears on the surface, he is still no more difficult to copy than van Gogh, a perennial favorite of art forgers. And it is common knowledge among insider New York art circles that in a Tokyo mansion there hangs a marvelous fake van Gogh that was purchased privately several decades ago for around \$85 million, a truly dizzying markup for any forger to take to the bank.

Naturally, for me the motive behind this assignment went deeper than privately executing another expert copy of a multi-million dollar painting. The truth is I love fakes, whether mine or someone else's. It's all about the great effort it takes to paint a wonderful painting, even for dodgy reasons. Besides, when someone quite privately orders a pricey reproduction of an expensive painting he already owns, questions will tend to arise among the very few people who know that's happening. Ramón Rivera had sworn me to absolute secrecy during his first call. I am only writing about it now for this private case report for our own records.

I threatened to come down to the gallery and confront Ramón Rivera face to face, effectively to grab him by the points of his collar. I could always sense when he was holding back part of the story. In response he offered to go further on the phone; he hated scenes like that. The story, as I chipped it away from him piece by piece, like carving a portrait in marble, went like this:

The family of Yuri Benekov had instantly become Russian exiles in France at the outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. They had been growing increasingly uneasy even before it arrived, and when the government overthrow came, many of their important furnishings were already installed in their Riviera villa outside of Cannes, where they had spent many delightful winters during the gathering twilight of the Czars.

“There must be a *tope* (speed bump) coming up here,” I said to Ramón.

“Well yes, Paul, as you can imagine. One of Yuri Benekov’s great grandchildren, a younger son, has been living here in San Miguel for some time, more than a generation. He has always kept a low profile as he advances in his age. The money has run out since he was a minor heir through their father, and he is now happy to be a cancer survivor, but that has cost him financially. He contacted me because he wishes to quietly sell the last important asset he has, aside from his house in the Parque Juarez neighborhood, that wonderful Matisse, which as he now declares, he has never liked that well anyway. His desire is to replace it with a copy that no one can recognize as such. He will continue to ignore the copy as he had the original, so you will see why I thought of you.”

I wondered how to take this. “Of course, but what do you think his heirs will say to that when they inherit my version of it? Unlike some of my other copies, I can’t allow my name to ever appear within a hundred meters of it.”

“How can they legitimately say anything? It was never theirs, although I’m sure they will protest when they find out. His two sons and a daughter all live in California now and rarely come down here. They had no role in obtaining that picture, and even if your copy is all that’s left, they will still inherit the residue of all that money from the sale of the original when their father dies. That is a time, which between us, cannot lie so far down the road. So what’s the beef? It’s not our call, Paul. Not everything is.” After college, Rivera was a handsome guy with a cleft in his chin and dimples in both cheeks. He had done his apprenticeship at a gallery in Beverly Hills when he was learning the business, so he had a good handle on phrases like that, as well as a mastery of gallery ethics. “I can assure you that there is no question that Stan Bennett has the right to have his painting copied.”

“Who is Stan Bennett in all of this?”

“That is the great grandson we are still talking about. They changed their last name from Benekov in the fifties when they still lived in the U.S. It was the McCarthy era, so you know how anything sounding Russian was thought to be sinister back then. They wished to start clean.”

I took the job because I liked the challenge of doing another Matisse and it paid well. While I was happy enough to know the moral nuances of it, they didn’t seem

threatening to me personally, and I agreed with Rivera that Stan Bennett could have his Matisse copied if he wished to. I never avoid ethical issues, but I didn't see one here.

Once online at home I quickly located an art supply retailer in Montreal that sold the same Atelier Boudreau paints that Henri Matisse had used during that period, the identical ones I'd used before, in fact, on my other Matisse fantasy copies, but whose source I had forgotten. I knew from my earlier research that their formulae had not changed. Atelier Boudreau was even still grinding real malachite for one of their greens, and the similar shade the other suppliers now sold used phthalocyanine to save on materials costs. In looking at period photos I had seen their label on some tubes in a couple of studio shots of Matisse's palette and worktable.

I found a source for antique canvas and stretchers at Materiales del Arte in Mexico City. They specialized in offering "seasoned" components for restoration, even as they bought out the inventory of other suppliers going into bankruptcy. Although not large, these were all extra costs, but that wasn't a problem for Stan Bennett. His principal concern was that my reproduction of *A Luncheon in Venice* be irreproachable from any conceivable standpoint.

I decided not to remove the original canvas from its frame yet, and send both painting and frame back with Seguridad Reyes, who would store it in their vault while the owner negotiated a sale, most likely in private rather than at public auction. A month or so later, when my version was sufficiently dry, I would then mount it in the old frame with the same clips and privately deliver it to Stan Bennett in a plain brown wrapper. Should anyone inquire about the missing Matisse during that interval, he could quite plausibly say it was out being cleaned. Like many other objects of beauty, paintings also need periodic maintenance.

So while this all made for a rather complicated framework for a single painting commission, with its careful period detail, it still *was* all about painting, and not another detective outing, one I wasn't yet ready for. Even more, it was about fakes, and that gave me some extra satisfaction. The case we had just filed as *The Dead Pool* was a nasty piece of business, and near the end of it I had made a costly error that still haunted me and would continue to do so for some time to come. I desperately wanted to move on with a project I could bury myself in as a painter.

If I was able to pull off this copying project, and I had no doubt that I could, then only an x-ray comparison would reveal that Matisse's starting sketch on bare canvas from 1931 was any different from mine, and you'd need to have both pictures present to reveal that, something that was not in any way likely.