

Chapter 1

"I once was a painter," Vincent Vermay said as he stared at the empty canvas sitting expectantly on the easel. He ran his hand through his brown wavy hair and sighed. "Once upon a year ago," he clarified. The canvas stared back at him. Waiting. Always waiting. He reached out and touched the empty surface. It felt both smooth and rough beneath his fingertips. He had filled many such canvases with beauty over the course of his forty years. But since his fortieth birthday, he'd painted nothing. Nothing he'd dare show the public anyway. Nor had he shown them to his dealer. Kate had seen them though. He'd shown her the few pitiful paintings produced during his fortieth year and all she'd done was shake her head. Words had not been needed. Words would have stung far worse than the shake of her head.

Vincent turned away from the easel and went to the window. He looked down on the quiet Georgetown street below. The street, like the façades of the 19th century townhouses that lined it, was brick. Vincent liked his brick street. He remembered the day fifteen years ago when he and Kate—newly married and tired of apartment life—had met the realtor to look at the townhouse where they now lived. He'd fallen in love with the brick street. It was an archaic anomaly in the bustling, modern world. It harkened back to a simpler time. To a romantic time when neighbors gathered on front porches after dinner to visit and horses' hooves clopped as carriages drove by. Vincent smiled. Yes, the brick street remained. He and several of his neighbors, especially the elderly ones, fought an ongoing battle with the city fathers who wanted to pave over the brick. He and his fellow homeowners would never let that happen.

Vincent grasped the window's brass handles and slid it up. A cold breeze blew in and he shivered, goose bumps rising on his bare forearms. He wore his usual painting clothes—blue jeans and an oversized, one hundred percent cotton, beige-colored shirt. Kate called it his Williamsburg shirt because it reminded her of the craftsmen at Colonial Williamsburg. At present, he had the sleeves rolled up and held in place with black garters. He wore penny loafers on his feet. He took several deep breaths of the cold winter air. It burned inside his chest but that was okay. It made him feel alive. Something he rarely felt these days. He would be forty-one on Saturday. He prayed this birthday would end his artistic block. After all, or so it seemed, last year's birthday began it.

He heard the furnace kick on in the basement. He started to close the window but stopped, catching sight of Kate's red Mercedes

turning onto their street. What, he wondered, was she doing home in the middle of the day? He finished closing the window and turned back to his empty canvas. What would she say when she saw it? Would she accuse him of wasting another day while she was out working, actually supporting them now, since he no longer was? She hadn't voiced these feelings yet, but Vincent knew they were there. He saw them in the resentment that lived in her eyes these days. She didn't have to see the blank canvas though. She didn't have to know he still wasn't painting. He snatched a white sheet off the couch where he sometimes slept if he'd stayed up too late working. He threw it over the easel and covered the canvas. He'd never lied to her about his painting before. This would be a first for him. He hesitated, one hand reaching for the sheet to remove it. He heard her come in the front door. "Vincent!" she called. "Vincent, are you upstairs?"

"Yes, I'll be right down."

He left the studio. He left the sheet covering the canvas.

* * *

He met her on the second floor landing. Sunlight poured in the large stairwell window, lighting her up like an angel. She wore a dark green skirt and blazer with a pale green blouse. An ivory scarf covered with ivy encircled her neck, an emerald pin holding it in place on her left shoulder, the pin the exact color as her eyes. She had her long, curly, chestnut brown hair pulled back with a hairclip that matched her scarf pin. Round, steel-framed glasses rested on her long, delicate nose. She wore very little makeup; her fair skin and natural long eyelashes didn't need much embellishment. He looked at her perfectly angled face, her cheekbones high yet subtle, her chin square, and couldn't help but feel exactly what he had felt the day he'd met her in his college economics class. He was bowled over by her beauty. As he did that day so long ago, he grinned a big, old, country-boy grin.

Her green eyes questioned him.

He kept on grinning.

"What?" she asked, setting her leather briefcase on the window seat.

"You're extraordinarily beautiful, Kate."

Her right eyebrow shot up. "Okay. And now this is when you tell me you haven't painted a blessed thing all morning."

The words cut him. His grin disappeared. "Thanks for your faith."

"Well, have you?"

"Yes," he lied, surprised at how easy the lie came out.

She started up the steps toward his studio. He followed her.

"You can't see it."

She stopped and turned back to him. "Excuse me?"

"You can't see it."

"And why is that?"

"Because..." He took her hand. "Because this might actually be something good. I want to wait until it's done before I show anyone."

"I'm not anyone."

"I know that."

She pulled her hand free and continued up the stairs. He let her go. He sat down on the stairs and waited for her explosion. She would lift the sheet, see the blank canvas, realize he'd lied to her and she would blow. His hands formed into fists. He waited. He heard the studio door squeak open. He really should oil the hinges. Her high heels stomped on the hardwood floor. Then silence. She was lifting the sheet now. He knew it. The eruption was about to begin.

Except the eruption was not the shouting he expected. Instead, laughter floated down the stairwell. He sat still, not believing his ears. Footsteps on the floor again and then she was on the stairs next to him. "Vincent," she said, still laughing. "You're serious. You've got the damn thing covered."

He couldn't believe that she hadn't uncovered the empty canvas. He sat there on the step, unable to speak. How could it be, he wondered, that his lie would go undetected?

Kate sat down next to him and patted his knee. "You artists sure are something," she said, shaking her head. Mirth filled her eyes. "So you think I'm your artistic jinx. Is that it? If you don't show me what you paint, it'll be spectacular."

"No," he said, taking her hand. "It's just...well...I thought that if I painted the whole painting to completion without anyone seeing it or commenting on it, it might...you know..."

"Time was when you couldn't wait to show me your works in progress."

"I know but..." He didn't know what to say. Not really. He was lying to her for the first time since meeting her. He was lying and not getting caught. He hung his head.

She slipped her arm around his shoulders and pressed close against him. Her body touching his made him feel more ashamed than he already did. "I guess I can live with this new painting method. The suspense might kill me though." She kissed his cheek. "You need a shave."

Still not looking at her, he asked, "You're really okay with this?"

"Yes. Although it does hurt a little."

He looked at her. "What hurts?"

"The fact that I might no longer be your muse."

He saw traces of sadness creep into her eyes. He touched her cheek. "Don't think that. That's not it at all."

"Then what is?"

"I can't explain it. I just think that no one, not even you, should see this painting until it's done."

"A feeling you have?"

He nodded.

She smiled. "Then we'll go with your feeling. But you know how impatient I am." She stood up.

"Where are you going?"

She started down the stairs. "To pick you out a suit."

"A suit?" He followed her. "For what?"

She stopped outside their bedroom. "Okay, now I know you've definitely been painting and all those creative juices of yours have been flowing."

"Why?"

She lightly patted his cheek. "Because you've forgotten. You're not dressed. Didn't answer any of my phone calls. By the way, what did you do with the answering machine? The phone keeps ringing off the wall."

"Shut it off. The phone is turned down. What have I forgotten?"

She shook her head and went into the bedroom. "The reading of the will, Vincent." She stuck her head out the door. "Remember, my grandmother died three weeks ago. Not that anyone in my family was ever going to tell me."

He slapped his hand against his forehead. "Damn! The appointment with the attorney in D.C. That's today."

"Give the artist a prize. Now, come on. I may have missed her funeral, but I don't intend to be late for the will."

* * *

Vincent sat beside Kate in the huge conference room. She was nervous. He knew that because she kept playing with her earrings. She was angry too. He knew that from the fire in her eyes. The flames grew with each relative she looked at. There were four of them: two men and two women. Vincent had never met them before. They were, Kate had informed him earlier, from the "filthy rich and we know it" side of the family. Vincent didn't quite know how these four people were related to the deceased—knowing, according to Kate, wouldn't matter a hill of beans—but there was no doubt they were Kate's relatives. The women, especially, shared her same green eyes, and her chestnut brown hair. The four did not speak to Kate. In fact, they stared at her with open hostility.

The conference room door opened and a young, slick-looking lawyer in a designer, pinstriped, navy blue suit entered. He carried a leather briefcase. "Good afternoon," he said as he sat down at the head of the table. All eyes turned towards him, murmured hellos spilled forth.

The lawyer set his briefcase on the mahogany table and opened it, the latches snapping, the sound echoing off the mahogany walls. Pointing at a sideboard loaded with bagels, muffins, donuts and a full coffee pot, he said, "I trust you've helped yourselves to the refreshments."

No one had and no one explained why he or she hadn't.

Vincent stifled a chuckle as he winked at the lawyer.

The man looked at him with blank eyes.

Vincent wondered just how much hairspray the fellow used to keep his golden hair in place.

The lawyer removed a file from his briefcase and opened it. Clearing his throat, he said, "As some of you already know, I'm Derek Clausterman and for the past ten years, ever since my uncle died, I've managed Katherine Malloy's affairs."

"We know, Derek," the elder of the two men said. "Just get on with it."

Derek glared at the man then turned to Kate. "You must be Katherine Vermay."

"Yes. This is my husband, Vincent."

"Oh, I know who he is, Mrs. Vermay." He smiled at Vincent. "I own two of his works."

"Which ones?" Vincent asked, curious.

"Laughing at Winter and Gloom in Spring."

Vincent inclined his head. "I'm honored."

Kate pinched his leg beneath the table.

"For God's sake, read the damn thing and let's be done with it," the elder man said.

"Yes, Derek," the younger man said. "I have a meeting at four."

"Which was exactly why the dear man couldn't attend his own grandmother's funeral," one of the women said. "A meeting, you know."

"Caroline," the man practically hissed.

Lovely people, Vincent thought. Maybe it was a good thing that Kate had no contact with this side of her family.

"Okay," Derek Clausterman said. "We'll get on with it." He turned back to Kate. "The reason I've included you in this reading of Mrs. Malloy's last will and testament is because she's mentioned you in it. From what she told me during her last days, you've been a great source of joy to her over the years."

Kate tugged on her right earring. "I spent summers with her when I was a girl. I stopped going there for the summer after I went to college."

"After you sucked your college tuition out of her you quit going to see her." The words had come out of the woman who looked most like Kate. She had to be close to Kate's age as well. "Isn't that right, cousin?"

Anger flared in Kate's eyes. "You know nothing about it. You never did understand her."

"She was a crazy old woman. What else was there to understand?"

"She wasn't crazy."

"Oh, really? Then why did you stop going to see her? Especially after she gave you the money."

"That is none of your business." Vincent touched his wife's arm. She ignored him. "What I had with her was special. You never understood her."

"She was my grandmother too. Don't tell me I didn't understand her."

"You understand her? I think not Lydia. You never understood her. If you had, you never would have forced her to leave her home and move into your cold, ugly mansion."

"Why did you care, Kate? You stopped going to see her."

Kate shot out of her chair. "I had the right to know she died. I had the right to attend her funeral."

Vincent stood up as well. "Kate," he said, taking her arm. "This isn't the time."

Lydia rose to her full height, leaned over the table and said, "You gave up those rights when you left her that day."

Kate trembled but she said no more. Vincent gently eased her back into her chair. He held on to her hand. Tears welled in her eyes.

"Now that the pleasantries are out of the way," Derek Clausterman said, "May I continue?"

Lydia sat down. "Please do, Derek."

"As you know, Katherine Malloy was worth in excess of fifteen million dollars."

"Wow," Vincent said in spite of himself.

Lydia glared at him.

"Anyway," Clausterman continued. "You are all here because you are the only ones of her surviving relatives who are bequeathed anything."

The elder man sat forward in his chair. "And rightfully so. I am her only surviving child after all."

Lydia rolled her eyes.

Clausterman turned to Katherine's son. "To you, Jethro, she has left one million dollars."

"What!" Jethro explained. "That's all?"

Clausterman turned to the younger man. "To you, Edward, she has left one million dollars."

"You're joking." He grabbed Jethro's arm. "Dad, he's got to be kidding."

Lydia stood up again, a sick smile on her face. "I don't think Mr. Clausterman is kidding at all. Tell me, Derek, I take it one million is exactly what she left Caroline and myself."

"That's correct."

Vincent turned to Kate. She sat stock still beside him, her skin white, her body trembling.

Lydia leaned over the table, rested her hands on its top and, eyes boring into Kate, said, "She left the rest to you, Kate. You bitch."

Kate bowed her head. Vincent could feel her fighting for control with every fiber of her being. He laid his hand on her forearm.

"Sit down, Lydia," Edward said.

Lydia ignored him, shifting her gaze to Clausterman. "Am I right?"

The lawyer nodded as he said, "Yes, Lydia, you are. Mrs. Malloy left the remainder of her estate to Mrs. Vermay."

Kate gasped and clutched Vincent's hand.

"In addition, Mrs. Vermay, she left you another item which she felt only you and your husband would appreciate."

Kate looked up. "The house?"

"Yes, Mrs. Vermay. Katherine left you the house in North Tonawanda. The house and all it contains." He held out a manila envelope. "The keys and deed are inside. It's all yours."

Kate took the envelope. She stared at it in wonder.

"Where is North Tonawanda?" Vincent asked.

"In upstate New York," Derek replied. "The house there has been in the Malloy family since it was built by Katherine's husband."

"It's the house Lydia forced her to leave," Kate said. She turned to Vincent. "She hated it down here. She never wanted to leave that house. She wanted to die there. She belonged there. She always said that."

Vincent rubbed Kate's arm.

"Sentimental crap," Lydia said. "It's a dilapidated old house in a Godforsaken city. Besides, I got her fulltime help and gave her a wing to herself. What more could she want? I looked after her in her old age and look how she repays me."

"She wanted to be in her home."

"The home you stopped going to see her at."

Kate opened her mouth to speak but checked herself. Instead, she turned to the attorney. "Is this all?"

"For now, Mrs. Vermay. We will need to meet so I can discuss Katherine's holdings...well, your holdings now."

"I can go?"

He nodded. "I'll call you Monday to set up a meeting."

Kate rose from her chair. "Thank you, Mr. Clausterman." She walked towards the door.

"What's the matter, Kate?" Lydia said. "Nothing more to say."

"Shut up, Lydia," Vincent said. He took Kate by the hand and led her from the room. Out in the hall, he slipped his arm around her and asked, "Are you okay?"

She handed him the manila envelope then removed her glasses and wiped at her eyes with her hand. "Thanks for telling her to shut up."

"Why didn't you tell her that you have seen Katherine since you turned eighteen?"

"Katherine didn't want her to know."

"Why?"

She sniffed. "I don't know. She never told me why. Drive me home, okay?"

"Sure." He pressed the elevator button and massaged her upper back while they waited. "When are you going to show me your new house?"

"Soon."

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Vincent woke with a start. He knew before he checked her side of the bed that Kate wasn't beside him. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was three o'clock. His heart beat wildly in his chest. What if she'd snuck upstairs to see his supposed painting? He jumped out of bed, slipped on his pajama bottoms and went looking for her. He ran up the stairs to the studio. She wasn't there. He sank against the door, relieved.

He tried downstairs next and found her on the front porch, wearing his flannel robe, light snow falling upon her. She was crying, oblivious to the cold and snow. He sat down beside her and took her in his arms. She buried her face in his bare chest and cried harder. He stroked her hair and held her. *Idiot!* She had been out here crying and all he'd thought of was himself. No, more specifically, what he had thought of was his lie.

He looked over her head at the snow gently falling in the pale light of the old-fashioned street lamps. It hit the brick street and

melted. Snow did not often stick here in Georgetown. Licking his lips, he said, "Hey, babe?"

She pushed back from him and looked up. Sniffing, she said, "I didn't want to wake you." Her voice wavered and cracked.

He smiled down at her. "You not being next to me woke me." He wiped the tears from her cheeks. "It's freezing out here."

She nodded, gripping his hand.

"Let's go inside. You're soaking wet."

She nodded again.

He led her inside, switching on the foyer light as he said, "Give me that robe."

She removed it, revealing mauve flannel pajamas decorated with small peach roses and green petals. He'd given them to her last Christmas and it pleased him that they'd turned out to be her favorite.

He hung the wet robe in the closet. "Come on." He led her into the living room. He didn't turn on any lights; the light filtering in from the foyer was enough. He sat down on the leather couch and pulled her down beside him. Arm around her shoulders, he said, "Now, what are all these tears about?"

She laid her head on his shoulder. "You're skin is cold."

"That's because I was sitting out on the front porch with you without a shirt on in the middle of winter."

"Sorry."

He kissed her forehead.

She took his right hand and entwined her fingers in his. "You have marvelous hands, Vincent. Hands with talent that create beauty."

Not anymore. "I don't think you were sitting on the front steps crying because of my hands." He pushed a stray lock of hair back from her face. "Any chance it had to do with Lydia Malloy?"

"Not really her."

"Then what."

"Katherine's death. And her life too."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a very long story, Vincent."

"So tell me. I'm not going anywhere."

"But I am. I have to be at the Capitol building early. Senator McMartin wants the whole staff there by seven."

"And what the good Senator wants, he gets."

"Don't do that." She moved away from him, releasing his hand.

"What?"

"Use that tone."

"What's the difference, Kate? You know I don't like the man."

"That man happens to be my boss."

"A choice I've never understood."

"The job pays quite well, you know. More than the one with Congressman Freeholder."

"Freeholder was a better man."

"Maybe so. But the job with McMartin affords me a higher profile. And, I'm making more money. A fact, by the way, which has been our saving grace this past year."

There it was, the resentment he knew she felt towards him because he was no longer pulling his financial weight. "Thanks for pointing that out, Kate," he said, rising.

She reached for him. "Wait, Vincent, I didn't—"

"Yes, you did. It's how you feel. You think I haven't picked up on it? How naive do you think I am?"

"I don't think you're naive."

"I know what all your Washington cronies are saying about me behind my back at all the functions you drag me to. I'm a leach. I'm a failure. I lost my artistic touch."

She jumped to her feet. "Stop it, Vincent!"

"Tell me, Kate. Do you agree with them?"

"No."

"But you resent me."

"No," she said. "I love you. I believe in you."

He looked away. She was lying. What she said aloud was not what her eyes said. Even in the dim light from the foyer, he could see the truth. She loved him. He didn't doubt that. But she no longer had faith in him. Lies, their relationship was nothing but lies now. What had happened to them?

"Vincent," she said. "I love you."

"But you think I've lost my talent."

"No."

Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying."

"Yes, you are."

She grabbed his hands. "Please, Vincent, drop this."

"You won't admit it."

"Vincent," she pleaded.

He pulled his hands free. "Don't admit it. I know. You can't fool me." He started to walk away, but stopped when she said his name, her voice quiet, trembling. He turned back to her. "What?"

"I need you. I just lost Katherine."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not going anywhere. Besides, where would I go?"

"Will you do something for me tomorrow?"

"What?"

"Book us on a flight to Buffalo this Saturday. North Tonawanda is not too far from the airport. I want to show you Katherine's house. I can explain things better there."

He stared at her, considering. Maybe a trip together would help. He did want to see Katherine's house. "Okay."

"I know I've never really explained my relationship with Katherine."

"She was your grandmother. That's explanation enough."

"She liked you, Vincent."

"I only met her once at one of your clandestine meetings. And that was years ago."

"She said that you were perfect for me. She said if I married you, I would never be lonely and never unloved. She said you were one of the few special men in the world."

"Then I guess she was wrong."

"No, she wasn't. Painting isn't everything you are, Vincent. You're gentle and kind with a heart as big as the universe. You love with every fiber of your being. I could never be unhappy with you."

"If that's so, why has the way you looked at me changed, Kate? Explain that one."

She stood silent, staring at him.

"Thought so. No explanation."

"Vincent..." She trailed off.

He held up his hands. "Forget it. I'll book the flight."

He left her standing in the living room. He went up to their bedroom, climbed into bed and rolled onto his right side, his back facing her side of the bed. She followed him to bed moments later. She lay down close to him. He felt her breath on his neck. "Vincent," she said. "What you see is disappointment. Not in you, but in life."

His heart picked up speed. "Life?"

"Yes."

He rolled over on his left side and faced her. "What do you mean, Kate?"

"I mean that life is ugly. And that over time, it creeps into your heart and destroys your hopes and your dreams, and in your case, the outpouring of beauty in art."

He took her hand. "You don't resent me."

She smiled. "No."

"But what you said about the money and taking the McMartin job?"

She laid a finger on his lips. "Is fact. We needed money." She smiled. "But now, thanks to Katherine, that's no longer an issue."

Now that she had said it aloud, it suddenly hit Vincent. "Shit," he said.

"What?"

"We're filthy rich."

Kate laughed. "Yes, I guess we are."

Vincent sat up. "If Katherine was worth 15 million dollars and she gave the others a total of 4 million. That means you got..."

"Eleven million, Vincent."

"Oh, my, God, Kate." He let out a long whistle. "Technically, I don't have to ever paint again."

"Oh, but, Vincent, you must. You must paint."

He lay back against the headboard. "And you, Mrs. Vermay, don't ever have to write another political speech."

She shook her head. "Don't get carried away with this, Vincent. You know we both love our work."

"Okay, I'll give you that. But now, we can do it just for the fun of it."

"You are impossible." She kissed his shoulder. "Now go to sleep. And don't forget to book the flight before you start painting tomorrow."

"Promise."

She rolled onto her back and closed her eyes. He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. He didn't dare tell her that he would have plenty of time to book the flight tomorrow because, just like today, he wouldn't paint a thing.