

~CHAPTER ONE~

*The University Building*

I stepped out of the examination hall at Manchester University sighing in relief and strolled towards the student café for some lunch. If the excited buzz around me was anything to go by, everyone else also thought the exam paper had been a breeze. I smiled at their whoops and cheers, and silently thanked our lecturer for priming us so well. Knowing I'd only one more exam to sit the following morning, and being well prepared for it, I decided to relax for the rest of afternoon, before knuckling down to some last minute revision later in the evening.

Being a glorious sunny day, as is usually the case in England during any examination week, the grassed area in front of the old university buildings was packed with lazing students; some sprawled on the lawn in pairs or clusters, others huddled around wooden picnic tables. End of semester fever hummed like bees in the air. I would have been welcome to sit with several of these groups, but as usual, I opted to be by myself. It might have been the age difference—I was two years older than most of them—or that I'd never seemed to gel with any of the crowds while I'd studied here. I was a natural loner. The only time I made any meaningful connection with someone was when I was seeking a blowjob in one of the gay clubs on a Saturday night. Even then, it usually ended with just a thank you and me walking away from any potential for a relationship.

Before reaching the café, I came to an abrupt halt. I spotted a familiar solitary figure sitting on one of the farthest picnic benches, his paints and canvas spread out before him. I watched the fair-haired guy clean his brush in the jar of sullied water, his tongue sweeping over his plump bottom lip, observing the red stone building as he did this.

It wasn't the first time I'd laid eyes on him. I'd seen this hottie around the university grounds many times before. Always alone and often sketching the scene in front of him. I never managed to catch his eye, nor pluck up the courage to approach him. For all my outward bravado, I hadn't wanted to embarrass myself nor be rejected by him. The artist, always engrossed in whatever he was doing, never looked up. As much as I willed it to happen whenever I passed by, he never noticed me.

For some reason or other, our paths had never crossed socially over the past three years, and now our student years were almost up. University ended for the summer recess in two weeks time and we would be going our separate ways. If I didn't talk to him today, I'd probably never get the chance again. It was either now or never.

Lacking my usually abundant confidence, I held back, trying to decide on the right approach so I didn't mess up what was to be my one and only opportunity with him. Standing there under the shade of a large oak tree, I observed him from a safe distance, wondering whether my intrusion would be welcomed. He always seemed such a loner, as if he spurned company in general and would do the same to me. I tutted aloud when I realised I could be describing myself. Perhaps we had more in common than I'd thought after all. I just had to show him I was willing to talk to him.

As soon as the picnic table next to the artist became available, I dashed to claim it for myself. If I hadn't already, I hoped to draw his attention by deliberately making a load of noise as I sat down and dumped my bag on the bench. The blond artist briefly looked my way, our eyes catching for a second or two, before he turned his head back to his painting. I leaned down and rummaged in my bag for some bottled water to quench my sudden anxiety-driven thirst.

I'd never encountered rejection at a nightclub. Not once, as far as I could recall. But this was a different situation entirely, and thinking this might very well be my first rebuff; I dithered a little longer, nervously fiddling with the strap on my bag and taking unnecessary gulps of the tepid liquid. What if this guy was straight or already spoken for? What if he wasn't interested in me?

From my position, I had a clear view; not only of him, but also the painting he was making. The guy was certainly talented; the watercolours mixed on his palette were applied with skill. As much as the developing painting fascinated me, the creator was of more interest. When his head tilted, his wheat-coloured locks fell forward over his cheek, the sunlight giving the impression of waves of silk, or so I imagined as I began to compose the first lines of a new story in my head. His top lip held between his teeth softly in concentration, so absorbed he appeared unaware of his surroundings—and of me.

Despite questioning other students in my classes over the past few months, I was unable to find out anything about him other than he was a painter, a solitary

one at that. Even when I pointed him out, no one knew his name, or where he lived. Not one of them took the same classes as him. Some had said they had seen him with one or two guys on occasions, but couldn't recall many details.

The guy was shorter than myself and well built. I stared at his muscular, bulky thighs filling the legs of his jeans as they spread out on the seat. He wore a faded grey t-shirt with indecipherable lettering and an arty theme: of Picasso or Dali perhaps. Fair hair covered the skin on his exposed golden arms; one consequence of sitting in the midday sun for hours, I guessed. His rounded chin adorned also with light coloured stubble. I wondered how his facial hair would feel against my skin if we kissed, or as his lips moved down my torso. Shivering with sudden arousal, I practically groaned.

A tilt to his head signalled the artist had moved his focus from the building. Deciding not to turn away from him, I swallowed down my anxiety, and swept my hands nervously through my hair. Our eyes finally met and held, neither of us flinching nor pulling away. Large blue-grey eyes bore down on me, the sadness emanating from them enough to make me gasp. I wondered if he was lonely too. Slowly my lips formed a gentle smile, and in return, I received the same. For an instant, his eyes sparkled, sending a welcome tingle over my already warm skin. We both quickly glanced away to look at the painting and then back at one another again.

Summoning my courage and not anticipating rejection now I'd seen that magical glint in his eyes, I stood and walked toward the artist, looking at the canvas laid out before him. I allowed sufficient time to appraise his work before commenting.

"You've captured the colour of the stone work beautifully." I hoped that was an intelligent enough response without sounding like some poncy git. "And I like the way you've painted those wispy cusps of clouds." I looked between the sky and the artwork for comparison, waiting for a reply or at least some sort of acknowledgement.

The artist nodded thoughtfully, scrutinising his work, seemingly appraising it as well. "Thank you." His voice was shy and gentle. "I've not quite finished."

"Would you mind if I watched you paint for a while?"

"Feel free." His cheeks flushed lightly.

I walked around the picnic table, sliding in next to him. “I’m Benjamin, but I prefer Ben.”

“Vinnie.” A smile lit up his face again, and it hit me how really gorgeous he was when he smiled. After rinsing his brush in the dirty water, he applied a wash of green for the grass in front of the building. “Or Vincent, if you really must.”

“As in Vincent Van Gogh?” I chuckled, feeling pleased. Not only did I now have his name, I’d shown him I knew something of the art world.

“Yep, you got it. My parents loved his work, hung loads of his prints on their walls, and they used to paint in his style as well.” He dabbed a darker shade of green in the foreground with a thinner brush to add texture. The smile disappeared, making me wonder if the sadness I sensed in him was related to his parents.

I wanted to keep our conversation flowing. “Are you studying Art? Or is this a hobby?”

“I majored in Art, although, I’m almost finished now. Just have the final assessment of my portfolio tomorrow afternoon, plus the evening viewing for family and friends to get through on Saturday, and then I’m finished here for good. Three years done and dusted. Thank goodness.” His voice oozed excitement at first and then became laced with a little trepidation. I wondered if he was worried about the exhibition, or the fact he was about to embark on a new phase of his life. I could empathise with that.

I pointed to the piece in front of him. “So, this won’t be on display then?”

He shook his head. “No, I’ve painted this scene several times before. The one I have on display was done in acrylics in the style of Van Gogh’s later work.” I nodded as if I understood what he meant.

I watched Vinnie apply more paint to complete the finer details of his picture. It really was beautiful. Despite the building having historical significance, the subject matter itself wasn’t particularly awe-inspiring to me. He’d obviously been drawn to some aspect of this building if he’d painted it many times before. Perhaps it was just a pleasant and convenient place for him to sit and paint.

“Part of the skill is knowing when to stop, especially when using watercolours. At least with oils you can let it dry and then add some more on top if

you want to change or add something.” He rinsed out the jar and his brushes with some clean bottled water and dried them with paper towelling.

Realising he was packing away his supplies, I grappled with ideas to retain him a little longer. “And what do you intend to do now you’ve finished uni?”

Vinnie paused in his packing up. “I already work part-time in an art supplies store down by the river off Bridge Street. You know, the one with the art gallery and coffee shop attached?” I nodded. I knew of it. “I’m working there full-time over the summer, running art classes for kids as well as working in the shop.”

My father owned a rival business on the opposite side of the city, along with another twelve shops in nearby towns. As my father was doing his best to put his employer out of business, I didn’t think I should mention it. If only I’d known beforehand, I could have arranged a summer job for him in one of our stores. “Not returning home to your parents, then?” As soon as I uttered the words, I regretted my thoughtlessness. Vinnie looked down immediately and resumed packing away.

“No, I’m staying here for now. I’ve paid the rent on my bedsit for the next two months and my brothers live nearby in St Helens.” He gave no mention of his parents. “How about you?”

I laughed with embarrassment. “My mother still insists on a family holiday every year, despite me being twenty-three. So next month, I’ll be in Tuscany with my parents and brother for three weeks. And then I’m supposed to help out my father with the family business. I haven’t decided yet for certain, though.”

“Twenty-three?” Vinnie questioned. “I took two gap years before I started university, too.” I smiled, realising we were the same age. “I worked during that time to save for the tuition fees. I didn’t want a huge debt when I’d finished.”

I never worried about paying tuition fees or anything else for that matter. My father provided more than enough for me, and not for the first time, I felt a little guilty about that. “I travelled around Europe for eighteen months before deciding what I wanted to do and then helped out in my father’s business until I started studying here.”

Vinnie frowned a little. His bag was packed and ready to go, but he remained seated, which I took as a good sign. The canvas lay on the table’s surface, drying in the sun. “So, what was your degree?” He sounded as if he genuinely wanted to know.

“English Lit. and Music.”

Vinnie nodded, his lips pursing while mulling over his next question. “What instrument do you play?”

I beamed, chuffed he was trying to find out more and showing an interest in getting to know me. “Piano, violin, guitar... the spoons.” I risked a joke, hoping to tease another smile from him.

Vinnie’s eyebrows scrunched for a second, and then he laughed along with me, tapping his thighs as if playing some invisible spoons, before asking, “So what career would you really like?”

I shrugged. “To be honest, I can’t make up my mind. My father wants me to follow in his footsteps, but I’d like to write. I suppose I could do both.”

“You write?”

“Yes, fiction—I write gay romance and fantasy in my spare time. Or try to anyway.” I liked that Vinnie didn’t blanch at gay. In fact, his eyes sparkled when I said the word. “I’ve got loads of them half-written. I just need time to edit and finish the best ones off. Not that anyone would want to read my stuff.”

“You should submit them to a publisher, you never know.” He really had the most gorgeous eyes, blue yet not quite blue—with a hint smoky grey.

“What colour would you call your eyes?” I cringed when I realised I’d actually asked him that.

He blushed, looking away from me, and rummaged in his bag for his box of paints. His slender fingers pulled out a tube, the lid being a similar colour to his eyes. “Stormy Blue, I think. A mix of pale blue and grey,” he suggested, showing me the name label.

I took the tube as if inspecting the colour, looked in his eyes and smiled, before handing it back to him. “Yep, looks like it.”

He packed it away again, took out an envelope, and stood. “Talking of writing, I need to post this letter to my brother so it gets there by tomorrow. It’s his birthday.”

“Never heard of the telephone or email?”

“I don’t own a phone or computer.” His cheeks flushed. “All my money goes on art equipment, rent and food. I never wanted to get into debt or owe anyone any money.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. I couldn’t imagine life without my phone or Mac or any of the luxuries I’d wangled out of my father over the past three

years. Most students I knew had a range of modern devices. And damn it, I couldn't ask for Vinnie's number to get in contact with him again.

"And I like to write anyway. Plus I often include a small picture I've painted for him." He placed his bag on his shoulder.

"Good luck with your assessment and the viewing next week."

"Thanks." Vinnie went to walk away, but paused. "You could always pop into the exhibition on Saturday evening if you'd like to see more of my work," Vinnie offered, doubt clearly rising in his voice. "I could do with all the support I can get. It's in the Art Department studio. There are posters with the details all around uni advertising it."

Cheering inwardly, I kept a restrained look on my face. "I might just do that."

"It's free," Vinnie added, smiling.

As if that would make any difference to me. "Hope to see you there, then." I smiled back at him.

"See ya." Vinnie walked away.

I sat there and watched him until he was out of sight, taking in his rear view with lustful appreciation. His jeans clung tightly and my cock twitched at the thought of seeing his naked butt.

I remained seated for another ten minutes, basking in the late afternoon sunshine. I could have punched the air—I'd actually spoken to him. Saturday evening couldn't come soon enough. It wasn't a date as such, but I hoped it might lead to one. Something I hadn't had for a long time. The idea of taking Vinnie on holiday to Italy flashed randomly across my mind. I could persuade my parents easily enough. I laughed at myself. I needed to concentrate on getting a date with him first. But the idea of sharing my hotel room with Vinnie for three weeks had me grinning from ear to ear, until I remembered he had a summer job. I grabbed a sandwich from a local store on the way to my apartment, only now realising I'd missed out on lunch.

Later that afternoon, still on cloud nine, I pulled out my revision notes on Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Jane Austen. After an hour of skimming through them, I gave up. All I could think about was Vinnie, his painting and our earlier conversation. Deciding to do something totally different, I booted up my Mac with

excitement coursing through me. Opening a clean page, I began to write a new story.

So inspired, I was still typing three hours later when I realised I was hungry again. I made a cheese omelette before returning and adding more, eventually settling into bed at midnight.

And the main character in my new novel?

Vinnie, of course.