

**the
Return
of
Vincent
Van Gogh**

a novel

Don M Forst

Introduction

Escaping the August heat and high humidity, Mark embraced the cool conditioned air in the entryway to Chops City Grill in Naples, Florida. He was unimpressed by the slick contemporary décor intended to project affluence, but instead broadcasted cliché. He looked around for the man he was supposed to meet.

Seeing Mark, Boris looked at a picture he'd pulled up on his phone. It was him. Boris left his table and shot across the restaurant. "I'm so happy to meet you," Boris said in flawless English—thanks to the KGB. "I have a table over there." He tipped his head to indicate a corner table. "I'm sure you're eager to hear all the details." Boris was six feet tall and muscular, had dark brown eyes and neatly combed brown hair. Other than his sharply cut square jaw, the dominant feature on his face was a two-inch vertical scar below his right eye.

Mark rushed ahead of Boris and sat down. When Boris reached the table, Mark demanded to know where the money was coming from.

"Mr. Reed, you don't waste any time," Boris said through a controlled smile.

"Call me Mark."

The men ordered vodka martinis and then got down to business. Boris said, "Otto Winkle is financing this endeavor. He's very rich and very German." He pulled a photo out of a manila folder and showed it to Mark. "He lives in Naples. He's been collecting your paintings, and he feels that he has enough now to start a modest-sized art museum. He's asked me to assure you that you'd have final say on every aspect of its exterior and interior architectural design."

"I'd like to see the site right now," Mark said. "If you don't mind."

"No, not at all. Let's order lunch first."

"I already ate."

"Then let's go." Boris held up his phone. "If you'll excuse me, I need to tell my driver we'll be right out." He stepped out of hearing range.

A black Lincoln Town Car was waiting for Boris and Mark when they left the restaurant. "Hold on," Mark said, stopping. "I have to call my gallery."

"It's too noisy out here," Boris said. "Do it in the car."

The driver, a large man wearing a jacket two sizes too small, got out of the car and walked around to where Mark was standing. He smiled broadly and opened the right rear door. "Please, sir," he said.

Mark got in, and the driver shoved in next to him and roughly grabbed his wrists, engulfing them with his huge hands. "What the fuck?" Mark said, yanking his wrists away and sliding to the left and running into Boris, who had him pinned. "What do you want with me?" Mark asked, trying to climb over Boris. The driver grabbed Mark's shoulders and slammed him into the seat.

"Hold him," Boris said, shoving a hypodermic needle through Mark's jacket and into his left shoulder.

"Help me!" Mark screamed.

"No one can hear you," Boris said, tapping the dark tinted window. "Soundproof."

Mark's strength seeped away and his vision became cloudy. His head flopped back against the seat. He tried to form the words, "What the hell is going on?" but his tongue was dead in his mouth.

Chapter 1

Mark Reed's focus darted between the moored boats in Huntington Harbor and the canvas propped on a small easel in front of him. It was chilly where he sat on a short sandy beach in Long Island, New York. A stiff mid-March breeze was blowing off the harbor, but he didn't notice; his mind was on the large white sailboats in the distance and how to portray them on canvas. He'd been stalled for several minutes, uncertain what to do next, but then the answer came to him, and he scooped up a glob of white paint with his palette knife and applied the paint to the canvas. Within minutes, his sailboats' white reflections danced on the murky gray water.

Mark stopped painting and stepped back. He'd only started seriously painting three years before this, when he was 38, but his precipitous intensity and skill would have made anyone believe he'd been painting all his life. He rested his right elbow in his left hand while his right hand explored the stubble on his cheeks. He normally kept himself clean shaven and neat, but he'd neglected himself the last two days. The bulky, paint stained, black turtleneck sweater he was wearing did nothing to accent his trim, 6'1", 180-pound physique, and his baseball cap only managed to mash his full head of unwashed brown hair.

Mark scowled at the painting, certain something was lacking but uncertain what that something was. Then his face lit up, and he attacked the painting until he was satisfied with what he saw. He'd realized that he'd failed to make a distinction between the gray of the sky and the gray of the water.

After he'd used the last of the day's light, Mark folded up his stool, gathered up his oil paints, gingerly lifted his canvas from the easel, folded the easel, and carried everything up a low rocky embankment and over to his car, a red Buick SUV. From the marina where he'd parked, it would only be a 15-minute drive to his house in Lloyd Neck, on Long Island's north shore, bordering Long Island Sound.

Soon Mark drove down the 100-foot-long driveway on his property, which was dense with tulip trees, maples, and oaks. The only clear area there was a band of lawn around the house. He passed by the circle drive at the entrance and parked in the attached garage of the off-white stucco house he'd designed and built eight years earlier. As soon as he stepped out of the garage into the house, he heard his "love" in the kitchen, singing along to the radio. He passed through the great room with its 17-foot ceiling finished in walnut planks. Here the warm, light cerulean blue walls were covered with his gold-framed oil paintings. Recessed ceiling spotlights illuminated 10 of them. He stepped into the kitchen, where Allison was.

Mark had met Allison Weeks four years earlier at an opening in Highlands Gallery, in the SoHo district of lower Manhattan. From the moment he saw her, he was mesmerized by her beauty, her long red hair gathered into a loose knot on the top of her head, the few strands trailing along her high cheek bones, her green eyes. Her lilting voice enchanted him, as did her exceptional business acumen and obvious intelligence. Now she lived with him.

He watched her gently shred the salad greens for dinner. She'd recently changed her hairstyle, opting for a short cut that hugged her face, and side sweeping bangs. She was wearing True Religion designer jeans, a white oxford blouse, and turquoise heels, which accentuated her height, 5'7". Mark sauntered up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, and she nonchalantly brushed him aside and reached for an onion and started slicing it. Mark slowly turned her around locked eyes with her. Holding up her knife, she said, "Just so you know, I'm armed and dangerous."

"Perfect," Mark said, pulling her tightly against him before beginning a long and gentle kiss, his lips barely touching hers. Then he gazed into her eyes and said, "Have I told you lately that you're beautiful?"

"While I'm slicing onions? No, I don't think you have. Thanks anyway." Her face radiated love.

"Can't blame me for trying," Mark said.

Allison handed him the salad, and he asked if she'd take a quick look at the painting he did that day.

"It looks like the water melts into the sky," Allison said when he brought it to her. "Didn't Monet do something like that?"

"You're right, he did. But I think his *Impression, Sunrise* came out a lot better than this thing."

"I'm not so sure about that red sailboat, Mark. The color pulls the eye in and doesn't let it move around the painting."

"Now that you mention it, red doesn't work. It was gray, but I changed my mind." Mark respected Allison's artistic judgment. Graduating from art school and running an art gallery for several years had guaranteed that she'd have spot-on artistic insight.

The next day, Mark finished then signed his painting with two names, Mark Reed and Vincent Van Gogh. Using two names wasn't a casual decision; it evolved through considerable self-doubt and personal anguish. When he started painting—what turned out to be only days after receiving a slight head injury during an auto accident—his style was identical to Van Gogh's, although he didn't know it at the time. At first, when people brought that to his attention, he refused to accept there was any likeness or that his talent was in any way comparable to Van Gogh's. It was only after long months of denial that he slowly became convinced that he didn't possess full ownership of his talent, that it in fact belonged to Van Gogh. After this realization, he signed his previously unsigned paintings with Van Gogh's name only, and began offering them for sale at Highlands Gallery.

Mark's decision to sign his paintings this way set off a bomb in the global art market, forcing the value of original Van Gogh paintings to fall 60 percent. This was because many art collectors believed his talent was the reincarnation of Van Gogh. (A dead artist's work always draws higher sale prices than a live artist's. They considered Van Gogh alive.) So his painting values dropped, and wealthy collectors blamed Mark. Some wanted his head, others wanted his paintings.

An influential and wealthy art collector named Anthony Espinosa sued Mark for fraud and lost during a now famous trial in New York. During the proceedings, Mark publicly stated that he believed his talent was the result of reincarnation, reincarnated *talent*, that is. Many art critics and collectors questioned his sanity, but none questioned the caliber of his work. To satisfy critics, collectors, and to be able to live with himself, Mark decided to eliminate any doubt as to the origin of his paintings, so he signed them, using both his and Van Gogh's name.

Within three years, Mark's change of heart bumped the value of original Van Gogh paintings back to 90 percent of their previous values. The world art market accepted his two-signature paintings, considering them equal to Van Gogh paintings. The lion's share of the experts also accepted his talent, at least publicly, as a reincarnation of Van Gogh, which considerably boosted the value of Mark's paintings from five hundred to seven hundred thousand. Considerably less than the value of the Great Master's paintings.

After dinner, Mark mixed himself a vodka martini. (He used Kirkland brand vodka from Costco, which was a lot less expensive than premium vodka. It wasn't that he couldn't afford the best; it was just that he relished a bargain, a habit he developed as a lower middleclass kid and later as a struggling architecture student and then as a fledging architect.) He took his drink up to the second floor master bedroom, where he heard the shower running in the master bath. He sipped his martini and then set it on the nightstand. He undressed and went into the bathroom.

Mark opened the steamed up glass door of the spacious, white polished marble shower. Allison didn't hear him, as she was facing away from him and enjoying the sensation of the stream of hot water on her body. The overhead incandescent light cast a warm glow on her skin. Mark wrapped his muscular arms around her shoulders, causing her to shudder. "You really know how to surprise a girl," she said.

Mark glided his hands to her gleaming breasts and rubbed his fingertips over her nipples, which instantly hardened. He kissed the back of her neck, and she stretched her neck to receive him, her eyes

closed. Then, while every inch of their bodies touched, Allison reached behind her and caressed his penis. Mark's hands moved down her torso and stopped between her legs. Then he slid his fingers inside her. He turned her around until they faced each other. Their lips met while they absorbed one another's body heat. Then Mark sat down on the shower bench and pulled Allison to him. She straddled him and he entered her. They moved slowly at first, carefully. Then they sped up. Climaxed. The only sounds were their soft moans mingling with the patter of water on their skin.

Sated, Allison said, "Did you know this is the third time we've done it this week?"

"You mean it's not enough?"

Allison broke out laughing.

The couple went to bed happy.

When Joseph Roulin, a heavysset man with a salt-and-pepper beard, saw the painter seated in front of an easel in the distance, he refastened the buttons on his blue postmaster's jacket and picked up his pace. Long shadows trailed behind him as he strode along the winding dirt road that separated Auvers-sur-Oise (Auvers), a village north of Paris, from the expansive wheat fields of the countryside. When he reached the painter, he tipped his hat and said, "Good afternoon, my friend. How goes your work today?"

The painter, a slight man with a shock of red hair, seemed not to hear the greeting. Instead, his eyes darted between the scene in the distance and the canvas in front of him and his paintbrush flew from palette to canvas and back again.

Joseph patted his friend's shoulder. "Once again, you paint as if you expect to catch the sun. But I must say even you are not fast enough to accomplish that."

Vincent Van Gogh paused and squinted at Joseph. Then, pointing to Joseph's jacket, he said, "It's Sunday, isn't it?"

Joseph chuckled and said indeed it was. Then he explained that he was in uniform because he had official business in the next village. Van Gogh nodded absently and turned back to his canvas. After a few moments, Van Gogh sighed and stopped painting. "Joseph, can you imagine what it is like to feel colors you cannot see? Do you understand the frustration of not being able to express the colors you feel, only because your blues are not intense enough and your yellows are not... and your yellows are *only* yellow?"

Joseph shrugged.

"I want warmth to jump out of my yellows," Van Gogh said, enunciating his words with his hands.

Joseph shook his head.

"Look here," Van Gogh said, pointing at the canvas with his paintbrush. "The foreground is satisfactory, but the painting as a whole lacks the spirit that this morning's rain brought to the green fields before us. Do you agree?"

Joseph only lifted the brim of his hat and scratched his forehead, saying, "Well, Vincent, I'd best be on my way." Then he bent over and scooped up a tattered straw hat from the dirt, clapped it on his thigh, and held it out to Van Gogh. "Madame Roulin would scold you if she saw your bare head right now."

Van Gogh plopped the hat on his head and resumed painting.

"I will see you tomorrow," Joseph said. "Let us hope it will not be too hot for posing." Van Gogh needed models to sit for him while practiced his portraiture, but he was too poor to hire them, so Joseph and his wife occasionally sat for him.

An hour after Joseph left, Van Gogh completed his painting and then packed up his paint box, folded his easel, picked up his stool, and strode back to Auvers, where he'd taken a room with a family. When he was only two blocks away from home, he saw ahead of him two young men in their late teens playing tug-of-war with a rifle, and cursing at each other.

“Stop!” he yelled. “You will hurt yourselves!” But the young men only tugged harder and cursed louder. So Van Gogh dropped his gear and dashed toward them, saying, “Stop this nonsense! A gun is not a plaything!”

Then, with their hands still on the rifle, the men fell to the ground and rolled over and over each other.

“I said stop!” Van Gogh shouted as he got closer to them. And then BAM! the rifle discharged and Van Gogh cried out, clutching his chest. Then he dropped to one knee and fell onto his side. The men froze.

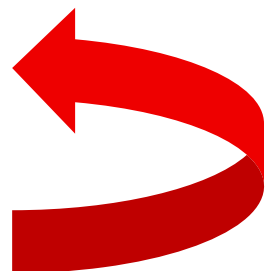
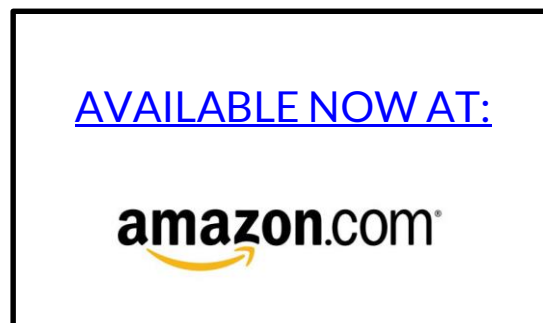
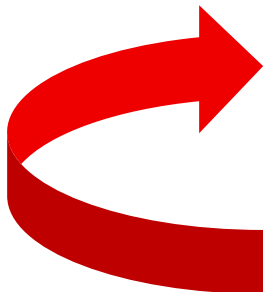
“Help me,” Van Gogh whimpered.

One man yanked the rifle away from the other, jumped up, and disappeared down a narrow lane. The other one followed close behind.

“Please, help me,” Van Gogh gasped. But it was suppertime, so most of the townspeople were indoors and unable to hear him. He rolled onto his knees and painfully pushed himself to standing.

Mark woke up in a cold sweat. It was five thirty in the morning, too early to get up. He rolled over, thinking *God, I wish this fuckin’ dream would leave me alone.*

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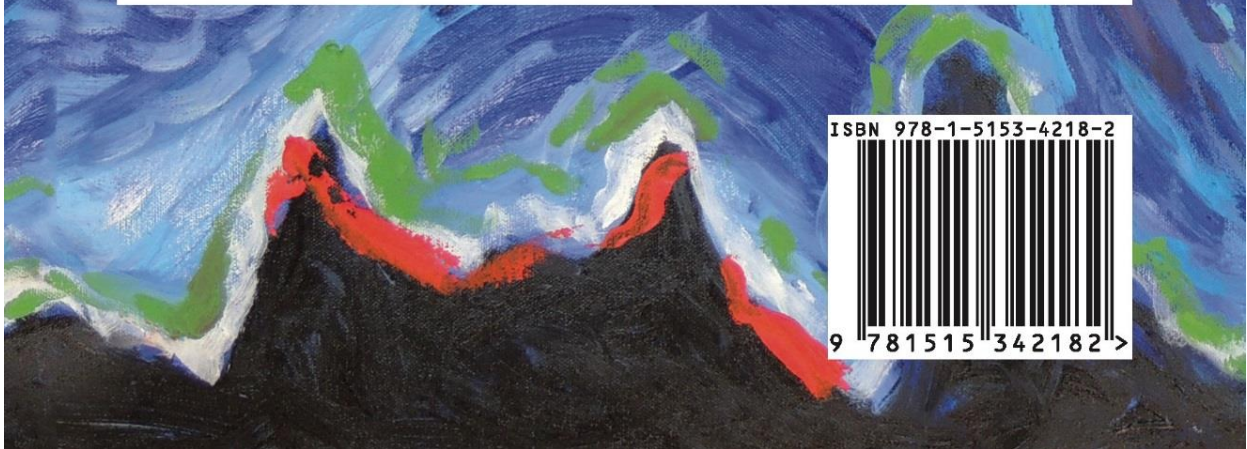




THE RETURN OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

World-renowned artist Mark Reed is kidnapped and taken to a remote camp in Africa. His talent is so similar to Vincent Van Gogh's, he's been accused of being the reincarnation of the artist. Will this talent ensure his survival? Before Mark's abduction, his deep, loving relationship with his fiancé had become precarious. Mark wasn't always Mark, and Vincent may be the reason. A rescue involving extreme danger ensues. If it is successful, will the threat to Mark's life continue? Will he ever be himself again?

The Return of Vincent Van Gogh is a tale of action and suspense crafted by retired architect turned artist and writer Don M. Forst. His first novel is five star awarded *The Reincarnation of Vincent Van Gogh*.



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