

# VINCENT IN WONDERLAND

by C.E. White

## CHAPTER ONE

*What I am in the eyes of most people—a nonentity, an eccentric, or an unpleasant person—somebody who has no position in society and will never have—in short, the lowest of the low.*

*All right, then. Even if that were absolutely true, then I should like to show by my work what such an eccentric, such a nobody, has in his heart.*

— Vincent van Gogh

*Zundert, The Netherlands - 1864*

Vincent skipped every other step down the stairs in a mad dash from his bedroom. He'd seen two of his father's most long-winded parishioners walking up the path to the parsonage, and he didn't want to get stuck listening to the same stories they repeated week after week. He was terrible at pretending to be interested.

He grabbed his blue bottle in case he saw any interesting bugs and fled out the back door just as the guests knocked at the front. He ran out of the garden, through the moor, and into the marsh. Each footfall sent mud splattering everywhere, and he loved it. Mud was real—the stuff underneath, hidden by the grass and the flowers. His parents only seemed to care about how everything looked on top—everything, including him.

He reached the bank of the big creek and plopped down on a sandy patch of ground, chest heaving from his run. Beetles scooted across the surface of the water, and a heron landed with a faint splash in the muddy shallows of the shore opposite him. He ran his hands across the grains of sand, enjoying the feel of the rough grit.

The iridescent green of a water bug glinted in the sunlight, and Vincent reached for his bottle, then rose to his knees and leaned out to capture it. It danced out of reach, and he sank back to watch it skate away.

A rustling near the far hillock drew his attention, and a head bobbed into view. He frowned as the face appeared.

*Hendrik.*

At thirteen, Hendrik had two years and about a foot in height on Vincent. Hendrik pointed in his direction as three more sets of shoulders topped the rise. Vincent couldn't make out the words, but Hendrik's mouth moved, and an echo of laughter reached him. The town boys always terrorized Vincent if they could, calling him strange, taking—and often breaking—his things, and shoving him in the dirt.

Vincent stood, vacillating between the desire to defend himself and the desire to escape. He noted the wide brook behind him and opted to run. He'd certainly end up in the water if they cornered him on the shore.

He took off running, not toward home, but in the direction of the barrow mound on the moor. Most people were too superstitious to crawl into the burial mounds, but Vincent had investigated this one a long time ago and never found anything. It was partially caved in and barely big enough for him to hide within, but nothing marked the opening while the summer vines overgrew it. He didn't think the boys would find him if he reached it ahead of them, and he was fast. This, he knew from experience.

When he topped the next hill, he rounded through the trees so he could approach the barrow mound from the back. It was the long way around, but if he took the shortest route, he'd still be in plain sight when the other boys came over the knoll. This way, he'd come to the entrance from the rear, and they'd never know where he went.

He sped on, branches whipping his face, thankful the mossy ground under the trees muffled his footsteps. He stopped at the edge of the tree line, breathing hard and checking for his tormentors. The dash from here to the barrow would put him out in the open. He ran as quickly and silently as he could toward the hillock and never stumbled. He knew the moor as he knew his own mother's face.

The underbrush crashed with the other boys' approach—they certainly didn't attempt any stealth—but the swell of the barrow rose before him, and they were on the far side of it. He reached it and knelt in front of the opening, carefully parting the brush that hid it to climb in. He rearranged the vines covering the hole, then backed in as far as he could—thankfully, far enough that the light from the opening did not touch him.

Their voices reached him now. "Did you see where he went?"

"Back to his mommy, I bet."

"Just like the little coward to run away!"

That last one was Hendrik's voice.

Their lumbering footsteps grew louder and louder then passed into silence as they entered the trees. He didn't think they would come back to look for him. They didn't seem to have the patience for an actual search.

Vincent stayed where he was, though, relaxing into the cool dirt, taking in the dank smell of the earth. The light fell in patches across the ground in front of him, flickering as a breeze tickled the leaves.

He knew someone must've been buried here at some point, but that didn't bother him. He actually enjoyed the dark stillness inside the barrow. He found it comforting.

*The dead expect nothing of me.*

Suddenly, the earth shifted behind him. He fell back, and a let out a sharp cry.

*That's not possible. I put my back to the wall when I scooted in. Unless....*

He remembered the cave-in. Maybe it had been hiding something all along. He reached around and felt nothing at his back. A soft pitter-patter startled him, and he rounded to see a flash of white melt into shadow behind him.

*There can't be anything alive in here! It was hardly big enough for me to lie down flat.*

He moved deeper into the mound—deeper than it should have gone, deeper than it ever had before. Step after step, his bewilderment grew, but so did his curiosity. The tunnel shrank smaller and smaller, forcing him first into a crouch, then a crawl. Only blackness lay in front of him and only silence behind, but the familiar brown velvet of earth still padded his hands and knees with its clammy cushion.

*I should go back for a candle. If there is anything to see, it won't be very interesting in the dark!*

But mother would never let him take a candle, and this tunnel didn't even exist last week.

*What if it isn't here when I come back?*

So, he pushed on. His crawl became a shuffle as the tunnel constricted even more, and he nearly turned back, but he found the dread of not knowing far outweighed his fear of going on.

Another rustle sounded in front of him.

*I'll probably get eaten, and no one will ever know what happened to me.*

The thrill of adventure sent a shiver up his spine and goosebumps down his arms. It urged him on. He put his hand out once more and found only dirt.

*But I just heard something further on! This can't be the end.*

He continued his blind investigation, moving his hand methodically across, up, then across again, careful to cover every inch. When his hand reached the level of his eyes, he felt an opening. Though surprised to find it angled up, he pulled himself into it and began to climb.

He continued up and up into darkness until he felt another wall of dirt. He pushed against it tentatively, startled when he broke through with almost no effort at all, revealing a shockingly bright light. Something shoved him from behind as if with invisible hands.