

The Canvas

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THE CANVAS



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THE CANVAS

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Dedication

For Burt,

Whose companionship has colored the canvas of my life with the richest of hues. To you, the friend who has stood steadfast beside me, the mentor who has guided my hand beyond the mere strokes of the everyday, and the inspiration that has breathed life into the words I weave. This book is a mosaic crafted from the palette of our shared moments, a tribute to the enduring beauty of friendship and the artistry that binds us.

In the gallery of memories we've created, your presence is a masterpiece that defines both the light and the shadows. May the pages that follow resonate with the laughter, wisdom, and countless conversations that have painted our years with joy. Here's to you, Burt—an all-around great guy—whose spirit is the brushstroke that turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. Thank you for being a part of my journey.

Prologue

The Brushstroke of Destiny

Before the world knew of the Victorian home nestled among the modern façades of Wolcott, New York, before the whispers of a canvas that could bend reality became murmurs of legend, there was a man whose heart was steeped in the deepest hues of love and loss.

Bruce Rigby, an artist of modest renown and profound talent, dwelt within the walls of his ancestral home, painting to quiet the ghosts of his past and to fill the silence left by a love that had been snatched away too soon. The Victorian mansion, with its gabled roofs and the air of timelessness, was both his sanctuary and his canvas, a place where memories lingered like the scent of oil paints and turpentine.

It was in the quiet twilight of his life, after years of solitude, that Bruce heard a tale that would alter the course of his existence and those of the unsuspecting souls in the years to come. A rumor, carried on the winds of fate, spoke of a canvas not bound by the laws of nature, a canvas that held the power to create and to erase, to bring to life that which was rendered upon it and to undo the existence of what was.

With a heart haunted by what-ifs and yearning for the family he never had, Bruce set forth on a quest that led him to the far reaches of the earth, to the cradle of ancient magic. And there, he found his destiny woven into the threads of two canvases—Ma'at, which held the promise of creation, and Apophis, which whispered the temptation of destruction.

The choices he made, the secrets he kept, and the legacy he left behind were the first strokes on a canvas much larger than any he had ever painted. They were the precursors to a story that would span generations, a story that would question the very fabric of reality and the consequences of wielding a power beyond human comprehension.

This is the story of "The Canvas," where art transcends the boundaries of the frame, where love defies the constraints of life and death, and where the legacy of one man's brushstroke becomes the destiny of all who come to touch it.

And so, our tale begins with a brush dipped in the deepest sorrow, a man's yearning crystallized onto a canvas that knew no bounds, and the unwavering belief that love, in all its forms, is the truest art of all.

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Act I

Chapter 1

The Recluse Artist

The Victorian mansion loomed with an air of subdued dignity, its storied past whispered through chipped paint and the untamed embrace of ivy. Once, it had stood as the jewel of Wolcott, its vibrant hues and neatly trimmed lawns a testament to meticulous caretaking. Now, the grandeur had ebbed, the lawn's former precision lost beneath a rebellious overgrowth that veiled the garden's deliberate designs.

The porch, where a broom once swept away the day's debris with regularity, now cradled leaves that had settled into the corners, an undisturbed gathering of various autumns past. Spiders had claimed the nooks and cornices, weaving their gossamer webs with an artisan's pride, connecting spindle railing to worn column in a delicate, though unintended, decor.

Windows, once clear enough to reflect the ambition of their owner, now held a film of the world's dust, their view blurred like a memory. The panes, some cracked, caught the light and fractured it, sending fragmented stories into the interior's quiet. Shutters hung at angles that suggested a casual disregard for their duty, no longer standing at attention, but rather lounging against the faded walls they were meant to adorn and protect.

The paint, which had been applied with such care years ago, now flaked away in weary surrender to the elements, revealing the weathered wood beneath. The colors, once chosen for their cheer and charm, had retreated into the shadows of their former selves, the dull greys and blues melding with the sky's overcast moods.

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The roof, a vast expanse of shingles that had shielded the home from countless storms, now bore the scars of relentless seasons. Here and there, gaps where shingles had given way to wind or rot offered glimpses of the vulnerability beneath the aging exterior.

The turret, a once proud beacon that caught the morning light and held it aloft, now leaned slightly, as though weary from years of vigil. Its windows, rimmed with intricate woodwork, peered out like tired eyes, heavy with the burden of watching time's relentless march.

Even the chimney, a stalwart column of brick that had once billowed white smoke into crisp winter air, stood silent, the fires within long since cooled, its purpose rendered a quaint reminder of warmer times.

This mansion, a vestige of Victorian elegance, now whispered its elegance in echoes rather than shouts, its splendor not lost, but receding into the gentler tale of a beauty resting, as all must, in the arms of a relentless age.

Inside the Victorian mansion, time's passage was a tangible presence, the air thick with the perfume of aged wood and musty velvet drapes. Each room stood as a cavernous testament to a bygone era, the walls lined with portraits whose eyes followed silently, guardians of history. The grand hall, with its sweeping staircase, once thrummed with the lifeblood of opulent parties; now, it lay still, save for the occasional dance of dust motes in the stray beams of light that filtered through the high windows.

The furniture, carved and regal, held the memory of its craftsmanship in every ornate leg and backrest. Chairs and tables, fashioned from dark woods, bore the patina of countless hands and the polish of attentive care that had faded like the whispers of its artisans. In one corner, a grand piano stood, its ivory keys yellowed with age, the melodies it once produced now silent, the resonance of laughter and chatter that once spiraled around its melody long since evaporated into the shadows.

The nursery, a room once vibrant with expectancy and the soft murmur of lullabies, lay as if under a spell. Toys, untouched and gathering dust, waited in vain for playtime's giggle. The crib, a delicate construction of wood and lace, stood empty, the mobile above it stilled, its cheerful animals frozen mid-frolic. Bookshelves filled with tales of adventure and fantasy faced outwards, their spines faded, the stories within sealed away from the light of day.

Halls stretched out like arteries from a heart that had ceased beating, echoes of footsteps the only sign of life where once the air vibrated with the sounds of a house fully lived in. The air hung heavy, and particles caught in shafts of light seemed to swirl with purpose, playing out scenes from days filled with warmth and joy.

The stained glass that once cast vibrant stories upon the floors now diffused a muted palette, the reds and blues and greens dimmed as though washed out by the rains of countless seasons. They still captured the imagination but spoke in hushed tones, as if not to disturb the slumber of the house.

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In the grand dining room, the chandelier hung low, unlit, its crystals devoid of sparkle, presiding over a long table that once seated guests now absent. The silverware lay unpolished, and china cabinets displayed their wares like museums showcasing relics too precious to touch.

The grandfather clock, tall and once punctual in its duty, stood motionless in the foyer, its pendulum stilled, hands locked in time—a time that Bruce no longer cared to remember. Its ticks and tocks had been the heartbeat of the house, now replaced by silence, the lifeblood of the past halted in its veins.

Of all the rooms, only a couple bore the signs of daily use. Bruce's private quarters, a sanctuary from the sprawling loneliness of the mansion, were spartan in their furnishing. The bed was made, its covers free of the dust that reigned elsewhere, the pillow bearing the indentation of a head rested in solitary repose.

The kitchen, though unkempt, was functional. Pots and pans hung from a rack above an island, their copper bottoms dulled. The oven, a mammoth of cast iron, retained a stoic pride, and the icebox, a little less grand, still chilled the essentials. The wooden table bore the marks of use, and chairs were pushed back unevenly, as though someone had risen quickly, a meal unfinished, called away by thoughts more consuming than hunger.

Everywhere else, the house bore the weight of abandonment, each room a chapter of a story that had ceased mid-sentence. Yet in these few spaces that Bruce inhabited, life, albeit muted and solitary, continued its

quiet, daily rituals amidst the grandeur of the silenced mansion. The air in these rooms moved differently, stirred by human presence, carrying the scent of oil paint and the subtle hint of lived-in comfort that contrasted sharply with the museum-like stillness of the rest of the house.

In this home where generations had left their mark, Bruce moved like a ghost through time, living amongst remnants of antiquity, his life a stark splash of the present woven into the rich tapestry of the past. The Victorian mansion, a character in its own right, stood as a monument to legacy and loss, its rooms echoing with the memories of what was and the silence of what is.

In the muted light of the Victorian mansion's grand hallway, Bruce Rigby moved like a wraith among shadows, the lines of his face etched with the story of a life fringed by solitude. The remnants of what once were thick, brown locks had given way to the relentless march of time, now thinly veiling the canvas of his scalp. Each strand surrendered its youthful color, bearing a salt-and-pepper testimony to the years that had sifted through like fine sand in an hourglass.

Perched precariously upon the bridge of his nose were glasses with frames spun from the finest wire, delicate and unassuming. They magnified eyes that had seen love distilled into the purest grief. Behind those lenses lay pools of thought, often dimmed by the ghosts of, yet still alight with the quiet fire of an undying artist's passion.

Bruce Rigby stood by the north-facing window, where the soft light of the overcast sky fell into the room, casting a serene glow that seemed

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to smooth the edges of reality. His attire, a carefully chosen armor against the intrusions of the world, whispered of function over form.

The sweater that hugged his torso was a patchwork of muted browns and grays, the woolen fabric pilled from wear, each little ball of fuzz a testament to countless brushes against the rough wooden arms of his well-used easel. Its sleeves, slightly too long, were perennially rolled up to his elbows, baring forearms mapped with a cartography of veins and the occasional splash of paint—a painter's unintentional tattoo.

Around his waist, a leather belt, its buckle tarnished and scratched, cinched a pair of trousers that had faded from their original color under the stress of sunlit days and too many washes. The trousers bore the evidence of his art, with daubs of color here and there where his hands had wiped clean brushes in moments of distraction.

His feet were clad in shoes that had molded to the contours of his soles, the leather creased and worn soft from the many hours he spent standing before his easel. The soles were thin, whispering their intimacy with every wooden plank of the mansion, every pebble of the driveway, every blade of grass he'd tread upon in the gardens where he sometimes sought inspiration.

Clasped in his hand was a well-worn artist's smock, its fabric a historical document marked with the residue of his craft, from dollops of titanium white to the deep ultramarine blues of his darker moods. It served as both a shield for his clothes and a banner of his calling, the stains and splatters a record of battles fought with brush and palette.

This was Bruce's uniform, each thread interwoven with his daily rituals, each stain a chronicle of his solitary pursuits, each crease a memory etched in fabric—a silent ally in his quest to capture the intangible on canvas.

The studio, Bruce Rigby's sanctuary and cell, bore the creative chaos of a mind perennially storming with ideas. Canvases, the soldiers of his thoughts, stood leaning against the walls in a disciplined clutter, each at different stages of completion. Some bore only the faintest outlines, the embryonic sketches of concepts born in restless dreams, while others were frenzied with strokes of paint, abandoned mid-epiphany.

In one corner, a cluster of easels formed a semicircle, like disciples around their master. Each one cradled a different vision; a canvas caught in the throes of a thunderstorm's passion, its blues and grays violent and visceral; another whispered the serene hues of a dawn he once remembered, too painful to greet with finishing touches.

The wooden floor was a mosaic of splattered paint, an abstract testament to the gravity of his work, each droplet a fallen soldier from the brushes that now lay scattered across the utilitarian surfaces of old, repurposed tables. These tables, a motley collection salvaged from the mansion's attic, stood laden with tubes of paint, their caps lost long ago, squeezed and rolled up from the bottom with a methodical care that belied the disarray.

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Jars of brushes, their bristles pointing in all directions, stood sentry among the litter of paint tubes. Some brushes were still stained with the last color they kissed onto canvas, the bristles stiff with the memory of their stroke. Alongside these jars, pencils, charcoals, and a myriad of other tools lay in an order understood only by their wielder.

Beneath the window, a sturdy old chest bore a palette knife's nicks and color scrapings like scars, surrounded by a graveyard of palette remnants, their colors intermingled into a murky history of previous works. The window itself was streaked with the evidence of rainy days' musings and the dust of sunny ones, the glass distorting the world outside into a fitting backdrop for Bruce's inner landscape.

The room's walls, once likely pristine and bland, now served as a canvas for his impromptu bursts of inspiration—sketches and quotes scrawled in charcoal, test patches of color experimentation, and the occasional handprint where he steadied himself against a sudden surge of emotion.

Near the door, a shelf groaned under the weight of art books and notebooks, their pages curled, and corners bent, chronicling Bruce's intellectual and emotional journey through the years. Some lay open, peppered with notes in the margins, while others were sealed, perhaps holding thoughts too raw to revisit.

This was a room that pulsed with the heartbeat of creation, a living, breathing organism that thrived on the unpredictable whims of its creator.

It was cluttered, yes, but each cluttered piece was a note in an intimate symphony, the melody of which Bruce Rigby was the solitary conductor.

(Bruce reflecting)

Before the canvas, I stand motionless, my gaze locked into the white void, the blankness mirroring the chasm within. The bristles of my brush quiver slightly, a faint tremor of life in an otherwise frozen tableau. This easel, a silent confidant, knows the gravity of the scene it helped unveil, a scene etched forever in the shadows of my heart.

Donna and I, in the zenith of our young lives, were buoyed by a love so potent it seemed to render us invincible. We floated through those days, every plan and whisper shared carrying the undercurrent of our growing love and the child it had blossomed into. We promised to be surprised, to allow the mystery of our baby's gender to unfold in its own sacred time, but curiosity – that playful sprite – got the better of us. We folded under its weight, laughter lighting our eyes as the ultrasound revealed we were to have a daughter.

On that evening, the one forever scorched into my memory, Donna's laughter had been a soothing balm, her smile a beacon. But as night draped over us, so did an unexpected urgency; her pain, sharp and unyielding, came in waves that stole that soothing laughter away.

"We need to go, now," I had said, more forceful than intended, my own voice sounding foreign, tinged with fear.

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At the hospital, under the sterile gleam of fluorescent lights, anticipation transformed into a crucible of anxiety. Nurses scurried, their faces etched with professional concern, and doctors spoke in hushed, urgent tones that did little to shield us from the gravity of the situation.

"Mr. Rigby," one doctor, a man with eyes too weary for his years, had said, placing a firm hand on my shoulder. "There are complications. The baby... we need to deliver tonight, it's not safe to delay."

"A C-section?" My question came out choked, strangled by the growing knot of dread.

"It's the best chance for your wife and your daughter," he'd assured, though the assurance did not quite reach his eyes.

In the operating room, amidst the beeping monitors and the clatter of surgical instruments, I held Donna's hand, the lifeblood of our connection. Her skin was cold, her grip weak but determined.

"Bruce," she whispered, her voice a ghost of its former strength. "I'm scared."

"So am I," I admitted, swallowing the boulder in my throat, wishing I could swallow the fear with it. "But you're the strongest person I know. You and our little girl are going to be just fine."

The words were meant to be a fortress, a barrier against encroaching dread. But words, no matter how strong, could not fend off the insidious creep of fate.

Time stretched, each second a lifetime as the doctors worked with meticulous urgency. The rhythm of the operating room was a dissonant symphony, a chaos of purpose that I could not comprehend. I clung to Donna's hand, a lifeline in the tumultuous sea that threatened to pull us under.

When the silence fell, it was not the peaceful quietude of resolution but the hollow silence of absence. The baby did not cry. Donna did not sigh with relief. There was only the sterile beep of machines and the hushed murmurs of the medical team, a cacophony of defeat.

"Mr. Rigby," the doctor began, his voice an unwelcome harbinger. "I'm so sorry. We did everything we could."

No. The word was a silent scream, ricocheting within the walls of my skull. No, because it was unacceptable, inconceivable. No, because in that moment, the future – our future of three – had been severed, leaving behind a void no words or condolences could ever fill.

The funeral was a blur of black umbrellas, somber faces, and a sky fittingly overcast, as if the heavens themselves bore mourning shrouds. The little casket, achingly small, lay next to Donna's; two vessels of precious cargo sailing into the unknown vastness of eternity. They were

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aligned side by side, as they should have been in life – my daughter nestled close to her mother.

I remember the weight of the earth in my hand, heavy as the burden in my heart. It fell in thuds onto the polished wood, the sound a grotesque finality that no philosophical musing or religious consolation could soften. Each clump of soil was a nail, a seal on a door to a room in my soul where light would no longer enter.

The service droned on around me, words from the clergy, friends, family – a chorus of grief and loss – but I heard none of it. I was ensconced in a cocoon of numbness, my mind replaying the flicker of Donna's last smile, the imagined hue of my daughter's eyes.

And then, there was silence. One by one, the sea of people dispersed, the consoling touches and whispers ebbed away, leaving me standing – a lone figure against the expanse of loss. The gray sky wept, its tears indistinguishable from my own, but I did not move.

Hours passed. The grave workers waited at a respectful distance, but I was oblivious to their presence, to time, to the cold that seeped into my bones. The world had narrowed to this plot of earth, to the unbearable lightness in my arms where the weight of my daughter should have been.

The sky darkened, the first stars piercing the twilight with an indifference that felt like cruelty. It was the pull of the cold that finally led my feet away, the physical discomfort a necessary tether to the world of the living. I walked away, leaving part of my soul nestled in the ground

with Donna and our daughter, beneath the weeping willow that whispered lullabies into the wind.

In the days that followed, reality settled like ash upon a razed landscape. I returned to our Victorian home, a hollow shell, each room echoing with the ghost of our dreams and laughter. The nursery, once a room of hope, now stood as a mausoleum to our lost daughter and her beautiful mother.

Now, in the stillness of my studio, I stand before the canvas that refuses to be marked. The paint on my palette dries, untouched, as the memories play their mournful reel. The echo of Donna's laughter, the anticipation of our daughter's cry, the staccato rhythm of my own heart breaking – they are colors that no canvas can hold, a palette too devastating for any artist to wield.

Yet, in the quiet that surrounds me, there is the faintest whisper of strength, the lingering essence of Donna's courage. It's this spectral wisp of what once was that finally guides my hand. The brush touches the canvas, and with each stroke, I etch the pain, the love, and the raw grief into something tangible. It is not the future we imagined, but it is a future where the past can live, breathe, and speak in the silence of paint.