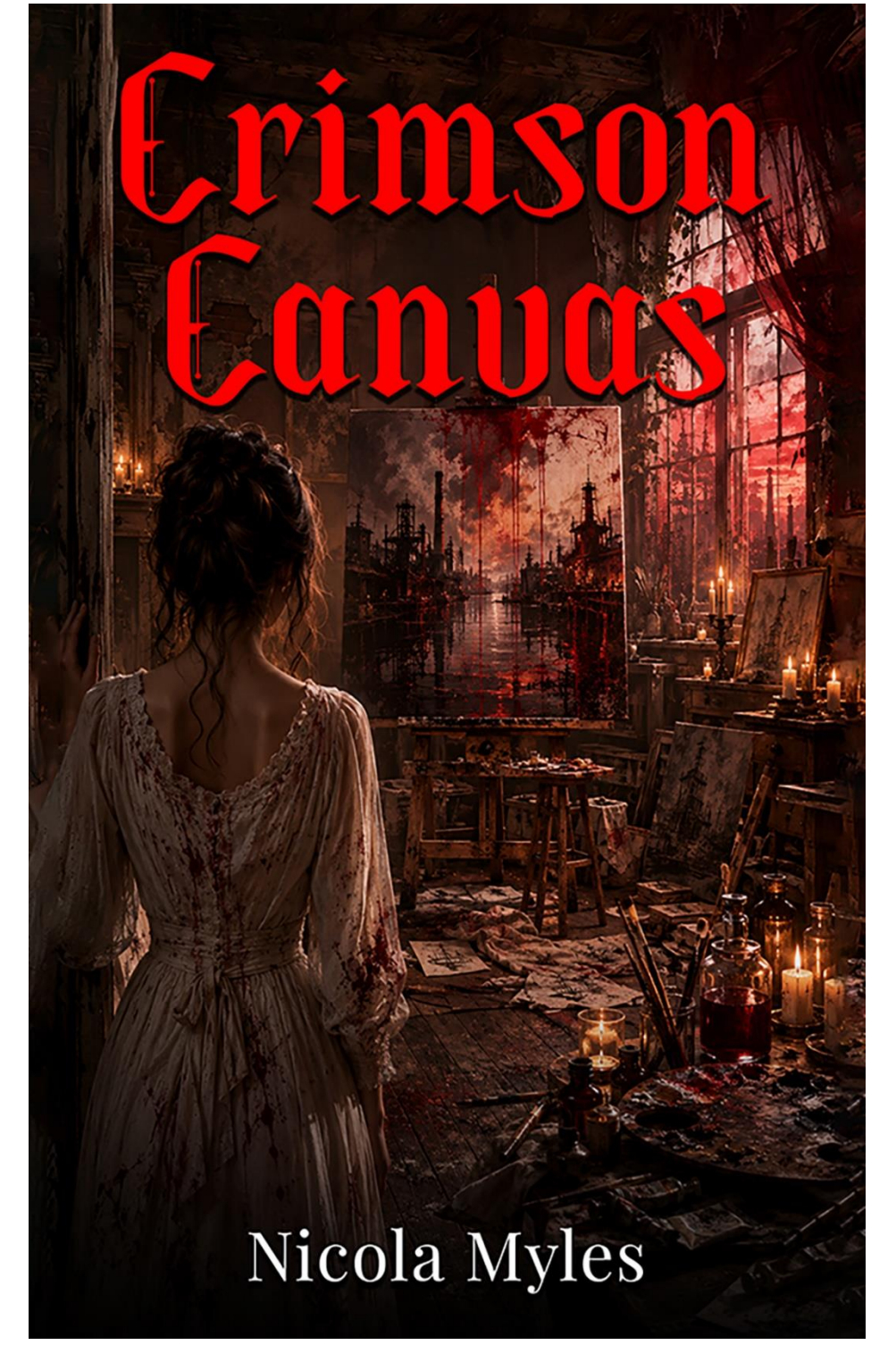


Crimson Canvas



Nicola Myles

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By
Nicola Myles

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*To my Twin sister who loves a good story
and can keep me entertained with ideas.*

Thanks

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CHAPTER 1

The Warehouse in Watercolour

Gianna Rossi

The last of the daylight drains from the sky beyond my window, and I don't notice until my hand on the brush begins to ache. I've been working by the same lamp for hours, the one with the warm bulb that makes the corner of my flat feel like a small, amber-lit cave. The tea beside me has gone cold. A skin of dust and pigment has settled across the saucer, and the water in my rinse jar has turned the colour of weak coffee.

I lean back on my stool and let my eyes go soft.

The painting is finished. I know this before I can name the reason, the way you know a door has clicked shut without hearing it. The paper is still damp enough to gleam in places, but the composition holds. It doesn't ask for anything more.

I've been living in this warehouse for three weeks. I found it on a long walk in late October, down past the Navy Yard where the waterfront turns industrial and then forgotten. A brick hulk with its windows boarded over and a loading dock half-swallowed by brambles. The city had grown around it and then

away from it, leaving it to the gulls and the rust. Nobody else stopped to look. I stood on the opposite kerb for twenty minutes, and the whole time I felt something I can only describe as recognition. Not that I'd seen the building before. That it had been waiting for me to see it.

Now it lives on a sheet of cold-pressed Arches paper, eighteen by twenty-four inches, and I have rendered every brick I could count from the street. Every stain of salt and weather. The way the corrugated iron on the roof catches the low afternoon sun and turns it into something almost tender. I've built the shadows with layers of indigo and burnt umber, glazing thin washes until the dark felt deep enough to step into. It's the most ambitious piece I've attempted since I left the programme at Pratt, and it's the first one in a long time that doesn't feel like a compromise.

I wipe my brush on the rag I keep draped over my knee and stand. My spine protests. I've been hunched too long, and the small of my back reminds me. I step backwards until my shoulders touch the wall and I can take the whole thing in from a distance.

The warehouse stares back at me. It's a portrait of decay, really. Not the picturesque kind, not the ruin with a gift shop. The honest kind, where the neglect is so complete it becomes a kind of dignity. I've caught the way the brickwork buckles above the third window, the rust bleeding through the mortar like a slow wound. The broken gutter that hangs at an angle, I had to measure twice to believe. And there, on the north-facing wall, is the ventilation vent I added in the final hour.

My eye snags on it.

I don't remember painting the vent.

I remember the bricks. I remember the window frames, the boarded door, the tangle of dead ivy. I remember the way the light fell across the loading dock and how I had to mix three separate greys to get the shadow right. But the vent, that grille of ironwork set high in the brick, I cannot call to mind. I must have painted it. The brushstrokes are mine, the pigment is mine, the detail is too precise to have come from anywhere but my own hand. And yet the act of painting it is a blank. A small, clean absence where the memory should be.

A faint chill moves across my forearms. The flat is not cold. The radiator ticks steadily beneath the window, and I can hear Mrs Kapoor in the flat below running her bath. But the chill is there, and I recognise it for what it is. The same feeling I get when I walk into a room and forget why I came. The same small, irrational unease. I tell myself it's nothing. I've been working too long. My mind is tired, and my hand has been moving on its own, and that's all. That's all it ever is.

I turn away from the painting and cross to the kitchen counter. My flat is small, one room with a sleeping alcove, but the light is good, and the rent is, for Brooklyn, a minor miracle. I fill the kettle and set it to boil. The sound of the water heating is a comfort, a small, domestic noise that pushes the silence back. Outside, the streetlamps are beginning to flicker on. A car passes, its headlights sweeping a brief arc across my ceiling. The city is settling into its evening, and I am here, in my quiet, in my paint-stained jumper, with a finished piece that should feel like a victory.

It does feel like a victory. Mostly.

The vent bothers me. I don't know why. It's a vent. It's a

detail I observed and rendered, and the fact that I can't recall the moment of rendering it is, I'm sure, a perfectly ordinary quirk of concentration. Artists lose themselves in the work. That's the point. That's the reason I paint in the first place: to reach that state where the world falls away, and all that remains is the colour and the paper and the small, exact decisions of the brush. I've been chasing that feeling since I was sixteen, since my first watercolour class.

At the community centre, I discovered that a wet brush on dry paper could make a girl with too many thoughts inside her head go quiet for an hour. It's the closest thing I have to a religion.

So the vent is nothing. The vent is evidence that I was doing my job well.

I make a fresh cup of tea and carry it back to the easel. The painting has dried enough for the colours to settle into their final values. The warehouse looks, in the lamplight, almost more real than it did in life. The brickwork has a weight to it, a density that makes the paper seem heavier than it is. And the vent is there, of course. It's there, and I painted it, and I can see now that I've rendered it with a care that borders on the obsessive. Six slats, evenly spaced. A frame of riveted iron. A shadow beneath the upper lip that suggests the thing is set slightly proud of the wall. I've even caught the texture of the rust, the way it flakes in thin, curling scales. It's good work. It's the best detail in the piece, and I have no memory of painting it.

I set the mug down on the saucer, and the clink of ceramic on ceramic is too loud in the quiet room.

I tell myself to stop. I tell myself I am doing what I always do: picking at a loose thread until the whole fabric unravels. My

mother used to say that. Gianna, you'll worry a thing to death. She said it with love, mostly, but also with a kind of exasperation, the way you speak to a child who can't let go of a question. She was right. I know she was right. And yet I am still standing in front of the painting, and my tea is cooling, and I am trying to remember a moment that is, for all intents and purposes, gone.

I take my phone from the counter and open the camera. I photograph the piece in sections, as I always do, for my portfolio and the submission I plan to send to the small gallery on Atlantic that takes local artists. The gallery owner, a woman named Miriam who wears oversized cardigans and speaks about colour theory with a fervour I admire, has been asking me to bring something new for months. This will be the piece. It's the best work I've ever done, and I know it, and the knowing is a small, solid thing I can hold onto the camera captures the vent in crisp, unforgiving detail. On the screen, it looks even more deliberate. More intentional. A detail a painter would include only if she had stood there on the pavement, staring up at it for a long time. And I must have done that. I must have seen it, noted it, and filed it away, and then my hand retrieved it while my mind was elsewhere. That's how observation works. That's how art works. The eye sees more than the mind knows.

I lower the phone. The unease is still there, a thin, cold thread running beneath my thoughts, but I am, as I have always been, very good at not listening to it. I have built a life on not listening to it, on deliberately and repeatedly choosing to see the world as a place of beauty rather than a place of threat. It's not naivety. I know there are things to be afraid of. I read the news. I walk home with my keys between my fingers after dark. But I decided a long

time ago that I would not let fear take up more room than it was owed. And that decision has served me. It has kept me steady. It has let me paint.

I clean my brushes in the sink, working the pigment out of the bristles with a patience that is its own kind of meditation. The water runs grey, then brown, then clear. I lay the brushes flat on a clean rag to dry. The ritual is familiar, and the familiarity is a comfort. I have done this a hundred times. A thousand. The same motions, the same order, the same quiet, methodical care. It's the part of the process that no one sees, the part that happens after the art is finished and before the world gets to look. I love this part. I love the private, unglamorous work of maintenance. It feels like a kind of honouring. Like I am thanking the tools for what they've given me.

When the brushes are clean, the palette is scraped, and the jar of rinse water has been poured away, I stand at the window and look out at the street. The city is fully in its evening now. The lights of the bodega on the corner spill yellow across the pavement. A man walks a small, impatient dog. Two women laugh on the steps of the brownstone.

Opposite, their voices carrying up through the glass. The hum of Brooklyn is a thing I have learned to love, a low, constant, many-layered sound that is not silence but not noise either. It's the sound of other people living their lives, close enough to hear but far enough not to intrude. It's the sound of being alone without being lonely.

I think about calling my nonna. I think about it every evening, and most evenings I don't call because I tell myself it's too late, or I'm too tired, or she'll be in bed. But tomorrow is Sunday, and

I have no excuse. I'll take the train out to Sheepshead Bay in the morning. I'll bring her the biscotti from the Italian bakery on Court Street, the ones she pretends are too sweet but eats anyway, two at a time, with her espresso. I'll sit at her kitchen table and let her tell me the same stories she's told me since I was a child, the ones about the old country, about the shop her father ran on Mulberry Street, about the winter the heat gave out, and they all slept in their coats. I'll let her fuss over me, ask me if I'm eating enough, ask me if I've met anyone. I'll say no, Nonna, I haven't met anyone, and she'll shake her head and say something in Italian that I won't fully understand but will know, by the tone, means she thinks I'm too picky.

The thought settles me. The thought of her kitchen, with its lace curtains and its radio always tuned to the station that plays old songs, is a warmth I can almost feel. It's a reminder that there is a world beyond this flat, beyond this painting, beyond the small, strange unease that has been following me around all evening like a cat I didn't let in.

I turn from the window. The painting is on the easel, and it will still be there in the morning. It will be dry by then, and I will be able to look at it with fresh eyes, and the vent will be just a vent. A detail among details. A thing I painted because it was there to be painted.

I switch off the lamp. The room goes dim, lit only by the streetlight bleeding through the blinds. The painting is a dark rectangle in the corner, and for a moment, before my eyes adjust, I cannot see it at all. It's just a shape. A presence. A thing that is, for now, only itself.

I leave it there. I go to the alcove and pull back the duvet and

lie down in the dark, and I listen to the city breathe. The radiator ticks. The pipes hum. Somewhere, a siren passes, and then it's gone, and the quiet returns. I close my eyes. I think about the warehouse, about the way the light fell on the brick, about the salt-stained stone and the rusted iron and the vent I cannot remember painting. I think about it until the thoughts blur into something softer, and then I'm not thinking at all.

The last thing I hear, before sleep takes me, is the sound of the bodega's metal gate rolling down for the night.

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About the Author

Nicola Myles is a night carer for elderly people living with dementia and a passionate collector of books by fellow authors. She lives on an island off the south coast of England, where she enjoys spending her free time walking her wonderfully mad Boxer dog, exploring the beach, or relaxing in the park. Nicola is also looking forward to welcoming her first grandchild and fully intends to spoil them just as much as she already spoils her beloved dog.