

**the  
Reincarnation  
of  
Vincent  
Van Gogh**

**a novel**

**Don M Forst**

# Chapter 1

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Mark Reed slammed on the brakes and yelled, “Goddamn it!” when a kid driving an Audi A6 cut in front of him. “Someone should tell Daddy his kid is driving like a bastard with his head up his ass!” It was Friday night, and Mark was driving north on New York Highway 110 toward his home in Lloyd Neck, Long Island, his thoughts blocking out the thrum of late April rain on the roof of his car. Minutes earlier, when he locked the door to Mark Reed & Scott McGrath Architects P.C., he halfway hoped he’d never have to go back there again. He’d worked late. Why? To draft plans for yet another of his firm’s dull and tight-budgeted office buildings? But it wasn’t that he wanted them to be dull, ordinary, or run of the mill. It wasn’t that he didn’t push for more interesting designs, or do his best to upset the status quo. No, he tried, but his structural engineer always derailed his efforts, saying they weren’t practical, which was the same as saying they were too expensive. This frustrated Mark, but what pissed him off was that his business partner always sided with the engineer.

“Could you for once just forget about money?” Mark asked his partner Scott McGrath more than once. “We’ve developed a reputation for being practical. And that’s worked for us. But I’m sick of practical. For God’s sake, let’s take a risk... create something exciting.”

Mark turned on his car stereo, and Michael Bublé’s song “You Make Me Feel So Young” began to play. This song made him wonder if he and Scott had become old, and in their old age discarded their dream of creating extraordinary buildings, the kind that would make architect Frank Gehry jealous. Actually, Mark was 41 and Scott 43, so he knew they were too young to give up on anting more. Had their drive for stability and financial success overshadowed their aspirations to make art?

Scott Reed and Mark McGrath were introduced to Canadian-American architect Frank Gehry’s work when they were architecture interns visiting the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, which Gehry designed. They were blown away by the luster of the light playing on the irregular curves and dramatic shapes of the museum’s titanium silver exterior. Until Gehry, an architect

had never molded a structure such as this. After they left the museum that day, Scott and Mark made a pact to traverse the boundaries between architecture and art and design amazing buildings.

Now, all those years later, Mark couldn't even imagine working as creatively as Gehry did, couldn't imagine indulging in the freedom that came with being one of the world's preeminent living architects. Gehry received commissions from all over the world. Mark longed to design buildings like his: the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, the Dancing House in Prague, 8 Spruce Street in lower Manhattan. He knew if he and Scott could produce even one design remotely as genius as Gehry's, they would be at the pinnacle of their careers.

But, more and more, Mark felt Scott had brushed off their youthful pact. He knew if he brought it up, Scott would give him an earful. He'd be ordered to quit bitching and accept that there's nothing wrong with making a comfortable living. Then Scott would ask him if he'd forgotten who they were when they started out. "We were a couple of idiots groveling for work," Scott would remind him. "Yeah, it was mundane work, but what was that to us? Work was work. Do you remember how thrilled we were when we won our first contracts?"

Mark saw the beginning of Mark Reed & Scott McGrath Architects differently. They were unusually lucky. From the get-go they were blessed with landing great projects. They didn't have to scramble hardly at all. Success came quickly, and he never took it for granted. But he could hear Scott saying, "I don't hear you griping that you can't afford your four-thousand-square-foot home, your Lexus, or your round-the-world trips. Because what we do makes money. Do you hear me? Money. Why do you want to change things up?" And then Mark would sulk, and Scott would admonish him. "Besides, don't fool yourself into thinking you're a greater talent than you are. You want to be more creative? Be creative on your own time. You've got it damn good, which is why I can't believe you've got the nerve to bitch about it."

The traffic lights cast a gaseous sheen on the pavement while the glow of street lights gathered in the clouds of spray. The rain started to come down harder, so Mark turned up the stereo. He noticed that the windshield wipers were keeping time with Bubl e's "It's a Beautiful Day," and for a few moments he assuaged his frustration with the optimism of the tune. But then he wondered,

*What if Scott is right? What if I am overestimating my talent? What if tomorrow I landed a contract with a fat budget and the go-ahead to design what I wanted? Would I have the talent to pull it off? I have skill up the ass, but that's not the same as talent.*

The stoplight was red when Mark approached the intersection at West 11th Street in Huntington, so he let up the gas and coasted. Before he came to a complete stop, the light changed, so he looked right and left and then accelerated. And then, as suddenly and unexpectedly as it is with all accidents, a Ford F250 pickup ran the red light on 11th Street and caught the right front quarter panel of Mark's car and spun him around and into the opposite lane. His airbag exploded, mushrooming into his face and his left hand was propelled into his forehead, while the car kept spinning and only coming to rest when it slammed into the curb. Being swiftly and steadily overtaken by shock, Mark struggled to hold on to consciousness. Then darkness swallowed him.

Minutes later, Mark stirred at the close sound of a screaming siren, and he realized he wasn't in his car anymore. He became aware of a blanket covering him and a hand on his shoulder. A paramedic said into his radio, "We have a conscious white male, six one, a hundred and eight pounds, late thirties or early forties, pupils equally dilated, blood pressure one eighty over ninety, heart rate seventy-five, contusion on forehead and knuckles of left hand." Mark's eyelids fluttered, and the paramedic said, "It's okay, buddy. You're going to be just fine. Please tell me, on a scale of one to ten, with ten being unbearable, how bad is your pain?" Mark didn't answer. The paramedic continued his radio communication. "No significant blood loss, no noticeably broken bones. I'm unable to ascertain pain level at this time. Clear saline IV started. ETA four minutes."

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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 Joseph's greeting.

Instead, his eyes darted between the scene in the distance and the canvas in front of him. His paintbrush flew from palette to canvas and back to palette. 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 looked at Joseph Roulin. Pointing to Joseph's jacket, he asked, "It is 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. And then he turned his attention back to his canvas, and Joseph watched him work. After a few moments, Van Gogh stopped painting and sighed. "Joseph, do you know 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 because your blues are not intense enough and your yellows are not... 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. Do you agree?"

Van Gogh waited for an answer, but Joseph only lifted the brim of his hat and scratched his forehead, and said, "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."

Van Gogh plopped it on his head and went back to painting.

"I will see you tomorrow," Joseph said. "Let us hope it will not be too hot for me to pose."

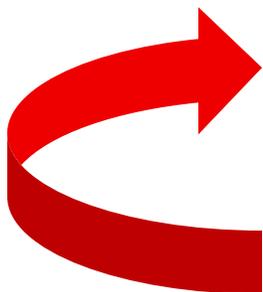
Van Gogh needed models to pose for him while practiced his portraiture, but he was too poor to hire any, so Joseph and his wife occasionally volunteered to sit for him.

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 the house where he was staying, 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 at them. "You will hurt yourselves!" But the young men only tugged harder and cursed louder. So Van Gogh dropped his gear and walked quickly toward them, saying, "Stop your nonsense! A gun is not a plaything!"

Then, with their hands still on the riffle, the men fell to the ground and rolled over and over each other. "I said stop!" Van Gogh shouted, and he started to run toward them. And then the rifle discharged. Bam! And Van Gogh cried out and clutched his chest. Then he dropped to one knee and the fell on his side. The men froze. "Help me," Van Gogh whimpered. And then one man yanked the rifle away from the other, jumped up, and disappeared down a narrow lane, and the other one followed close behind.

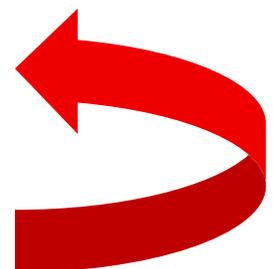
"Please, help me," Vincent Van Gogh gasped. But it was suppertime, so most of the townspeople where indoors, and no one heard him. He rolled onto his knees and painfully pushed himself to standing.

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ISBN 978-1-4849-3275-9

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