



Searching For A Starry Night, A Miniature Art Mystery

By Christine Verstraete



~ Eppie Award Finalist for
YA/children's eBooks, Epic Foundation ~

Synopsis: Sam, her bff, Lita, and a mischievous Dachshund named Petey, face an angry housekeeper, a dog-hating gardener and an ancient family curse as they search for a missing miniature replica of Van Gogh's famous painting "Starry Night."

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Reviews: Praise for Christine Verstraete's Searching for a Starry Night

"...well written, very exciting, and hard to put down, especially with the spooky old Victorian house...scary goings-on at night, and a lot of suspense."

–Stories for Children Magazine

"Enjoyed sleuthing with Sam and Lita—and Dachshund Petey—so much that I can hardly wait for their next case!"

–Gay Toltl Kinman, Agatha Award nominee, author of *Super Sleuth*

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–Debi Sullivan, Independent Reviewer

*Searching for a Starry Night, A Miniature Art Mystery***Chapter One**

Samantha Ann Carlton tilted her head back and tried to see all the way to the top of the old three-story Victorian. Funny, it looked much bigger than she remembered—and creepier.

A shiver slithered down her back as she stared at the house, its siding and trim painted in gloomy shades of blue and gray. Maybe it'd look better in the morning, she hoped. Maybe the whole place would look better.

She looked around, feeling like she was in a Stephen King novel. The tall, thick elm trees planted in the yard loomed over the house like arms. The sun hung low. Faint wisps of pink light peeked out from behind gray clouds.

Thirteen-year-old Sam gulped. A quick peek told her that Lita Jackson, her BFF since they were seven, wasn't having any better luck controlling her imagination. And Lita was the one who watched spooky movies with her and woke up screaming in the middle of the night.

The expression on Lita's face could be called pre-panic. "Wow, big house. You sure it'll take only a few days to find that missing miniature painting? Not that I mind helpin', you know."

Sam tried to sound convincing. "We'll be done in no time. Mom thinks the painting got mixed up with some other stuff."

"Okay." Lita paused. "You think we'll get to go swimmin'? Would've been nice if we'd gone to your mom's friend's cottage on the other side of Lake Geneva. I love the lake. That would've been awesome."

"Yeah, I still wish we were going there, too. Guess we'll have to make the best of it. Believe it or not, there's a nice lake here by Aunt Hilda's house. Maybe we can go fishing and sit on the beach or something."

"You mean you can fish. Me? I brought my notebooks. I'm workin' on a new story."

Sam smiled and shook her head. "You still writing? I thought you'd take the summer off. School's out, bookworm."

"Hey, don't you be sayin' anything about my books. You know I like writin' stuff. You should try it."

"Nah, too much like homework." She helped Lita lift the heavy black suitcase from the car's open trunk. "Ugh, you pack bricks in here?"

"Funny, Sam. No, it's clothes—and my books."

"I don't know much you'll get done, what with all the ghosts around. *W-o-o-o!*"

Lita frowned and dropped the suitcase. It hit the ground with a thud. "G-Ghosts?"

Despite coming to Wisconsin from Mississippi years earlier, traces of the southern drawl that flavored her speech grew stronger when she became nervous. Like now.

"You know, maybe I should've stayed home. My mom wanted help cleanin' closets. I loved readin' R.L. Stine's books, but I sure don't want to be in one."

Sam laughed and jumped as Petey, the one-year-old Dachshund their friend Helena Sanchez had adopted from the animal shelter, plowed into the back of her leg. The little dog yipped and rushed by in his urgent mission to inspect the bushes. His wing-like ears made Sam giggle. "What's the hurry, boy?"

"C'mon, Sam." Lita pulled another bag from the trunk and hurried them along. "If Petey found a mouse, I'm outta here!"

Sam laughed. "*Buck-buck-buck*. Chicken. He didn't find anything. That Dachshund's a funny little dog. He jumps at shadows."

"Yeah, he's got the energy of ten dogs. I sure hope he stays out of trouble."

"I'm glad Helena let us 'Petey-sit' so she and Angela can shop for the wedding," Sam said. "I can't wait until Helena and Mr. G get married. I've never been in a wedding."

"Me, either. It'll be cool."

Sam's mother, Grace, grabbed a bag and slammed the trunk closed. "Okay, let's go, girls, enough gabbing."

The blue nylon overnight case in hand, Sam followed her mother up the front stairs, the treads worn to a dull gray. The crackle of dry leaves accented each step. Something, maybe bugs—she sure hoped it wasn't mice—skittered under the sun-faded porch and made her shiver. It didn't help when Petey paused on a step, cocked his head sideways, and began barking.

Lita stopped and gave Sam a worried look. "Sam, you hear that?"

Uh-oh. Now I'm beginning to think there might be something to what sounded like a harmless little ghost story, Sam thought. "M-Mom? The house really isn't haunted, right?"

Grace sighed and shifted her bag from hand to hand. "Sam, you were here a few months ago for Auntie Hilda's funeral. You know this house is fine. Let's get the bags inside. I was hoping the housekeeper would've been here before us, but I don't see any lights. Guess we'll have to fend for ourselves."

The next surprise came when her mother pushed open the carved oak front door. A gust of hot, stale air rushed out. Sam gasped. It was like standing in the middle of a desert.

Lita took a deep breath and began to cough. "Oh wow, it's like an oven."

Grace stomped into the front hall and slammed her hand against the wall switch. "It's hotter than blazes in here." The flood of light from the crystal chandelier hanging overhead helped chase away some of the gloom.

Sam set her bag down on the polished hardwood floor. Lita did the same, the two of them watching as Grace yanked open several windows. The only one oblivious to the heat was Petey. The dog busily sniffed around the radiators and started to search out interesting scents in each corner.

"I told the housekeeper Mrs. Drake to expect us today. She insisted everything would be taken care of."

Hearing footsteps behind them, Sam turned and whispered, "Mom, there's someone—"

"You're early," the woman snapped, cutting Sam off.

The housekeeper brushed past everyone without a second glance, her striped skirt flying, the clatter of her hard-soled shoes against the floor made Sam think of Dutch girls and windmills. Not that Mrs. Drake's sour expression had any similarity to the smiling Dutch girl on that can of kitchen cleanser under the sink at home.

The older woman muttered under her breath as she clomped around the room. "That's what happens when people just show up when they want." She set her bag on the table, and reached for the chain hanging from the ceiling fan overhead. The fan

blades spun to life with a groan.

Sam held her breath and wondered how her mother would react.

Grace scowled, but winked in Sam's direction before she answered. "Getting here early was a good way to beat the traffic. I don't think you've met my daughter, Sam, and her friend, Lita. Girls, this is Mrs. Drake, Aunt Hilda's housekeeper."

Mrs. Drake stared down her long nose. "Hmpf, in those dirty jeans you look like a Sam."

That done, she gave Grace an equally unfriendly glare. "Mrs. Carlton, I distinctly said the house would be ready tomorrow. As I told you, there are things to be done before this place is ready for visitors."

Oh, boy. Sam saw the small vein begin to throb on the side of her mother's neck. She knew what that meant.

"And Mrs. Drake, I told you before, as executor of the will and Hilda's niece, I am free to come here whenever I like or am able." She looked around. "The house is fine, just hot. No matter. The girls and I will work out in Auntie's old art studio."

Sam and Lita exchanged alarmed glances. "What studio?" Sam whispered. Lita shrugged.

Even Mrs. Drake acted surprised. She closed and opened her mouth like a fish out of water. "Surely you aren't, you can't, I mean . . ." She picked invisible lint off her prim striped dress. "All that dust and dirt. You're not taking Miss Hilda's lovely things out there are you? It's dingy, grimy, and—"

"And much cooler." Grace's voice was firm. "My aunt used the building as her art studio for years until she quit painting. It'll be fine. There's a lot of room to work and it's perfectly livable. All it needs is a little sprucing up. We can cook and shower in the house. Please, don't let us interrupt your schedule. The girls will help move whatever we need before we sit down to eat."

Sam saw the horrified look on Lita's face. What? That dirty old building—the shed? She'd only caught a glimpse of the building when they'd stepped out of the car. She didn't like what she'd seen. With its dirt-streaked windows and layers of moss, the old brick building looked forlorn and creepy. It didn't appear that big, either. If the outside was that bad, she hated to consider the inside. The idea of working in such a building

sounded terrible, but Sam wasn't about to let crabby old Mrs. Drake know that.

The housekeeper coughed behind her hand. "Well, I was going to clean the kitchen cabinets. Been putting it off. Guess I'll do it later. There's some leftover turkey, macaroni salad, and baked beans in the icebox. Not much else, but you're welcome to it."

Mrs. Drake jumped back two steps and pointed. "Wh-what is that?"

There, beneath the table, Petey posed like a statue. Sam had trouble stifling her laughter as the woman and the dog stared each other down. "That's Petey, the Dachshund. Our friend, Helena, brought him home from the shelter. I don't know why he was sent there. He's a good dog. Isn't he great?"

The housekeeper made a face like she'd swallowed something horrible. She spun on her heel and hurried into the dining room.

Sam whispered to her mother. "I guess she doesn't like dogs." She peeked through the doorway and watched the older woman climb the stairs to the upper floor.

"Never mind," Grace said, shaking her head. "She's been acting strange ever since I talked to her. I told her we'd be here today. She kept making excuses and made it sound like I should stay home."

"How come?" Sam asked. "It's not her house. She can come over here anytime, right?"

"Yes. She's worked here for more than a decade. I think losing Aunt Hilda has been as hard on her as it was on the rest of us. When I last spoke to Bob Jensen, the gardener, he said he hadn't seen her much since Auntie's death."

"If you ask me," Lita added, "it sounds like she's been avoidin' the house."

Sam nodded. "I think so, too, at least until Mom called."

Her mother fell silent. *Something must be up*, Sam thought.

"Hmm, it does seem that way, doesn't it?" Grace tapped her foot as she thought. "She makes me nervous. She can do whatever she wants when I'm not around to see it, but she's starting to annoy me. I don't know what she's up to. Sam, you and Lita go upstairs while I take a quick look around down here. Auntie's room is the first door on the left. Wait for me there and—"

The dog trotted over to the staircase and started to growl. Grace grabbed the leash and clipped it to his collar. "Petey, enough. Shh."

"Looks like he doesn't like Mrs. Drake either," Lita said.

Sam laughed since she knew her mother had the same thought.

"I suspect Petey's smarter than we think. For now, he can stay with me. If you girls spot Mrs. Drake, stay out of her way and try to not let her see you. I'll be up in a few minutes, okay?"

The stairs creaked as Sam took them two by two, with Lita right on her heels. At the top step, Sam paused and listened. She peeked around the corner, then hurriedly shrunk back and motioned at Lita to go down a step. "I see a light. I think somebody's in the bedroom!"

The two of them pressed their backs to the wall as they heard the door above them open with a loud creak. Sam felt trapped, but it was too late to do much else. Her heart hammered in her chest. She sure hoped that Mrs. Drake, or whoever it was, decided to go down the hall in the opposite direction instead of taking the stairs.

Sam held her breath and counted off the seconds. She gave Lita a nervous smile and listened for the faint click of a door shutting, then held a finger to her lips. Lita nodded.

Sam dared not breathe. She feared that any second they'd be discovered. Her knees shook as the minutes passed. She exchanged glances with Lita, whose expression made Sam think of a frightened rabbit.

Sam's muscles tensed as she prepared to leap down the stairs and run if they were discovered. When no one appeared, Sam knew they had to take a chance. She crept up a step, leaned forward, and carefully positioned herself so she could peer around the corner. She caught a glimpse of a familiar, striped fabric as the wearer disappeared into a room at the end of the hall.

"Didn't Mrs. Drake have on a striped dress?"

"I think so." Lita shrugged as she joined her friend near the top step. "I wasn't paying attention to what she's wearing. Why?"

"I think she went to the other end of the hall."

"I'll check out the bedroom and see if anyone is there. You best give your mom a yell."

"Mom?" Sam skipped down the stairs to the first floor and called out in a whisper,

"Mom."

"Sam? I told you to wait."

Sam hurried back upstairs and waited for her mother so they could go in the room together. "It looks like Mrs. Drake was in Aunt Hilda's bedroom. I think she went to the other end of the hall."

"Is that so?" Grace asked as she turned the knob and pushed the door open. "Well, I know she's probably been in here plenty of times and . . . Oh, I can't believe it!"

Sam gasped as the door squeaked open further and she saw the room's interior. "Holy cow, what happened? What a mess!" She stepped into the old-fashioned bedroom and picked up a handful of pastel pink, yellow, and blue floral handkerchiefs that had been dropped on the floor.

"I think Mrs. Drake happened." Grace shook her head as she looked around. Petey stood beside her and held his head up, smelling the air. She stooped to pick up a pair of gloves the dog sniffed at and tossed them into a checkered box. "This is just terrible. I'm going to have a word with that woman. Auntie was always so neat. This would break her heart."

Lita gazed around the room, a disappointed look on her face. "Mrs. Carlton, this is such a beautiful room. It's like one of those places you see in old movies, or in a historic photo. It's so pretty. It kind of reminds me of a room from one of those big mansions around where I grew up." She sighed.

Sam knew Lita was thinking about how long it'd been since she'd seen her brother, Spencer, who'd moved down south last year. She saw how sad her friend felt and gave Lita's arm a squeeze before she continued her inspection. The room did resemble a scene from an old Hollywood film. It was almost like time had stopped. Wallpaper with giant pink roses covered the walls. The furniture was dark, large, and decorated with dozens of frilly, lacy doilies. Everything was pink—and unbelievably messy.

How could anyone do this? Sam eyed the mess; drawers hung open, Aunt Hilda's personal things had been pulled out and tossed everywhere. "Was Mrs. Drake mad?"

"Who knows?" Grace looped the dog's leash tightly around the doorknob. "Petey, stay."

In response, the dog lunged forward. Finding that he could move no further, he

stretched out his neck and started to whine. Sam went to pet him. "Petey, it's okay, boy. Just wait. There's too much for you to get into. Sit nice." He licked her hand, and relaxing, slid to the floor.

Grace sighed and shook her head as she gently placed a handful of pastel-colored silk scarves in a lace-trimmed hatbox. "Maybe she was looking for something. What, and why now, I don't know, but she didn't have enough time to search everywhere is my guess. Or Auntie could've been looking for something before she died. She wasn't quite herself at the end. Maybe Mrs. Drake didn't have time to straighten it all up, though she's had plenty of time to do it. I just don't understand!"

Every drawer in the dresser, even the small drawers in the ornately carved vanity against the front wall, had been opened. Sam eyed it all with interest, but the tall walnut wardrobe grabbed her attention.

Crossing the room for a better look, Sam saw that the old wardrobe stood taller than she originally thought. It towered over her with rows of ornate carving around the edges. Faded pale yellow roses decorated the two front doors. Each door had a shiny crystal knob, its surface etched with a delicate flower.

Positive that the armoire held something special, Sam reached out, grabbed a crystal knob, and tried to pull the door open. It rattled, but remained shut tight. "There must be something good in here since it's locked, right?"

"Maybe a treasure," Lita chirped.

Petey sat up and added his two cents with a couple sharp barks.

Grace's eyes twinkled as she held out a small gold key. "Could be. You tell me."

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(updated 8/11)