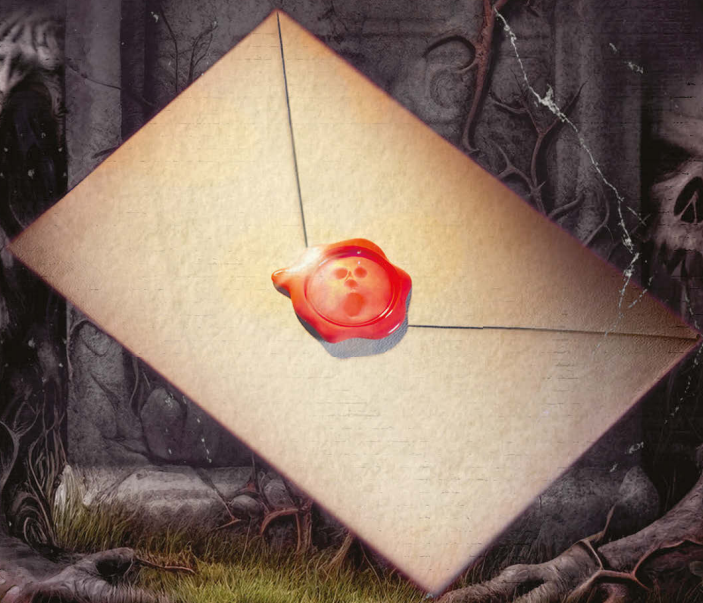


BY EVAN JACOBS



RETURN TO SENDER

A decorative title box with a hand-drawn, ornate border. The border features intricate scrollwork and floral motifs at the corners and midpoints. The background of the page is filled with faint, delicate spider webs, creating a spooky or antique atmosphere. The title text is centered within the box.

THE HISTORY OF THE VINTAGE ROSE ANTIQUE SHOP

The story begins with a sorcerer named Ervin Legend. He had a talent for making money. While traveling, Ervin bought items all over the world. He would have called himself a collector. Others might say hoarder. Once he grew tired of things, he sold them for a profit. "One man's junk is another man's treasure," he used to say.

Eventually, Ervin wanted to settle down. His home was in Scarecrow, California. But he needed somewhere to put all of his things. Ervin opened the Vintage Rose Antique Shop in 1912. It was a place to keep his collections. His wife, Visalia, inspired the shop's name. She loved roses and kept them in vases all over the shop. "Roses mask the smell of old things," she would say.

After the shop opened, Ervin kept traveling. He collected pieces to sell from all over. In 1949, Ervin and Visalia went to Cairo, Egypt. While there, the couple disappeared. Nobody knows what happened to them. Some say Ervin's love of sorcery might have been to blame. He may have looked into something he shouldn't have.

Family members took over the shop. None were quite like Ervin, though. Without his passion, the business began to fail. His sister believed it was cursed.



In 1979, the Legends put the shop up for sale. Rose Myers bought it. She was odd, like Ervin. Her passion for old things was like his. "Everything has a story," she would say, with a twinkle in her eye. From a young age, Rose had looked for bargains. She would resell things for a profit. Buying the Vintage Rose was her dream come true. The place was old. It was filled with odd treasures. Plus, Rose was part of the name of the store. It seemed like this was meant to be.

Rose ran the shop for 40 years. When she passed away, it closed. The business had been left to her nephew, Evan Stewart. He was Rose's closest living relative. The Stewart family moved to Scarecrow. They reopened the shop in 2019.

Today, the shop still holds many treasures. Collectors come from all over. Some have purchased these mysterious relics. Are they magical? Do they watch over the store? We may never find out. Or will we?

CHAPTER 1

THE PROJECT

"This is so not cool." I glance at the sheet of paper in my hand and roll my eyes. Then I stuff the paper in my bag and pull out my phone.

"Totally, Heather." My best friend, Sasha, doesn't look up from her phone. "Why would Mrs. Hartsfield assign that as a history project? It makes no sense."

Mrs. Hartsfield seems to think 8th grade history requires presentations. All of her projects include one in some way.

I start scrolling on social media. "The project is dumb. First, we have to find something old in our house. That's bad enough. Then we have to actually tell the class about it. This is ridiculous."

"I know, right?" Sasha shakes her head. "I don't think I even have anything old at home. Do you?"

"No way!" I exclaim. "But at least we can have partners for this project. We get to do it together."

Sasha smiles and nods. "Totally."

She and I leave the school building. Then we start walking to our neighborhood.

Everyone calls where we live the “rich area.” But it’s just home to Sasha and me. Our parents are wealthy. The houses in our neighborhood are huge. They’re like mansions. I could never imagine living any other way, unless I was in an even bigger house in a wealthier area. I’m sure I will be one day.

I would have to leave Scarecrow for that to happen. That’s the name of the California town we live in. Our neighborhood has always been the best one here.

Scarecrow was founded over 100 years ago. All of its old mansions were in our neighborhood. Eventually, developers remodeled them. That was a success. Our homes are gorgeous.

Still, I can’t wait to get out of this town. Scarecrow is way too small and a little creepy. It’s always overcast. That’s one reason why I love to go on vacations with my family. We always go somewhere sunny and warm. Living in this dreadful town makes me miss the sun so much.

Even the way Scarecrow got its name is weird. This place used to be all strawberry fields and swamps. Farmers were having trouble with birds eating their seeds. Then the farmers put up scarecrows everywhere

to keep the birds away. That led to the town's name. I kind of wish I didn't know this story. It makes me like Scarecrow even less.

Sasha agrees. She and I are basically the same person. We've been besties since kindergarten. Having the most perfect hair, teeth, and skin is our obsession. High-quality makeup is a top priority for us. We love it even more than designer clothes and shoes. But we have plenty of those too. I think all of this is why we are the two most popular girls at Scarecrow Middle School. Everyone seems to think we're perfect. That has even spilled over into social media. People always talk about our perfection in their comments and posts. I guess it makes sense. We're rich and beautiful. What's more perfect than that?

"Maybe we can have our parents talk to Mrs. Hartsfield," I suggest. "They can tell her that we have only new things in our homes. We never keep anything old."

"You think that'll work?" Sasha asks.

"It's better than doing this assignment," I say. "If our parents make a good argument, Mrs. Hartsfield will back down. If she doesn't, one of our parents could threaten to file a lawsuit. Schools never want that. Surely Mrs. Hartsfield wouldn't want to lose her job."

“Oh, that’s a good point.” Sasha smiles as she continues to look at her phone. “My dad’s law firm could easily sue the school.”

I move my long blonde hair out of my face. My hair always feels so soft. Sometimes I wish I could run my hands through it all day. “Why do we even have to take history?”

Sasha shakes her thick, wavy brown hair. “I have no idea. History is like algebra. When do you ever use it in the real world?”

I hold up my phone. “If there’s anything we want to know about the past, we can look it up using this. Why waste time learning about it in school?”

Sasha shrugs. “Adults just want to torture us.”

“You’re probably right. Why is it taking us so long to get . . . home?” Finally, I shift my eyes away from my phone. I glance around me. “Sasha, look. This is why it’s taking so long to get to our houses.”

Sasha finally stops using her phone too. She looks up. “What are we doing here?”

We’re standing in front of Vintage Rose Antique Shop. It’s the worst. I look in the shop’s window. The store is full of old junk. So much of what no one wants is all in one place. Vintage Rose is horrendous.

“I don’t know. Maybe we were too into our conversation. We didn’t see where we were walking.”

Sasha thinks for a moment. “Hmm. Maybe we can use this place. We could find something old here for our history project. Then we’ll tell Mrs. Hartsfield we found it at home.”

I tilt my head to one side. “Yeah. Good idea. That *would* be easier than suing the school.”

Sasha grins. “Project problem solved.”

“But do you really want to go into this dump?” I make a face.

Sasha turns up her nose. “I know it’s yucky. But it might be worth it, Heather.”

“Fine. But let’s be quick. I don’t want anyone from school seeing us in here.”

CHAPTER 2

MAIL

Bells jingle on the shop's door as I enter. "This place isn't as dusty as I thought it would be."

Sasha follows me inside. "But that smell!"

Nodding, I turn up my nose. "I know. But I think it's just old stuff. Maybe this is the smell when a bunch of it is put together."

Sasha shrugs. "I guess so. It smells like dead flowers. You're right about not staying here too long. If we do, I might throw up."

We both laugh.

As I look around the shop, I shake my head in disdain. "There's one word for this place—junkyard."

All kinds of old items fill the shop. Record players, radios, books, and gross-looking old furniture are among them. I don't even know what some objects are. Vintage Rose is truly a hoarder's paradise.

"Sasha." I scratch my arm. "Let's get out of here. What if this place has fleas?"

She smiles. “How can it have fleas?”

“Look at those old rugs.” I point to some hanging on the walls. “I bet they’re infested with fleas, ants, or some other insect.”

“Ew!” Sasha guides me away from the rugs. “Come on, Heather. Don’t even think about that. Let’s just find something we can use. Then we’ll leave.”

I nod. “Totally.”

We continue looking around. There’s a girl behind the counter. She looks familiar to me. A man stands next to her. Maybe they’re father and daughter. That would make sense. I heard this shop is family owned.

Then I remember where I’ve seen the girl. “Hey,” I whisper to Sasha. “That frumpy girl from school is here.”

Sasha looks in the girl’s direction. “Oh yeah.” She giggles. “Are you surprised? Why wouldn’t a loser like her be here?”

Just then, the girl looks back at us. We both laugh, showcasing our big, beautiful smiles and pristine white teeth.

The girl rolls her eyes and turns away.

“Look at that old black mailbox.” Sasha walks over and opens it. Then she puts her hand inside.

I cringe. “Ew, Sasha! What’s wrong with you?”

Anything could be in that mailbox. It's bad enough that you touched it. Why would you put your hand inside?"

"We have to touch whatever we're going to present in class." Sasha pauses. Her eyes grow wide. Then she quickly pulls out her hand. She's holding an envelope. "There's mail."

"Oh, creepy," I say. "That envelope is all yellow. I wonder how old it is."

Sasha holds it with her fingertips. "It looks ancient. But at least it's not dirty." She looks at the red flag on the side of the mailbox. "The flag thingy has been lifted up. Maybe that's to show there's mail inside."

I shrug. "Yeah, I guess so."

Sasha and I look closer at the yellowed envelope. It's from someone named Jackson Scarecrow. He has a Montana address. The mail was sent to Joseph Scarecrow.

I think for a moment. "Hmm, Scarecrow. This mail might give us extra points with Mrs. Hartsfield if we can connect it to our weird town."

Sasha nods. "That's a good idea. But how do we prove it's something from one of our houses?"

I take the envelope from Sasha's fingertips. Then I hold it lightly between mine. "This went to 1985

Raintree Street. I think that street is close to my house. Maybe I could just say that Joseph Scarecrow was related to my family somehow. My parents told me I had relatives who once lived on the land where my house is now. I can also say this letter has been passed down through the years as a piece of family history.”

Sasha grins. “Wow, Heather. You’re good. That might actually work.” She points to the envelope’s postmark. “Look at when it was sent. It says 1942. This is perfect!”

I’m excited about our plan. “Totally!”

We stare at the envelope for a moment. Handwritten across the front are the words “RETURN TO SENDER” in blue ink. I think that’s odd. Joseph and Jackson had the same last name. They were probably related. Maybe Joseph was mad at Jackson and didn’t want to hear from him. Who knows? Honestly, I don’t care.

I walk up to the frumpy girl from school. “Excuse me.”

She looks at Sasha and me. I can tell she doesn’t want to help us. It’s obvious to me how jealous she is.

I ask her my question anyway. “How much is this letter?” Then I glance in the direction of the mailbox. “It was inside of that mailbox over there.”

“That means the letter was in the pass-along section.” She quickly looks away.

The man behind the counter clears his throat. “Tenley, remember to tell them what that section is for.”

She turns back to us and speaks in a dry tone. “People donate those items. Someone must have donated that mailbox. So everything over there is free and—”

“Free? Let’s go, Sasha.” I bolt for the shop’s door. Then I wave at the man and Tenley. “Thanks! Bye!”

Sasha follows me outside.

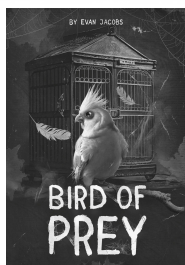
The man starts to respond. “You’re wel—”

Then the door shuts before we can hear him finish.

Sasha and I laugh so hard. Why listen to anything else after Tenley said “free”?

I’m thrilled with our find. Our history project is going to be the best.

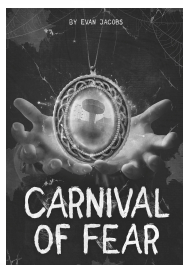
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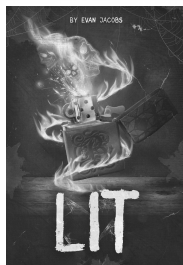
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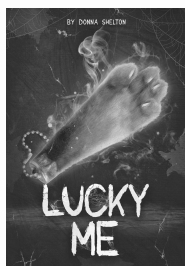
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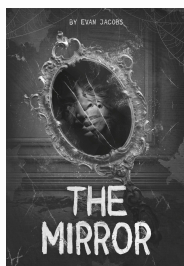
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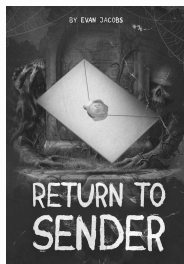
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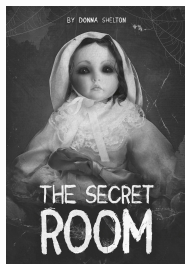
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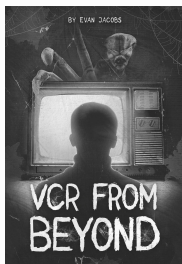
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VINTAGE ROSE MYSTERIES

RETURN TO SENDER

Heather and Sasha need a good idea for their history project. After a mailbox at Vintage Rose catches their interest, they discover a mysterious letter inside. Have the girls found what they need for their project, or are they about to encounter something they never saw coming?

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