

BY EVAN JACOBS



NEW PAINTING

A decorative rectangular frame with ornate, hand-drawn scrollwork at the corners and midpoints. The background of the entire page is covered with faint, light-colored spider webs.

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 GIFT

Come on, Tabitha,” Heather says. “Just rip it open!”

“Yeah, Tab,” Sasha says. “At this rate, you’ll be 14 by the time you open that!”

Everybody at my 13th birthday party laughs. So do I. But that doesn’t stop me from taking my time to open my last gift. Heather and Sasha don’t care what it is anyway. They both stare at their phones. That’s usually what they’re doing.

Heather and Sasha are eighth graders. I’m only in seventh. The three of us don’t hang out at school. We just live near each other, and our parents are friends. Our neighborhood is behind Scarecrow Middle School.

The last gift is big and flat. It’s wrapped in beautiful orange paper. First I open the card. My cousin Denise wrote in it. She smiles at me shyly and adjusts her thick glasses. Denise doesn’t really know anyone at the party since she goes to a different school. But we have a lot in common. Both of us love art.

All eyes are on me as I start to tear the paper. My mom is taking pictures. When the wrapping comes off, my heart begins to race. It's a painting. Is this what I think it is?

Denise points to the artist's name at the bottom of the canvas. It's written in cursive with silver paint.

"An Ophelia Wretch?" I shout. My face bursts into a smile. I can't believe it!

"I know she's your favorite painter," Denise says softly.

"Thank you so much!" I give her a big hug. She seems surprised.

For a moment, we all stare at the painting. The subject is a strange-looking orange man with brown hair. His suit is gray. He doesn't have a nose or eyes. There are just empty, black sockets where those should be. A dark, shadowy background frames the man. I can tell the paint is faded. It makes me wonder how old this piece is.

"Where did you get it?" I ask Denise. "This is my first real Ophelia Wretch painting. They are so hard to find now! Collectors always snap them up."

"My mom found it at the Vintage Rose Antique Shop," Denise says.

"Oh, really? That's in Scarecrow." Denise and

her parents live in Sunnyside. It's the next town over from Scarecrow. I wonder what they were doing at the Vintage Rose.

"Yeah. She bought it during their grand reopening a while back."

My aunt walks over from where she was standing with my mom.

"Hi, Aunt Becky! Thank you so much for the painting. How did you find it?"

"Oh, you're very welcome. It was just something I picked up while browsing the Vintage Rose. That's such an interesting shop."

I nod. *Interesting* is one way to describe the Vintage Rose. There's all kinds of weird stuff in that place. Sometimes kids from my school go there to mess around. They grab free items from the pass-along section. This is a part of the store where people donate things, and anyone can take them for free. As kids, my brother and I went to the store a few times to look for Halloween costume accessories. I haven't been there in years though.

Aunt Becky goes on. "When I brought the painting home, Denise recognized the artist. She said you loved her work. It has been in a closet ever since. We've just been waiting for your birthday!"

My aunt goes back to chatting with my mom. The party is starting to break up. Some of my friends are glued to their phones. It's clear they're ready to go. I should say goodbye to them. But I'm not done looking at the painting yet.

My best friends, Steven and Kendra, walk up. "You actually like that?" Steven asks. "Isn't it a little . . . dark?"

I laugh. Steven always wears button-down shirts in bright colors. He would never dress in a gray suit like the orange man.

"It's awesome!" I say. "Look at the lines and shadows. The way the colors contrast is so unique."

"It's cool," Kendra says. She smiles a bit. "If you're into creepy things."

The two of them laugh.

"Maybe it's a little odd," I say. "But it's an Ophelia Wretch! She's my favorite artist. Her paintings are so vivid. They really make you think. Did you guys know she's from Sunnyside?"

"No," Steven says. "Maybe you should go visit her. You two could have a painting party." He grins.

I frown. "Too bad she died in the 1980s, or else I would."

"Oh, sorry," Steven says, looking down.

All of my friends know I love to paint. But they

don't always get how passionate I am about it. My paintings are on almost every wall of our house. Most of them have girls as the subjects. That's my thing for now. Someday I hope to be like Ophelia Wretch. She is known around the world for her unique paintings. Since we're from the same area, I think of her as my painting soulmate.

"You're not planning to keep that, are you?" Heather asks. She looks up from her phone and scowls at the orange man.

"Of course I am. It's going up in my room immediately."

"No way," Sasha says. She scowls too.

Why did my mom even make me invite these girls to my party? We have nothing in common.

"That painting is mega-weird," my brother chimes in. Doug is at least a foot taller than all of us. He plays basketball at Scarecrow High School. Because he's so tall, everything he says seems to float through the room.

"Shh," I say. "Denise and Aunt Becky might hear you."

"Whatever."

Doug walks away. He goes over to the cupcakes and picks up three of them. Then he shoves them in his mouth.

Steven and Kendra crack up. I just roll my eyes.

At least Heather and Sasha will go home soon. I'm stuck with my brother forever.

CHAPTER 2

TRUE COLORS FADING

I nudge the painting of the orange man a little to the left. Now it's perfectly centered on the wall across from my bed. An old painting of mine had to be moved first. But it only seemed right to make the Ophelia Wretch painting the centerpiece of my room.

After admiring it for a moment, I pull out my phone. Once I've found the best lighting, I take a picture of the painting. This is going on my Instagram. The caption says, "New Ophelia Wretch from Cousin Denise." I add a heart emoji and a few hashtags before posting it.

There's a real Ophelia Wretch piece in my room. I still can't believe it. Some of my paintings hang on the other walls. There are also pictures of me, Steven, and Kendra tacked up. We've been best friends since fourth grade.

My easel stands in front of the orange man. There's a half-painted canvas on it. This is a new painting I'm doing. It features a rowboat on a lake. A girl leans over

the side of the boat. She dangles her hand in the water. You can't see her face at all. The sun is coming up in the background. Across the lake is an old log cabin.

I stare at the painting of the orange man. For some reason, his orange skin looks more faded now. His black hair appears grayer too. Maybe it always looked like this. The lighting is different downstairs. It's brighter in my room. That helps me when I'm painting.

My mom peeks her head into my room. "You already hung that up?" she asks.

"Of course!" I answer. "Mom, you know I love Ophelia Wretch."

As she walks into my room, Mom stares at the painting. She almost seems mesmerized.

"For something you think is weird, you're sure into it," I say, laughing.

"It's so eerie, Tabitha," Mom says. She looks at me now. "Even without eyes, the man seems to be looking at us."

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

I move around the room. The empty eye sockets don't seem to follow me. My mom is just being silly.

"It's not looking at Tabitha," Doug says. He stands in the doorway now. There's a big smile on his face. "Even without eyes, that guy doesn't want to look at her!"

My brother laughs and walks away.

Mom just shakes her head. I think about saying something back to him. Then I get a text. It's a group chat with Steven and Kendra.

Steven

movies? 🎬

Kendra

cool. what 2 see?
scary movie!

It's Sunday. My parents don't usually let me go out on school nights.

"Mom," I say. "Can I go to the movies with Steven and Kendra? I know there's school tomorrow, but it's still my birthday."

She knows how much I love the movies. "Okay," Mom says.

This birthday keeps getting better!

VINTAGE ROSE MYSTERIES

NEW PAINTING

The painting of the orange man is Tabitha's favorite birthday present. Soon, though, she realizes it's not a normal painting. The canvas starts to change. Can Tabitha solve the mystery of the orange man before he ruins her life—and the entire world of art?

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