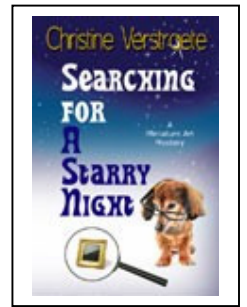


**Excerpt: Chapter One**

## ***Searching For A Starry Night, A Miniature Art Mystery***

By Christine Verstraete

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Praise for Christine Verstraete's

### **Searching for a Starry Night**

"Gripping, surprising, and leaving you wanting more... It's a must read...you'll be shocked at the twists and turns! With her talent to bring these characters to life in her writing, chills are sent down your spine, and your adrenaline will start pumping..."

–Lily Huber, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

"...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  
and author of *Super Sleuth*

"An enchanting tale full of youthful enthusiasm. Can **you** unravel the truth behind this mystery before our young investigators? A must-read for any age...young or old."

–Debi Sullivan, Independent Reviewer

## 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. Creepier, too.

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.

To thirteen-year-old Sam, the tall, thick elm trees planted in the yard loomed over the house like arms. The sun hung low. Faint wisps of pink light peeking out from between the gray clouds gave Aunt Hilda's home an eerie, deserted feel. The whole scene made Sam think of those spooky movies she liked, the ones that gave Lita Jackson, her best friend since she was seven, nightmares.

Sam watched Lita raise a thick eyebrow and look around, her expression unsure. "Wow, big house. You sure it's only gonna take a few days to search for that miniature painting? Not that I mind helpin', ya know."

Sam gulped and tried to sound convincing. "Sure, we'll be done in no time. Mom thinks the painting got mixed up with some other stuff. I still wish we were going to my mom's friend's cottage in Lake Geneva, but there's a nice lake here. 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, you bookworm."

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

"Nah, too much like homework." Sam smirked as she helped Lita lift the heavy black suitcase from the car's open trunk. She couldn't resist teasing. "Don't know how much you'll get done anyway, what with all the ghosts around—wooo!"

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. "Ya know, maybe I should've stayed home. My mom wanted help cleanin' closets. I loved reading R.L. Stine's books, but I sure don't wanna 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. Petey yipped and rushed by in his mission to inspect the bushes.

Sam giggled at the way the dog's ears flapped around. "What's the hurry, boy?"

She'd been really surprised when her mother said they were bringing Petey along. She thought "Petey-sitting" so bride-to-be Helena and her niece could go shopping for the wedding was a great idea, even if the Dachshund had the energy of ten dogs. She still thought it'd be fun to have a dog like him around all the time.

Grabbing her blue nylon overnight case, 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, or 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.

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

Grace Carlton sighed as she shifted her bag from hand to hand. "Sam, honestly. It's only been a few months since you were here for Auntie Hilda's funeral. You know it's a perfectly

normal house. 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."

Surprise number two 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."

Her voice angry, 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, who 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."

Sam turned at the sound of footsteps behind them. "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 making Sam think of Dutch girls and windmills. Not that Mrs. Drake's down-turned mouth and 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 a cloth 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 gave her daughter a wink 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 former housekeeper."

Mrs. Drake turned to stare down her long nose. She gave Lita a quick inspection, then turned to Sam. She sniffed and cleared her throat. "*Hmpf*, in those dirty jeans you look like a Sam."

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 the shed."

The shed? Sam and Lita exchanged alarmed glances.

Sam didn't think she liked that idea. She'd only caught a glimpse of the building when they'd stepped out of the car. She didn't like what she saw. With its dirt-streaked windows and layers of moss, the old brick building looked forlorn and creepy. Compared to the house, it didn't appear that big, either. In Sam's mind, the small shed seemed more suited to housing things than people.

Sam could tell that Lita felt as confused as she did. Even Mrs. Drake acted surprised. Sam tried not to giggle as she watched the housekeeper's mouth open and close like a fish out of water.

"Surely you aren't, you can't, I mean..." Mrs. Drake sputtered. Her hands 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 shed 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."

The idea of working in a shed, of all places, didn't appeal to Sam, but she wasn't about to let crabby old Mrs. Drake know that.

The housekeeper looked uncomfortable and coughed behind her hand. "Well...I was going to clean the kitchen cabinets today. Been putting it off. Guess I'll do it later. I put some leftover turkey, macaroni salad, and baked beans in the icebox. Not much else, but you're welcome to it." She sniffed again and looked around. Suddenly, she gasped, took two steps back, and pointed. "Wh-what is that?"

Sam leaned over and peered in the direction Mrs. Drake pointed. 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," Sam said. "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. Wow, did you see the look she gave you and Petey?" She peeked through the doorway to watch the older woman climb the stairs to the upper floor.

Her mother gazed at the ceiling and shook her head. "Never mind. She's been acting strange ever since I talked to her. I told her we'd be here today. She kept coming up with all kinds of excuses to try and get me to stay home."

"How come?" Sam asked. "It's not her house. She can come over anytime she wants, can't she?"

"True, but 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, it sounds like she's been avoidin' the house," Lita said.

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

Her mother fell silent, which worried Sam. Uh-oh, something's up.

"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." 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, 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. Finally, she heard the faint click of a door shutting and held her 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 behind a door at the end of the hall.

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

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

Sam skipped down the stairs to the first floor. "Mom," she called in a loud 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 makes me sick!"

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. Kinda reminds me of a room from one of those big mansions around where I grew up, like *Gone With the Wind* or somethin'." 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 her arm a squeeze before she continued her inspection. The room did resemble a scene from an old Hollywood film. 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 stepped nearer to pet him. "Petey, it's okay. Just wait. There's too much for you to get into. Sit nice now." 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. Why now, I don't know, but she didn't have enough time to search everywhere is my guess. Or perhaps Auntie was 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.

Sure 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."

\* \* \*