

The Annabel Warrant Files, Part IV

“Art Imitating Brothers”

I only just realised that I’ve spent so much time going on about Genoa City and the pocket watch and Westcrest that I haven’t even stopped to tell you about my friends: Sarah and Steven.

They’re not just friends—they are my *best* friends and if there’s one thing I’ve learnt about being a detective it’s that you need friends that you can rely on.

Sarah and I have been looking out for each other since first grade. I always seemed something of an oddity to her, I think, in my unfashionable pleated skirts and with my untamed explosion of blonde hair. She comes to me when she wants an opinion about something, because she knows that I won’t hold back.

I remember once, in sixth grade, when Sarah had a crush on a guy called Duncan Adams...

“Hey Anna,” she said and Sarra’s still the only one who gets away with calling me that. “You know that disco next week? Well... there’s this guy.”

The way she paused after she spoke lead me to assume that she was expecting me to look up at her before she continued. Or maybe to gasp and cover my mouth and burst into girlish squeals.

I didn’t plan on doing any of those things.

“Duncan Adams?” I asked, continuing with my homework.

“What? How did you know? Have I been obvious?” Sarah grabbed me around the shoulders and leaned in close. “He’s a total *lush!*”

“Lush?” I repeated after her and looked up, grinning. “Where do you *get* this stuff?”

“Probably too much time hanging around with my Aunt Sue,” said Sarah absently. She remained lost in her thoughts for a few minutes before speaking again. “Seriously Anna, how’d you *know?*”

I sighed and rolled my eyes at her. She punched me in the arm and I scoffed.

“You call *that* a punch? No, you’re not obvious. It was a pretty clearly a choice between Duncan Adams and Tommy Hendricks.”

“Good last name that Tommy has,” said Sarah. She’s always been *obsessed* with guitars.

“It’s spelt differently.”

“Whatever,” says Sarra, rocking back and forth in her chair. “What about Justin Paris?”

“The guy who always wears overalls?” I said and then we both broke down into gales of laughter loud enough to lure a decrepit school librarian out of her hiding place amongst the stacks.

“This is a place for *learning!*” The librarian hissed at us and that only made us laugh even harder. We left the library together and walked arm-in-arm across the school yard.

“Seriously, what do you think of Duncan?” Sarah asked.

“You could do worse, I suppose. His dad owns a restaurant that looks out over Lake Freyja. His mum’s a fitness instructor,” I pause before continuing. I knew all along that this is what Sarah wanted from me: not an opinion but *information*.

“What else?” She asked eagerly.

“He dated Shirley Dunsey last year, but they broke up when she puked strawberry milkshake on his Nike’s.”

“Eww,” says Sarah. “You know, sometimes I know *exactly* why I have you as a friend.”

“ Really?”

“Well, at least now I know not to order a strawberry milkshake when he takes me out.”

And then there’s Steven.

Sarah and I became friends with Steven on his first day at Genoa City High. It was a bright, summer morning and Sarah and I were sitting together in art class discussing how much warmer it would be if we were out in the sun.

“We have a new student today who has come all the way from Sumner City,” said Mz Deloraine. I write it with a “z” because that’s the way she always demanded for us address her. And I mean literally *demands*. So it’s like impersonating a bee everytime you dare speak to her.

Sarah and I sat back and watched the scene unfold. It was like a nature documentary. Steven shuffled forward in his black jeans and scruffy hair. There was a mythical bird on his blue t-shirt.

“Somebody find Steven a seat,” said Deloraine and turned her back to us in such a way that it was clear she was assuming no responsibility for the newest addition to her class. Instead she was leaving it to us: the ravenous horde.

I watched Steven’s eyes scan the room, but not properly. He looked but he didn’t really *see* anything. And then, as proof of my point, he went to sit down on the stool closest to him. A stool at the table of the GCBs. And I shouldn’t need to tell you what *that* stands for.

“I. Don’t. *Think*. So.” says Jacinta Mirriam. Back then her platinum blonde hair was cut short like a boy’s. She put her feet up on the stool, as much to show off her designer pumps as to block Steven from sitting down. Steven’s face drained of what little colour it had had to begin with.

There was a tangible feeling of tension in the air now. Mz Deloraine was going to turn around any minute and nobody wanted to know what would happen if Steven hadn’t found somewhere to sit down by then.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom. Heartbeats. Drums.

"You can sit over here," said Sarah.

"Yeah," I said, pushing out a stool. "You don't want to sit *there* anyway."

"Get a clue," said Jacinta. It's still her favourite line to use around me. She thinks it's clever because I'm a girl detective.

"Thanks," said Steven and he grinned even though you could see it was taking every effort for him to not just break down and cry. He's courageous, I guess. One of those guys who never realises just how brave he really is.

Mz Deloraine turned around and regarded us with dark eyes. She pursed her lips and scanned the room, seeking out her new student. Sarah waved as her eyes finally passed across our table. Jacinta groaned.

"We have wasted enough time," says Mz. Deloraine and that is how we met Steven.

The three of us still sit together in art class and it's still being taught by the perpetually-creepy Mz. Deloraine.

"It's time to take out your paints," said Mz. Deloraine to our class last week. "Today we will be painting in red."

Sarah is clearly the best of us at art—that's why I let her draw the eye on my first "private eye" sign all those years back. She chose to paint an apple, expertly blending different hues of red to make it appear as though bright light was reflecting off of the skin of the fruit. Steven painted a fairytale castle, complete with pointed spires and tiny crimson flags and I painted...

"What is *this*?" Said Mz. Deloraine, breaking me out of my daze. I hadn't been paying attention to the blank sheet of paper in front of me, and I looked down to see that I'd done little more than cover the whiteness of the paper with uneven blobs of red paint.

"It's a sand storm," said Steven. "On Mars,"

I nodded emphatically and Mz. Deloraine arched one drawn-on eyebrow.

From across the room Jacinta became my unlikely saviour as she cried out. We looked over to see a trail of red paint spilling down one of her legs and splatters of crimson on her stilettos. Jacinta wailed and Mz. Deloraine crossed her arms over her chest.

"This is not *art*!" Said Mz. Deloraine. "This is *foolishness*!"

"You're not the one who paid *two-hundred dollars* for these shoes!" Said Jacinta, wrinkling her nose. From where I was sitting, it looked like there were actually tears in her eyes.

Jacinta's posse were already rushing to wipe the paint off of her with paper towels. One of them, a girl named Emily Crumb, tried to open the door to the storage room in search of more, but the door appeared to be locked.

"Leave that!" Said Mz. Deloraine. "No students are allowed in the storage room!"

"She's so creepy," said Steven.

"Who, Jacinta?" Asked Sarah with a grin.

"No," he said. "Miss Deloraine."

"I think you mean Mz," I said, emphasizing the z.

"I wonder what she's hiding back there?" Asked Sarah and I could tell by the tone of her voice that she knew exactly how I was going to respond to such a question.

"There's only one way to find out," I said.

When school finished that afternoon, the three of us arranged to meet outside Mz. Deloraine's art room. We stood together and talked while we waited for the hallway to clear of students and then we slipped silently inside.

There was still a splash of red paint on the floor where Jacinta had spilt it over herself but there was no sign of the pictures we painted earlier, which seemed strange—usually the day's art is pegged onto strings that stretch out across the room.

We hurried over to the locked door.

"Damn it," I said, rifling through my school bag. "I left my master key at home."

Steven was already busy working the lock with an unfolded paper-clip. A moment later the lock clicked and the door eased open; clearly growing up in Sumner City has its advantages.

"Woah," said Sarah. "I thought that only worked in movies,"

"You'd be surprised," said Steven.

"We'd better get inside," I said.

"Wait!" Said Steven suddenly. "What if *she's* in there? Maybe that's why she didn't want anyone to go in. Maybe there's a bed and a refrigerator and a..."

"Fine," I told Steven. "You stay outside and keep watch. If anyone comes just... cough or something."

Steven nodded and Sarah and I stole into storage room. Here we discovered our red paintings, all lining the walls as well as some by students from other classes. Mz. Deloraine had been making *everyone* paint in red this week, it seemed.

There was a cluttered desk at the side of the room that was covered with report cards and a standing easel against the back wall. On the easel was a large canvas, partially covered with splashes of red paint.

“Looks like you’re not the only one who likes sandstorms,” said Sarah as we approached the painting. For some reason, just looking at it made me feel unwell.

“I don’t like it,” I said.

Then Sarah flicked a switch on the wall and a globe above our heads bloomed into light. Like everything else in the room the globe was coloured red, so that even our shadows appeared scarlet.

I started to say something else, but I don’t remember what. As much as the red painting was making me feel sick, I couldn’t take my eyes away from it. The swirls of paint seemed to *moving*, rippling like the surface of a pond... or a lake.

Later on, Sarah would tell me that she saw an orchard in the painting—but that’s not what I saw.

Out of the seemingly random splashes of red paint I started to perceive *depth* and next I could see a long corridor lined with stained-glass windows. A shadowy figure wearing medieval armour was pushing a prisoner forward.

The captive was a young boy with ashy-blond hair almost the same colour as mine and as I watched I finally found the breath with which to speak a single word: a name.

It was the name of my brother.

As quickly as it had appeared, the scene vanished. I stumbled backwards and Sarah caught me in her arms. The painting was gone, torn in half by Steven who was now staring at us both, his brow furrowed.

“You okay?” He asked and Sarah and I nodded. “What happened?”

“I...” It seemed like I should be able to answer him, but all memory of the scene beyond the painting was gone.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Sarah.

It wasn’t until later that I remembered what I had seen on the other side Mz. Deloraine’s painting.

Steven and I were walking to the bus stop together when he asked me if he could ask me something. It’s a pet-peeve of mine whenever anyone says that, but this time I let it go.

“Of course,” I said as we reached the bus-stop. The bus that Steven needed to catch was around the corner, but wasn’t due until after mine.

“You really miss him, don’t you?” Said Steven.

“Who?” I said. “I really don’t remember anything.”

“Back there in the art room, you called his name,” said Steven. He frowned and looked past me at the road. “You called for Jeremy.”