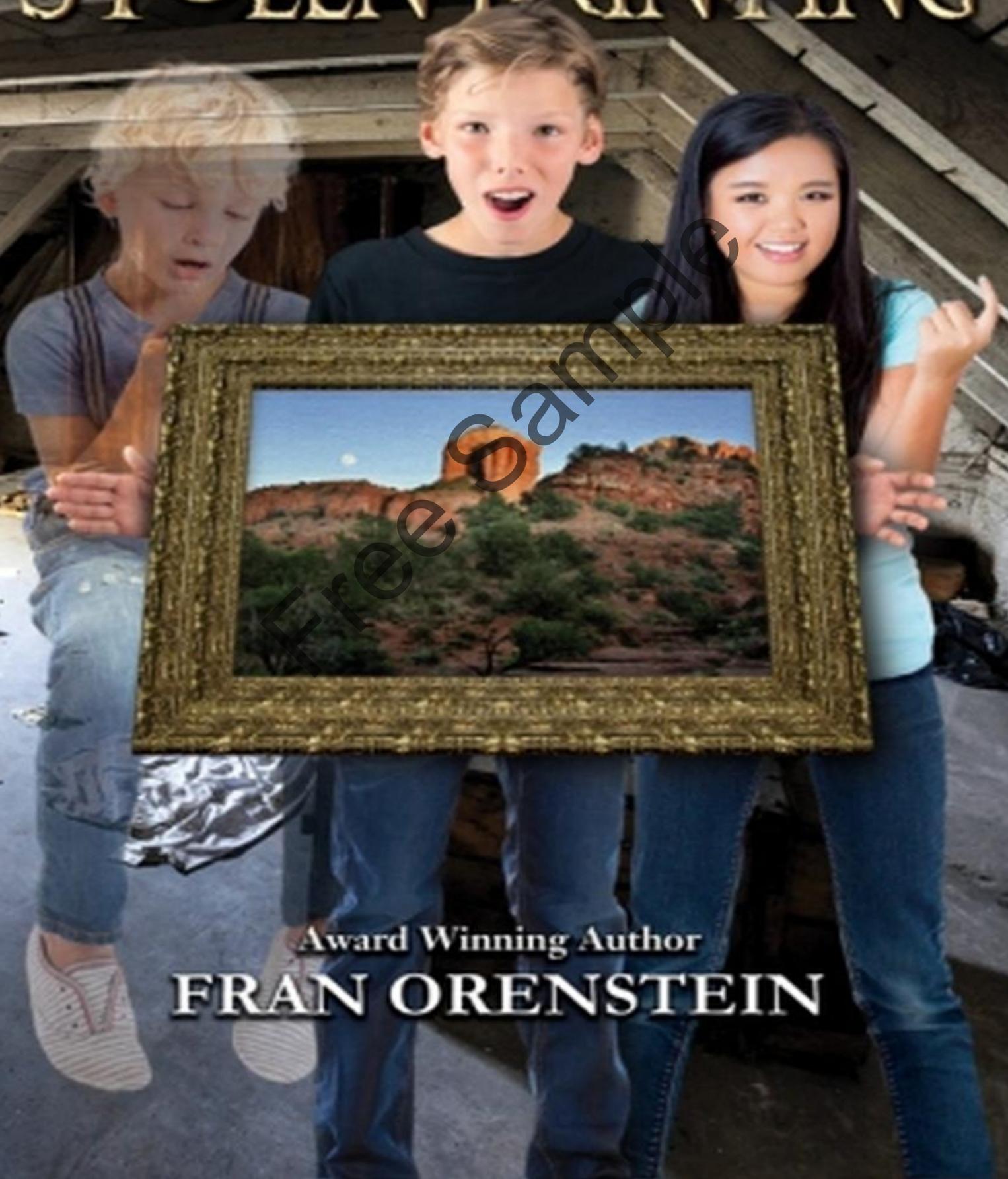


THE SHADOW BOY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 3

MYSTERY OF THE STOLEN PAINTING



Award Winning Author
FRAN ORENSTEIN

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MYSTERY OF THE STOLEN PAINTING

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Written by Fran Orenstein.

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Chapter 1



Snorts, Snuffles and Grunts

The laughter started in the corner at the last desk by the window. It always started there; a snuffle, a grunt, then another snuffle, like a pig in a sty pushing its nose into the slop pile. Nobody but JoJo laughed like that, well no human—nobody thought JoJo was human anyway. They did think he was funny, so titters and squeaks followed the grunts and snuffles, until the whole class was laughing. Ms. Gerard rapped on the board but nobody heard. Then she slammed the desktop with the metal stapler. Nobody listened. She tried shouting but there was so much noise with kids laughing so hard they practically fell off their chairs, she never stood a chance.

Besides Ms. Gerard, three kids in the room didn't laugh, one standing in the front of the room because he was the cause of the class hysteria. The other at her desk, fuming. And the third, well nobody could see him sitting on the window sill, his mouth turned down, squinting. If you looked closely enough, you might see a faint shadow on the wall.

The butt of this laughter, Danny West, stared down at a tiny hole in the floor, his hands hanging down at his sides, the book poised and ready to drop from his fingers. If he concentrated hard enough on the hole, maybe he could disappear into it, like that girl, Alice who slid down a hole following a talking rabbit. Then he could take a drink of something magic and grow so tiny no one would notice him. He would never have to read aloud again, nobody would laugh and he wouldn't feel so awful and, and....

But he didn't fall down the tiny hole and Ms. Gerard finally got the class to calm down by slamming the button on the bell that sat on her desk. She glared at the now silent students, her blood-red lips pressed together, as if a knife had slashed a tight line across her face. Veins stood out on her long, giraffey neck, holding back terrible words she wanted to scream but couldn't let them out.

Finally, words filled the room, squeezed between her gritted teeth. "Pop Quiz. Open a clean page in your notebooks and write two hundred words about why it is wrong to laugh at someone who makes a mistake. This will count toward your mid-term grade in language arts."

"He started it," Bari pointed at JoJo, who shot daggers at her, his eyes almost turning red like a vampire. Bari clapped her hand over her mouth in horror at what she had done and began to write, her nose nearly touching the paper.

The teacher ignored Bari and stood hands on hips until every child appeared to be writing. Then she sat down behind her desk, still sending darts from her gleaming eyes, like a coyote sneaking through the desert at night. In the chaos, she hadn't noticed Danny still standing at the front of the room.

Danny glanced up and saw only the top of everyone's head, as they stared down at the blank page, some still not writing anything. His eyes wandered and he thought he saw the light shift by the window but it didn't register, so he moved on to JoJo's desk. He didn't think JoJo cared at all but still he wrote. Well, his hand drifted in slow motion across the paper, a smart move considering Ms. Gerard's mood. Maybe he wasn't writing words, probably just drawing his stupid cartoons of Ms. Gerard with big ears and a mustache.

Danny still had two pages to read aloud but he couldn't do it, not today, not tomorrow, not ever. The letters and sounds wouldn't come together and make sense, twisting and turning like they were alive. They left holes in the words and sentences that Danny couldn't fill in and that stupid stammer would start.

Sometimes he felt like he would suffocate under a heavy quilt of words that tried to smother him, unable to get even the first letter of the word out of his mouth, because the rest of the word would dance around over the white paper. Sometimes he thought the words were alive and wanted to play games just to make him crazy. It hurt so much, he wished he could run out of the classroom screaming, instead he kept it hidden inside where no one could see his pain. Danny kept quiet in a crowd and only talked when it was safe, like alone with his family or with his best friend, Amy Crowe.

His grandpa had trouble getting words out and Danny once asked him how it felt. "Don't talk about it," Grandpa said, in as few words as possible. Danny figured maybe when he talked it didn't come out smooth because of his grandpa. Maybe it was in his genes and went far back in his family. Danny pictured some cowboy named West, sitting on his horse a hundred years ago in the middle of the Sonoran desert staring at a rattlesnake crawling toward the campfire but all he could get out of his mouth was, "R-rat..." So nobody paid him any attention and somebody got bit by the snarky snake and died. Danny wished somebody would listen to him and answer his questions but it was the family secret, something they hid in the back of the closet and ignored; except it wasn't a secret as soon as he opened his mouth.

He asked the speech teacher but she said not to worry, they were making progress, whatever that meant. After eight years, she might get the idea it wasn't working. No, he didn't stammer as much, at least not with people he trusted. Why didn't somebody get the message he shouldn't read aloud in front of a class. He tried to look it up, dyslexia but it was too scientific, so he gave up. Words hated him, so they tortured him just like the teacher and the kids in his class. One day, he might get up the nerve to ask Amy to do some research; nevertheless, something always stopped him, as if there were a little tickle of shame in the back of his neck. He dragged his eyes across the room where Amy sat still, staring out the window, tapping her pencil against her lips. She hadn't laughed, not even a tiny giggle came from between her lips.

He heard her voice in his head, something she told him last night. "I believe in you, Danny West, I'll never laugh or make fun. It's not your fault and don't you ever think it."

Small and thin, Amy, with her long, dark, braid and big brown eyes was his BFF, somebody he had known since kindergarten. Not a girlfriend, just a best friend, someone he could tell stuff to, who would listen and not laugh or tease him. They were both twelve, born the same week but Amy seemed like an old soul, as if she'd been around forever.

Danny wondered why somebody as smart and pretty as Amy would hang around with him but it made him feel like he was a winner, so he didn't look too hard at the "why".

Sometimes they would sit outside in the backyard and watch the sun sink behind the mountains to the west of where they lived in a desert town somewhere south of nowhere Arizona. Silhouetted black against the fiery orange and gold sky, tall saguaros stood guard over the desert, arms reaching up like ancient sentinels. Surrounded by shrub and cactus plants, the town shrank against a mountain range, trying to survive while withering a little bit every day from the baking sun.

It didn't take long for the sky to darken and twinkling stars to pop up until they dotted the sky, surrounding a spotlight moon. Amy knew all the constellations and drew maps for Danny so he could follow her as she pointed out the dippers, bears and the archer. Pictures worked, not words, so Danny had no problem seeing the star patterns overhead.

Yes, Amy Crowe was one smart girl. She didn't have a big head as did some of the others who thought they were so special because they were cheerleaders or on the champion soccer team. Instead, Amy played first clarinet in the school band, sitting right next to Danny who played second clarinet. It didn't bother him at all that Amy had first chair; she played better, so it was only fair. Amy was better at everything and Danny liked her that way.

Amy turned her head and caught his eye, tossing her head toward his seat. Danny got the message, so while Ms. Gerard looked down, fiddling with papers on her desk, daring the class to make a sound, he crept on tiptoe to his desk and slid into his chair. Whew, the silence was so loud he couldn't even hear the other kids breathing. Danny opened a blank page in his notebook and picked up his pencil. He started to write, in his cramped misspelled way about how it felt to stand up in front of the class and try to read aloud, listen to the kids laugh at him because he couldn't find the words then start to stammer. He knew his spelling was terrible and sometimes the letters twisted around and faced the wrong way, nonetheless, he hoped Ms. Gerard would understand what he was trying to say.

Half an hour went by and they nearly missed art. Mr. Lewis, the art teacher, poked his head in the door and Ms. Gerard stepped outside to speak with him. She left the door ajar so she could watch the class still writing their essays. After a few minutes, they both stepped back into the room. "Alright, class, pencils down. Line up please and follow Mr. Lewis. There will be no talking in the hall. One more breach of conduct and your homework for this weekend will be a ten-page essay on behaving in school and how to treat your fellow classmates."

She turned to the board to write something and Danny caught the slight smile on her face. He liked Ms. Gerard even though she tortured him, too, making him read aloud. His favorite teacher was Mr. Lewis, because he taught art. Danny worked a couple of hours on Saturday mornings at his grandpa's auto supply store, where he stocked shelves, swept the floors and did other odd jobs to earn money to pay for charcoal, colored pencils and sketch pads.

He liked being around his grandpa, who was like a father, since his real dad, a police officer, died trying to stop a robbery when Danny was a baby. He wanted to know more

but nobody would tell him anything. He tried to read the old newspaper articles at the library but the letters just danced around the page daring him to stop them long enough to make sense of the words. He felt ashamed to ask somebody else to read to him. Yeah, grandpa, mom and Sarah, his stuck-up big sister, were all the family he had. Oh, there was his dad's older brother, Uncle Rafe and his wife, Aunt Kris and a bunch of grown cousins. Grandpa was great for an old guy; he didn't talk much—he didn't ask Danny to talk much either.

Danny saved money every week so, one day, he would have enough money to buy some acrylic paint and canvases with which he could paint the desert landscapes he liked so much. Colored pencils worked but didn't have the depth paint had; he found it hard to make the shading right. He wished his family could afford the art lessons some of the kids took privately with Mr. Lewis. There were books on using colored pencils but he got frustrated trying to put the words together, so he just experimented on his own. Danny had a pad of drawings in his locker to show Mr. Lewis, though he was afraid to take a chance; Mr. Lewis might say no or tell him his work was awful. So, he left it in his locker, pushed to the back of the shelf.

Amy liked his drawings—she liked everything he did, as did his mom, who thought he was a great kid. Sure, he didn't get into trouble in school, did his homework, or tried but he wasn't great, he wasn't even good, not in his head. Danny wanted to hit out at everyone, especially JoJo McCoy and his sidekick, seventh-grader, Luke Allen, a big hairy moron who looked like King Kong. If there was an award for bullies of the year, they would win hands down. Danny had fantasies about waiting for them after school and...all this flew through Danny's brain as he followed the class through the halls to the art room. If he'd looked to his right, he might have seen a shadow flicker on the wall but his head bulged with angry thoughts.

When they passed the principal's office, JoJo turned and slid his finger across his throat then pointed his finger at Danny. Getting home could be nasty, today. He'd have to go the long way through the desert. He couldn't ask Amy to go with him; it might be dangerous with snakes and all kinds of creepy critters hiding behind the cacti and under the rocks. He wished he had his boots on; high-top sneakers would have to do the job this time. He was thinking of an excuse to tell Amy why they couldn't walk home together when the class stopped and he bumped into the boy in front.

“S-sorry, Jake.”

“Wake up, D-D-D-Danny.” Everybody at the end of the line laughed.

Mr. Lewis appeared in the doorway and glowered at the class. “Inside, now.”

Something tickled Danny's neck and he raised his hand, slapping at the back of his neck. Must be a fly, he decided, a very big fly. When he neared the door, Mr. Lewis put a hand out. “Can you stop by after school, Danny? There's something I want to discuss with you.”

Danny nodded, afraid to speak. Besides, all the air had evaporated from his lungs. His mind worked overtime, trying to figure out what he'd done wrong. Maybe Mr. Lewis thought he, not Jake, had made everybody laugh. At least he had an excuse for Amy; maybe, JoJo and Luke would get tired of hanging around waiting to use him as their

personal punching bag. He breathed easier and went to the double easel he shared with Amy.

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Chapter 2



Uh Oh, Trouble

The bell rang at 2:30 and Danny waited until everyone had left the classroom before speaking to Amy. “Mr. Lewis asked me to stop by the art room. He said there’s something he wants to talk about. I hope I’m not failing art.”

“That’s ridiculous, Danny. You’re the best artist in the school. Someday you’re going to be famous and your paintings will hang in museums.”

“I don’t think so, Amy, but it sounds nice.”

“Why don’t you show him the art you’re hiding in your locker.”

Danny shook his head. “How did you know about that? OK, stupid question, you can read minds, right?”

Amy smiled and blinked.

“Never mind. What if he hates it; thinks it’s stupid.”

“He won’t because your drawings are really good. Come on, Danny believe in yourself.”

“I don’t know.”

Amy raised herself on her tiptoes and stared him in the eye over the easel. “All great painters, writers, musicians, even great actors and famous movie stars are scared of rejection. Nobody wants to hear the word, ‘no’. You have to stop hiding your art in the back of a stinky locker.”

“Aren’t you the know-it-all?” But, Danny grinned.

“You’re lucky I’m non-violent, Danny West, or I might just bop you on the head.”

“You’re not tall enough to reach my head.”

“One day I might be taller than you.”

“Come on Amy, my dad was 6’3.”

Amy shrugged. “Well it’s just a thought. Come on, I’m going with you to the locker then to the art room, just in case you change your mind.”

“You’re also pushy. You’re worse than my mom and my sister together.”

“I like your mom; she bakes good chocolate chip cookies. Your sister, well, I have no opinion.”

“Uh, huh, right, Amy. When did you ever have no opinion on something?”

“Alright but I don’t want to talk about your sister with you.”

“Fine, then we won’t talk about her.”

“Now as for your art work...”

Danny tuned her out as usual and decided she was right; he had to show his drawings to Mr. Lewis some time or other and now was just as good as any other time. What was one more bad thing in a day of bad things? Well, he could get beat up on his way home, however Danny hoped JoJo’s fear of snakes would keep him from following him into the desert and he could get home without any bruises. The words inside his head were different, ‘cause they didn’t fade and go away like black and blue marks. Danny wondered if growing up would change anything. He still had the rest of middle school and high school to get through. That was a lot of years of JoJo and Luke and who knew who else. He could hear the laughter and teasing way out there in the future, just waiting for him. *“Come on D-D-Danny, we c-c-can’t wait to make your life miserable.”*

“Danny, are you listening?” Amy shook his arm.

“Huh?”

“You haven’t heard a word I said.”

“Sure I did,” he lied. “I was listening the whole time.”

“Right. Anyway, here’s your locker.”

Danny sighed. Had he daydreamed about the future all the way through art and out into the hallway? Sometimes, Amy ran over him like a freight train barreling along the tracks. He undid the lock and opened the door.

Amy jumped back a foot. “Whew, don’t you ever clean it out?”

Danny turned and grinned. “That’s what you get for being pushy.” He reached behind the books and smelly gym bag, knocking them to the floor and pulled out a sketchpad, handing it to Amy. “Here, hold this while I put back my stuff.”

She wrinkled her nose then reached out and held the pad with two fingers away from her body. “Maybe you should take the gym bag home and wash the stuff inside.”

Danny sniffed and made a face. “I guess you’re right. I’ll come back for it later.” It would make a good weapon if JoJo and Luke decided to brave the desert after all. Knock them out with stinky sweat socks. Tossing the bag back inside the locker, he slammed the door, closed the lock and twisted the dial. Then he turned down the hallway to the art room. “Oh, you’d better give me the art pad, Amy.”

“That’s OK, I’m going with you.”

“I don’t think Mr. Lewis invited you along.”

“I’ll just stay outside and wait for you.” Amy set her mouth in a tight line. Danny knew her well enough to keep quiet. He imagined they were like some of the old married couples he saw on television, always arguing, except they were only twelve and Amy told him she was never getting married or at least until she had a career. Like president of the world, he figured.

They reached the art room and Amy handed him the sketchpad. Danny knocked on the door.

“Come in.” Mr. Lewis got up from his desk as they entered. “Oh, hello, Amy. I didn’t realize you were coming, too.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Lewis, I’ll just take a chair and sit outside. I can do the English assignment, it’s just reading.”

“Oh, fine. If you need anything, just knock on the door.” He pulled a chair outside and set it next to the door.

Danny rolled his eyes as Amy grinned at him and raised her fingers in a V formation. Mr. Lewis shut the door and motioned to Danny to take a seat. “What’s that you’re holding?”

Danny clutched the pad to his chest. “Uh, it’s j-j-just some of my art w-w-work.”

“Wonderful, that’s what I wanted to discuss with you.” He reached for the pad and Danny held on a moment longer before passing it over. “Don’t worry so much, Danny, I think you have a lot of talent and that’s why I asked you to come.” Mr. Lewis flipped open the sketch book and looked at each picture a long time. Then he put it up on an easel and stepped back examining each page. Danny’s heart pounded like a kettledrum and he felt his head get hot. Then something silky and cool moved across his neck and his shoulders dropped. The heat receded and his heart settled down. What was going on? If that was a fly, it sure was humungous and invisible.

“I’m impressed, Danny. These are amazing. Where have you been studying art? I mean besides my classroom because I haven’t taught any of these techniques.”

“I haven’t studied anywhere. I just go out and draw pictures with colored pencils. It’s what I see in the desert.” Danny shut his mouth and shook his head. He hadn’t stuttered at all; every word came out smooth and easy. He only did that with Amy, his mom and grandpa. He felt calm and cool, like he could do anything and it would come out right. Something strange was happening. Maybe he was getting sick. That’s it, the weird feelings on the back of his neck weren’t normal, he probably had some kind of virus, maybe Valley Fever or something.

“Then you must have instruction books?”

Danny didn’t want to explain that he couldn’t read the words, if he could afford the books. “No, sir.”

“I see, then, this art is truly amazing. Have you thought about art lessons?”

“It’s kind of a problem. My m-mom can’t afford it and I work at my grandpa’s store so I can b-buy pencils and paper.” Danny rushed the last words because the stutter was coming back and if he talked fast enough he might be able to outrun it, although his speech teacher said the trick was to slow down. He just wanted to get it over with, so the words poured out like water over a broken dam.

“And your dad?”

“He was a police officer in Phoenix. He died in a robbery; some fancy art gallery, I think. I was little, so I don’t really remember him. Mom said the robber got away with the paintings and was never caught. So it’s just me and mom and my grandpa.” Danny stopped and took a breath.

Mr. Lewis stared off into space, as if he were seeing something. Danny turned his head and looked behind him but there wasn’t anything there, except a shadow of something against the white board.

The teacher snapped out of his trance. “I’m sorry, Danny, I didn’t know. It’s nice that you have your grandfather.”

“Oh yeah, I love my grandpa.” Danny peered at his teacher. “You all right, Mr. Lewis?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just thinking about my dad. He died when I was young, too, in a car accident.”

“I’m sorry about your father.”

“Wait, don’t you have a sister, Danny? I remember her when she went to this school. Sarah, that was her name.”

“Oh, sorry. Sometimes I try to forget about her; she’s, uh, well she kinda treats me like something smelly stuck to her shoe.”

Mr. Lewis smiled. “Ah, yes, well that does happen between brothers and sisters.” He seemed to want to say something else but changed his mind. “Isn’t she in college by now or working?”

Danny nodded. “She’s up at NAU in Flagstaff.”

“Hmm, Northern Arizona University, good school.” He stared into space again then shook his head fast as if he were trying to get rid of something. “Now back to the art. We can’t let your talent go to waste, so I would like to give you art lessons.”

Danny squirmed. What part of no money didn’t Mr. Lewis understand?

The teacher nodded. “I know what you’re thinking—you can’t pay me. I didn’t ask for any fee, did I?”

“M-my grandpa would be real mad if we took charity. He’s very proud.”

“Well, let’s not call it charity; let’s call it not letting a great talent go to waste. How much do you earn from working for your grandpa?”

Danny thought about it. “About 15 dollars a week, enough to buy art supplies and other stuff.”

“I’ll charge you 5 dollars a lesson and we can meet every other week for an hour at my studio. That way you’ll still have money for art supplies and whatever else you want.”

Danny thought again. “That might work but it’s not fair to you. I’ll take up your time and you won’t make any m-money.” He wanted to clap his hand over his mouth because the stammer was coming back. He took a deep breath instead.

“I don’t need the money, Danny. I want to do this for you and your art. I told you before you have a talent that shouldn’t go to waste.”

“Slow down, Danny.” The whispering voice blew into his right ear.

Danny slapped his ear. Flies didn’t talk. What was going on? Seeing Mr. Lewis’ eyebrows go up, Danny said, slowing his speech. “Uh, there’s a fly b-buzzing around my ear.” Then his head bobbed up and down, a smile creeping onto his face. “Yes, yes thank you, Mr. Lewis. I’ll work very hard and I won’t disappoint you.”

“I know that, Danny. Now, here’s why I asked you to meet with me. I want to enter one of your pictures in a statewide contest for art students. I need your parent’s, uh, mother’s permission. The winning pictures will be part of a special book of art. The winners will go to the statehouse for an awards dinner ceremony, get a copy of the book from the governor and a free one year pass for four to all the museums in Arizona.”

“Wow, cool. Maybe you could speak to my mom and grandpa and explain it to them? Sometimes, I have trouble talking about stuff.”

“I’d be happy to do that. I’ll call your mother tonight and arrange to meet with them as soon as possible. Will you leave this art pad with me, so I can decide between some of the pictures in here and the one I thought might be good to enter in the contest?”

Danny wanted to ask which picture Mr. Lewis thought was special enough for the contest but he couldn’t put it into words. Instead he said, “Uh, sure, whatever you want.”

“Oh and I’ll also talk to your mom and grandpa about the art lessons.”

“Right, I forgot about that. Thank you so much, Mr. Lewis.”

“You’re welcome, Danny. Now, something we have to deal with right away.” He got up and opened the door. “Come on in, Amy.” He held the door for her then brought the chair back inside.

“Earlier, I noticed JoJo McCoy and Luke Allen hanging around outside the front door. It looks like they’re waiting for somebody and up to no good. So if you’re willing, I want to drive you both home.”

Danny let out the breath he didn’t remember holding; no dodging rattlesnakes and scorpions today.

“It’s more than alright, Mr. Lewis, it’s fantabulous,” Amy said, grinning.

“Good, meet me inside the front door in ten minutes.”

Amy grabbed Danny’s hand and pulled him out of the room. “Come on, let’s get your stinky gym bag.”

“Hold on, I can’t take that today, it’ll smell up Mr. Lewis’ car.”

“Oh, I forgot. We’ll find the janitor and get a big plastic bag. That should keep the stink locked up.” She practically danced down the hall. “Oh, Danny, don’t you just love Mr. Lewis’ little red car? Everybody would drool for a chance to ride in it.”

“It must have cost a fortune,” Danny said.

“Well, maybe he’s rich.”

“Whoever heard of a rich teacher?”

“That’s a good point. Could be he teaches because he likes it but lives in a mansion and drives a cool car because his family has lots and lots of money.”

“You should write stories, Amy.”

“I might just do that one day. The Mystery of the Middle School Art Teacher, how does that sound for a title?”

“It’s kind of long,” Danny said, however, Amy wasn’t next to him anymore. Her voice echoed down the empty hallway and bounced off the walls. “Amy Crowe, world famous author.”

A face peered around the door to the boys’ bathroom. “You kids, so much noise.”

“Oops, sorry Mr. Jan...uh, I don’t know your name.” Amy danced up to the janitor. “Please, we need a large garbage bag so Danny can clean out the dirty, stinky stuff from his locker and take it home to wash, so it doesn’t smell up Mr. Lewis’ car and he’s driving us, so do you have a bag we can use, Mr. Janitor, pretty please with chocolate sprinkles on top?”

Danny marveled how Amy could say all that in one breath and one sentence and not fall down unconscious. He figured that’s why she was the first clarinetist...all that lung power. Maybe she should have taken up the tuba instead; she would probably be in the book of world records as the tiniest girl to play the tuba in an orchestra, all 4’8” and eighty pounds of her. She could probably fit inside the horn.

The janitor, turning his eyes upward, smiled and handed her a large black plastic bag.

“Thank you, Mr. Janitor. By the way you do a terrific job keeping the school clean because we kids can be such slobs.”

The janitor grinned. “Janovitch, not Janitor. You nice kid, missy, not like slobs.”

Amazed, Amy turned to Danny and winked. “Come on, slob; let’s clean out your locker.”

Danny followed the whirlwind named Amy as she danced down the hall.

Against the wall, the shadow of an unseen boy bent double, holding his belly, his shoulders shaking. If anyone listened carefully, one might hear the faint tinkle of laughter; the empty hall heard nothing.

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