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*Annie and the Mystery of  
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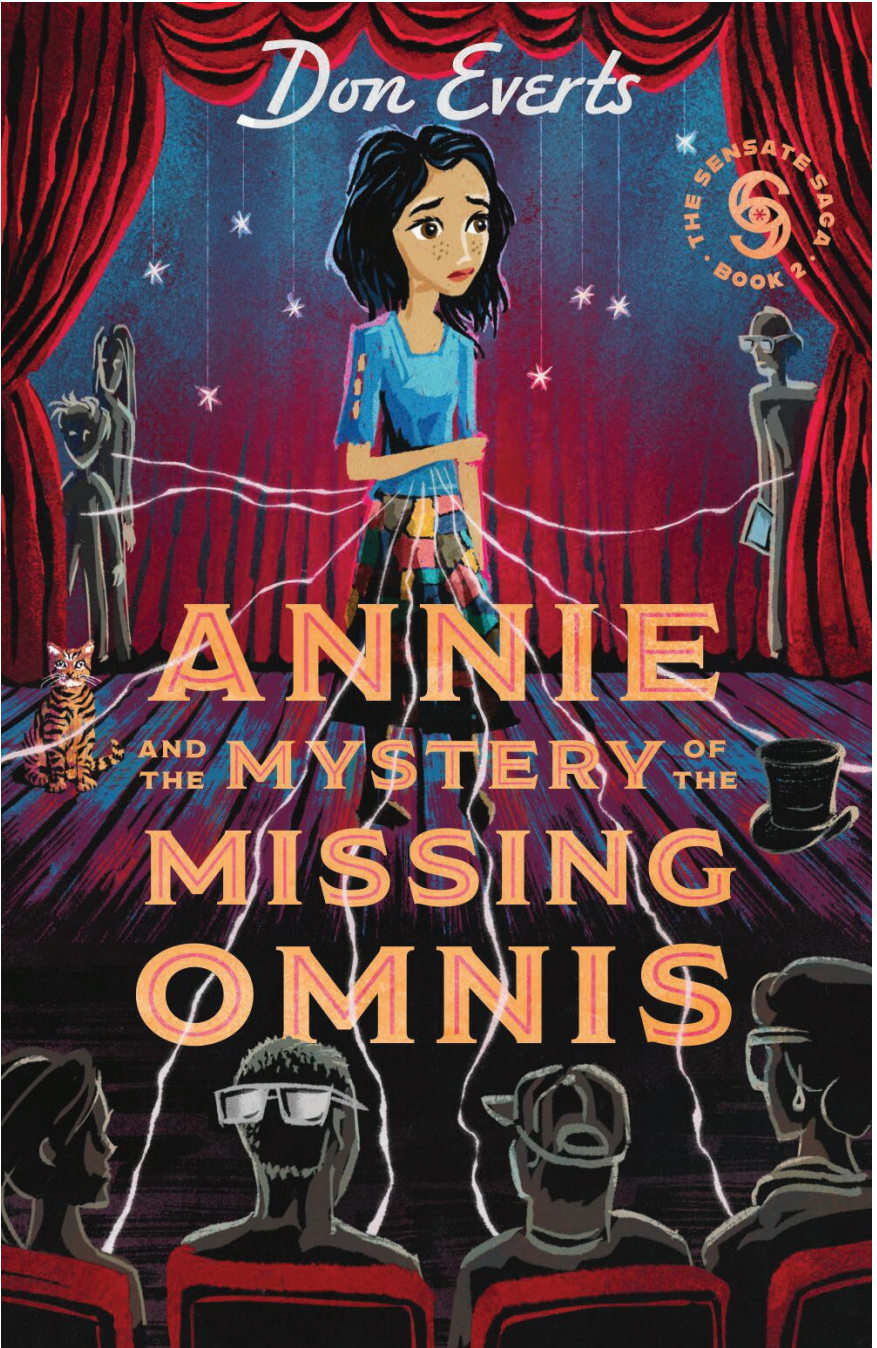
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Don Everts

THE SENSATE SAGA  
BOOK 2

ANNIE  
AND THE MYSTERY OF THE  
MISSING  
OMNIS



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## **ANNIE ALMOST THROWS UP AT SCHOOL (TWICE)**

Future Annie,

Hi. It's me. A younger you, I guess.

The therapist lady said I need to write about my life every day now. With the divorce, Gran dying, and high school starting at the end of the summer, she said it's important I "get in touch" with everything going on inside me. And around me.

I'm not so sure about that, though. Since Gran's funeral? And what started there? I'm sort of scared to write it all down, actually. Might make it seem more real.

And it's not real, right? It can't be. It's illogically, idiotically, incomparably impossible! Right?

The therapist lady said just write letters to your future self. Said that might make the writing easier. So, future self: Do you still see them? Am I just imagining it all? Or losing my mind? Or . . . ?

Freaking out,

June-before-high-school Annie

High school sophomore Annie Francis stood in the back of the classroom trying hard not to throw up.

She fidgeted with the top-spiral-bound notebook she was holding and knew exactly what the students in the class would think if they noticed the fidgeting: *Oh, that's Annie for you! Always on the move. Always chomping at the bit.* They'd assume her fingers were busy as bees because she was excited.

But they would be so wrong.

As she scanned the class of thirty-some Beginning Journalism students, she recognized a few of them. And she was certain they'd recognize her. Annie was the student editor of Centerville High School's student paper, the *Argus*, after all. She was sure most of them had noticed her—with her shoulder-length, black hair and colorful patchwork skirts and dresses—bustling through the halls and talking to nearly everyone in the school while searching for the next story.

Eager Annie. That's what some people called her.

And in a sense, they were right. She was always on the move. But if they knew what was going on inside her as she did all that bustling and talking and investigating? They might be shocked.

Mrs. Judith Robinson was up front talking to the class about “the historic impact of investigative reporting.” She was holding up a recent edition of the *Argus* as if displaying some long-lost precious parchment and telling the class about different investigative articles the school paper had featured over the years. Annie had her byline on a few of those articles.

But it wasn't Mrs. Robinson talking about her articles that was making Annie so nervous. Her fingers were fidgeting with her notebook and her gut was churning like an off-balance washing machine because she knew that in less than a minute, Mrs. Robinson was going to introduce her and expect her to walk to the front and tell the class some of her tricks for investigating a story.

The teacher started to carefully fold the *Argus* she'd been holding. “Scholars, I want to tell you about someone special who's going to speak to you this morning.”

This was it. She was starting to talk about Annie. The spin cycle in her gut went into overdrive.

“Her name is Annie Francis. A year ago she was sitting in Beginning Journalism just like you. She’s smart and determined and . . . imperturbable.”

Mrs. Robinson smiled, a twinkle in her intelligent brown eyes. “You can look that up later, scholars. A word worth knowing. And thinking about.”

Annie suddenly became self-conscious about all the wrinkles in the old patchwork dress she was wearing. She tried to smooth a few of them out. Mrs. Robinson was being more than generous. Sure, from the outside she knew she looked confident and determined. Imperturbable even. She’d always gotten good grades and was pretty dogged when chasing a story—probably because of her lifelong love of puzzles.

But on the inside? Sometimes it was a whole different story.

Even Mrs. Robinson had no idea how terrifyingly shy she’d been for most of her life, until that fateful summer before starting high school.

“Annie started working for the paper the first week of her freshman year . . .”

As Mrs. Robinson continued, some students started goose-necking and looking back at Annie. They obviously knew the teacher was talking about her, and their curious looks made her step back, pressing her back against the back wall. She felt the flatness of the unmoving wall behind her and the rising tide of nausea inside. She swallowed and had to pay attention to her breathing.

“Annie contributed to articles every now and then. Helped with research and fact checking. Did some proofing. But very quickly her tenacity and her ease with people have turned her into an incredible investigative reporter, not to mention the very able and successful student editor of the *Argus*.” Mrs. Robinson smiled. “The first sophomore to ever hold the position.”

She then placed the folded edition of the paper gently on her desk. “Annie? Could you come up and share your approach to investigating a story with these scholars?”

Now everyone in the classroom turned and looked right at her.

Her mouth felt as dry as the Sahara. The waves of sickness in her gut started lapping up toward her throat. To cover up the embarrassing shaking of her hands, she tightly gripped her notebook as if holding on for her life and started walking to the front of the classroom.

As she walked, she made herself look around at the faces of the students.

That was one of the many new habits she'd picked up that summer between middle school and high school. Her whole life up till then, she'd always just stared at the floor in front of her, pretending there was no one around her. That's how she'd walked through the world for years.

But ever since Gran's funeral the spring she finished middle school, ever since Annie started seeing what no one else could, she walked with her eyes aimed up and all around her. She tried to pay attention to people. Just like Gran.

In nervous moments like this, it was thinking of her grandma that kept her from just giving in to the nerves, running from the room, and retreating back into her old shy ways.

As she turned and faced the class, she thought again of Gran's last words to her: "Always leave a mark. That's why you're here."

Annie had initially wrestled with those last eight words from Gran. What exactly was she talking about? Big accomplishments? Inventing something? Or, like Gran herself, always touching people's lives?

Those unforgettable eight words had become a sort of refrain for Annie ever since Gran's funeral. Ever since she started seeing the impossible.

As she looked out at the thirty-some students at their desks, she saw it all again.

Something that still took her breath away.

Something she'd never become used to seeing.

Between Annie and each student in the class was a glowing white line.

As clear as day, she could see gossamer-thin, white lines coming out of her belly and leading, with soft curves like long pieces of floating yarn, to each and every student in that classroom. Over thirty white lines showing her exactly how connected she was to every human in the room. She could also see floating lines, of varying thickness and brightness, connecting the various students in the room to each other. Long, intertwined, glowing scribbles were floating everywhere.

The sight made her have to swallow.

The truth was, Annie was a Sensate.

She was part of a rare group of people who'd had one of their senses awakened in a special way. Specifically, she was a Seer.

Her eyes had changed that summer before high school.

Ever since Gran's funeral, she was able to see the relational connections between people. No matter how much she blinked or rubbed her eyes or wished the glowing lines would disappear, she could always see how people were or were not connected to others.

It was an incredible power, and Annie took her special ability very seriously.

But that didn't mean she always knew how to deal with what she was seeing.

Standing there and seeing the thin connection between herself and each of the students all at the same time was almost too much for her. Almost enough to make her sick. Almost enough to make her drop her eyes to the floor and run away.

But Gran's eight words were like a drumbeat inside her.

*Always leave a mark. That's why you're here.*

She swallowed again. She took a couple deep breaths.

"Are you okay?" Mrs. Robinson asked, a tone of concern in her voice.

Annie glanced over at her teacher where she sat at her desk and then back at the students whose eyes had gotten big, probably wondering what was wrong with her. Yes, there was a thin line of connection between her and each one of them. Yes, that made her uncomfortable in places deep inside her.

But it was also an opportunity to leave a mark. And she was convinced Gran was right: That's why she was here.

She tapped her trustworthy notebook with her fingers. "Hi, class. My name's Annie Francis. I'm a sophomore here at Centerville, and I'm the student editor of your school paper, the *Argus*."

She grinned slightly. "Did you know that Argus Panoptes is a character from Greek mythology? Argus was a guy who had one thousand eyes!"

That drew several chuckles from kids in the class and a smile from her teacher. She nodded at Annie to go on, a look of pride in her eyes.

"Argus was a watchman. A . . . wakeful, wise watchman." Annie couldn't help but smile at the quick alliteration she'd managed. "And journalism works the same way; reporters are like all these eyes that are watching. To report the truth. To confront corruption. That's what journalism, what Mrs. R here calls 'the fourth estate,' is all about."

She waved her notebook in front of her. "As investigative reporters we can leave a positive mark on the world, guys. And I wanna tell you all about it . . ."



The rest of the Beginning Journalism class went pretty well, and a couple of students lingered after the bell to ask Annie more questions. That's where she preferred to be, in a small group of people with a more manageable amount of glowing yarn coming her way.

When the last students finally left, she was buzzing and turned to celebrate with Mrs. Robinson.

But her beloved teacher removed her half circle glasses, letting them hang from their thin chain, and gave her a concerned look. "You sure you're okay? You looked almost sick there for a moment."

"I'm fine, R. Just got a little lightheaded, I think."

Mrs. Robinson did not look convinced.

But Annie didn't want her teacher (or anyone else) to know what sometimes went on inside Eager Annie. Time to get busy leaving her mark, right? So she said goodbye and headed out into the halls.

It was like walking out into a bowl of spaghetti.

Countless glowing white lines, of varying widths and brightness, traced and ran and looped in every direction.

Most of the time as she walked through the crowded halls of her school, she tried to tune out all the magic white yarn connecting people. But every now and then she'd see something that would take her breath away. Like the quiet student with only two hair-thin strings connecting them to the world around them. Or the newly dating couple whose close connection grew stronger and brighter every day, causing all their other connections to slowly wither.

Annie tried to block out all the stories that the strings floating around her suggested as she made her way through the spaghetti halls toward the lunchroom. She was excited to sit down with her crew at their lunch table and catch up after the weekend. They had so much to talk about!

Just three days ago, on the Friday of the homecoming football game, they'd anonymously published the results of their vandalism investigation. Because of their reporting, a crooked teacher, Mr. Sutton Shell, was being suspended while a full investigation into his theft of student council money was being launched.

Their underground paper had been a complete success—score one for the fourth estate! Annie couldn't wait to talk about it with her friends.

But lunch turned out very different than she expected.

One of the new freshmen, Oscar Owens, had news for her and the rest of the crew. Unexpected news. News that made her feel like throwing up for the second time that day.