

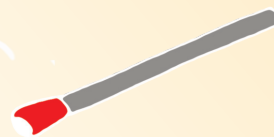
Meet the cast of **The Art of Secrets**

Saba Khan is a sophomore at the Highsmith School, a private school located on a leafy campus just north of downtown Chicago. A scholarship student and competitive tennis player, Saba is happy to stick by close friends and generally flies under the school's social radar. Before the novel begins, Saba and her family have lost their apartment in a blaze that the fire department suspects to be arson. In her first journal entry, Saba reveals rather cryptically that the fire may be "the best thing" that ever happened to her.

Saba's father, **Farooq Khan**, works long shifts in a factory to provide for his family. Raised in Pakistan and now an American citizen, Mr. Khan acknowledges that the world calls the U.S. the "land of opportunities." However, he begins to question what kinds of opportunities are available to him in the wake of devastating personal loss. Privately he worries that the cause of the fire may have been one of his own reckless family members.

Kevin & Kendra Spoon, a Highsmith senior and sophomore, are new to Chicago. Kendra is on the tennis team with Saba. Despite their newcomer status, Kevin and Kendra lead an ambitious, school-wide effort to raise money for the displaced Khan family. As Kevin says, "We're not new to the *situation* of being new . . . You want people to like you." But will the fast track to popularity and respect be the only reward for their hard work?

Dr. Regina Stickman is the proud principal of the Highsmith School—an institution that some will suggest has seen better days. Knowing an excellent PR opportunity when she sees one, Dr. Stickman informs a newspaper reporter who visits her office that—while she is required by law to protect the confidentiality of students—she is happy to provide "full access" to the students and staff if it will help get this inspiring story out to the public.



Wendy Pinch has seen it all, got it? She's been teaching PE to "little turds" at Highsmith (and putting up with Dr. Stickman) for more than thirty years. She takes pride in knowing "all the tricks, scams, schemes, frauds and dupes." The donations for the auction are stored in the gym, and Ms. Pinch admits she feels the tiniest bit responsible when things start to go wrong.

A shy exchange student from Spain, **Javier Conejera** is thrilled to have the opportunity to spend a full academic year in Chicago. Curious, hopeful, and still learning to express himself in English, Javier is eager to explore every corner of the big "brutal" city, as well as make some American friends. However, when a crime is committed on Highsmith's campus, this quiet stranger becomes a suspect. Javier claims the accusation is ridiculous—but when life gets difficult, isn't anyone capable of breaking the law?

Ariel Ames, an English teacher, is the youngest and newest member of Highsmith's faculty. After three years, her colleagues still refer to her as "the new girl," and she admits she often feels isolated at work. While her American Lit classes read works by Shirley Jackson and F. Scott Fitzgerald, her own behavior indicates that she hasn't exactly absorbed the insights contained in these famous stories.

Jean Delacroix is the lone member of the school's art department. Weary of teaching "watercolor technique and papier-mâché to a roomful of distracted teenagers," Jean dreams of quitting the job, moving to Paris, and making art full-time. Not surprisingly, Jean is the first person at Highsmith to notice that one of the items donated for the auction may be a valuable piece of art.

Tall and confident, senior **Steve Davinski** is a campus tour guide, star basketball player, and president of his class. In his own words, Steve knows "a lot about a lot of things," and he's quick to offer his own perspective about events, even though, he admits, "If there's one thing I don't know squat about, it's art." Later he adds knowingly, "Like everything else, it all comes down to numbers." When Steve begins a romantic relationship with Saba, it only adds to the ever-growing list of suspicious behaviors in the story.

Additionally, the ghost of Chicago's most famous "outsider artist," **Henry Darger** (1892–1973), haunts the novel. Details about Darger's fascinating life and his astounding body of work are revealed at the same time that the present-day story unfolds.

