

# The Mystery of Santa Claus

A Standalone Mystery Story

By Paul Moxham

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NOTE:

This can be read as a stand alone story, but if you want to have full knowledge of the characters, I suggest that you read *The Mystery of Smugglers Cove*, the first book in *The Mystery Series*.

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This story is set in 1950's Britain and is written in British English - not American English - so bear this in mind regarding the spelling of some words.

The Mystery of Santa Claus  
Want More?

## The Mystery of Santa Claus

It was Christmas Eve and Will, a freckled faced boy with a cheeky grin, couldn't be happier. Not only was he with his three best friends, Joe, Amy, and Sarah, but he was in Scotland.

To be exact, he was in Dunmoore, where his friend's grandparents lived on a large property called Heather Hills. The countryside was totally different from Smugglers Cove, the small coastal village on the south coast of England where the boy lived with his father.

Snow covered the entire landscape, including the tall pine trees that bordered the property. Behind them, seemingly inching its way up to the sky, was Claw Mountain, a craggy piece of snow covered rock.

As much as Will would have liked to spend Christmas with his father, he couldn't resist accepting the invitation from Mr and Mrs Mitchell to join them for a week in Scotland.

The days had flown by and now it was Christmas Eve. Will didn't know what it was, but there was something about Christmas that made everyone seem happier. Maybe it was the Christmas decorations that he and the others had helped to put up when they had first arrived at Heather Hills. Or maybe it was the Christmas tree that he and the others had selected to be carried into the living room and decorated. Or maybe it was the big pile of presents that lay at the bottom of the tree.

Whatever the reason, Will was really enjoying this holiday.

As Jock, the large brown dog who was also part of the family, bounded up, Will smiled. Maybe the reason was Jock. Maybe it was he who made everyone happy. How could anyone not be happy when they saw his smiley face and wagging tail?

Will gave the dog a loving pat. He smiled and turned to the others. "So, what shall we do now?"

Joe gazed around the village which was far smaller than Smugglers Cove. There was a bakery, a general store, a church, a police station, and two other shops. "I think it's time for a bite to eat."

"I think so too," Sarah piped up, her green eyes shining.

Will looked at his watch. "Well, it is almost lunch time."

Amy nodded. "After we've eaten, we could go ice skating."

"Maybe," Joe said. "Hopefully, the ice will be thick enough today."

The four children and the dog walked over to the Penny Olive Bakery.

"Hey, I wonder if dogs are allowed inside," Sarah said, glancing down at Jock.

"I hope so. I'm sure he'll behave himself," Amy replied, patting the animal.

Joe led the way inside and walked over to the counter, smiling up at the owner, a jolly faced woman with short red hair. "Hello Mrs Olive, remember us?"

The woman smiled instantly. "Of course I do! You helped catch a number of crooks last winter. Are you staying with your grandparents for Christmas?"

Joe nodded. "Yes, we are. We arrived two days ago."

"We actually came here yesterday afternoon," Amy stated. "But you were closed."

"Yes, I closed early," Mrs Olive replied. "My neighbour rang and told me that a tree had blown down beside my house, so I wanted to make sure that nothing was damaged."

"That was quite a big storm we had," Joe said.

"Yes, the wind was really strong," Mrs Olive replied. "Did you hear what happened to Mr McGregor?"

Amy frowned. "No. He's the old man who lives close to our grandparents, isn't he?"

Mrs Olive nodded. "Yes, that's correct. He was driving along the mine road when a massive tree crushed his vehicle. He was lucky to escape with only a few scratches, especially since his car is still stuck underneath the tree."

Will nodded. "That would have been scary. Well, hopefully, no trees fall at Heather Hills while we're there."

"Well, there's only one near the house," Amy pointed out. "And that's quite a young tree, so that shouldn't happen."

"No, that shouldn't fall," Mrs Olive agreed. "Trees normally fall down when they get old. Now, what do you want to eat?"

“Do you have any slices of Christmas cake today?” Joe asked.

Mrs Olive nodded. “I do, I made two cakes this morning. How many slices would you like?”

“Eight please,” Joe replied. “By the way, are dogs allowed in the cafe?”

Mrs Olive smiled at Jock. “Yes, they are, just as long as they behave themselves. Now, go and choose a table to sit at and I’ll go and cut up the cake for you.”

~

Twenty minutes later, Joe leaned back in his seat. “I’m bursting.”

Will groaned. “So am I. That was the best Christmas cake I have ever tasted.” He gazed over at Mrs Olive who was tending to a customer at the counter. “I wonder if she would write down her recipe for me.”

“I didn’t know you liked cooking,” Sarah piped up.

“Well, I can’t say I’ve done that much in the past,” Will admitted. “But then again, I haven’t tasted anything as scrumptious as that cake before. I could eat that every day if I had the recipe.”

Sarah laughed. “If you did, you’d soon be fat.”

“Shall we go and get our skates now and go skating?” Joe asked.

“Yes, that sounds like fun,” Sarah replied.

“Hey, how about we go along the mine road and look at the big tree that fell down on Mr McGregor’s car?” Will suggested.

“Yes, let’s do that,” Amy said.

~

Even though the way back to Heather Hills via the mine road was longer, the children didn’t mind. It wasn’t as though they had anything else planned.

As they approached the fallen tree, the children were amazed at how huge it was. The trunk was so thick that it covered the entire width of the bonnet.

Amy climbed over the trunk and examined the vehicle. “Golly, Mr McGregor really was lucky. If the tree had fallen a second or two later, it would have smashed onto the driver’s seat.”

“Yes. It could have been much worse. If he...” Joe stopped speaking as Jock suddenly bounded away into the woods. “Where is he going?”

“I don’t know,” Will said. “Hey, Jock! Come back here!”

The brown dog took no notice of Will’s shouts or, for that matter, any of the children’s. Within a matter of seconds, he was lost from view.

“Maybe he spotted a rabbit,” Sarah said.

Amy nodded. “Probably. Come on, let’s chase after him.”

“Good thing there’s snow on the ground,” Joe said. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t have a clue which way he had gone.”

The four children zigzagged between the birch and pine trees as they followed Jock’s paw prints. Luckily, the snow was not too deep to walk in, but deep enough to spot the prints.

As the group followed Jock’s path, they called out and, every now and then, the dog barked, as though to let them know where he was heading.

After five minutes of this, Joe started to get concerned. He had assumed that Jock had bounded off to chase a rabbit, but now this was starting to be unlikely. He called out to Jock and, this time, heard two barks at the same time in reply. “Hey, was that another dog?”

Amy nodded. “Yes, so maybe Jock was chasing a dog and not a rabbit.”

It wasn’t long before the children caught up with the two dogs. As they did so, the animals bounded off again.

“Hey! Come back here!” Will yelled.

Neither Jock nor the new dog, who was a black, Scottish terrier, took the slightest notice.

Sarah sighed. “I’m getting tired of this.”

Joe nodded. “Me too. But Jock doesn’t normally act this way so something strange must be going on.”

With reluctance, Sarah followed the others through the snowy woods.

Five minutes later, the trees parted and they emerged into an open area. The children stopped for a few seconds to take in their surroundings.

In front of them lay a winding river and, on the other side of that, were several fields. In the distance, some buildings could just be seen. Joe assumed it was a farm. He turned his attention to their side of the river and, peering down, saw the paw prints of the two dogs. "Can anyone see Jock?"

Amy suddenly pointed. "Look, just before that bend in the river."

Joe nodded. "Yes, that looks like Jock, but I can't see the other dog."

Will gazed ahead of the dog and saw what appeared to be a vehicle wedged up against a tree some distance ahead. "Hey! Could that car be what Jock is heading for?"

Amy nodded as she saw the car in the snow. "It must be."

"Come on, let's see if anyone is injured." Joe hurried down the slope. As he got closer, he saw that the white sedan had smashed up against a large pine tree. The vehicle had obviously hit the tree with some force.

Apart from the bonnet, the rest of the car seemed to be in relatively good condition, though the wheels were half buried in the snow.

Will peered up the slope and, seeing the trail of destruction, such as broken branches, realized that the car had veered down the hill. "There must be a road up there."

Joe nodded. "Yes, there must be. And, for some reason, the driver of this vehicle lost control and plunged off the road and down this hill, before slamming into the tree." He walked over to the driver's side and peered through the window. There was no one inside. He was surprised to see that the car was full of presents.

Before Joe could fathom what this meant, he heard the dogs barking from the other side of the car. Leading the way, he hurried to the other side of the vehicle and got a shock as he saw a man facedown in the snow.

"Oh no!" Sarah exclaimed. "Is he dead?"

Will knelt down and examined the man's pulse, breathing a sigh of relief as he did so. "Thankfully not."

"That's a relief," Amy said.

As the children turned the man over so they could get a good look at him, they were dismayed to see blood on the snow.

After a quick examination, they realized that the man had hit his head on a nearby rock, causing a small gash on his forehead. As well as this, his left leg was bloody.

But this wasn't the most surprising thing. It was the man's clothes. He was dressed in a Santa suit, complete with a red hat and a fake white beard.

Sarah turned to Joe. "Why is he dressed like Santa Claus?"

"I have no idea," Joe replied. "But his leg looks pretty nasty. We have to get him to a hospital."

As the Scottish terrier licked the man's face, the children wondered if the man would wake up. But he didn't.

Amy frowned. "He's breathing, but he's not waking up."

"Maybe some water will do the trick." Will hurried over to the river and brought back a handful of water which he dropped onto the man's face.

This did the trick and the man's eyes opened. He gazed at the freckle faced boy. "Who are you?"

"I'm Will," the boy replied. "And these are my friends Joe, Amy, and Sarah."

The man nodded. "I'm..." He paused. "I don't know who I am." He glanced around. "Where am I?"

"You've been in a car accident," Joe said.

The man frowned. "I have?" He looked at the clothes he was wearing. "Why am I dressed like Santa Claus?"

"We don't know," Will replied. "We just arrived here. Your dog attracted the attention of our dog."

The man looked at the two dogs. "I don't know either of them."

"You don't know your own dog?" Sarah questioned.

"No, I think I must have amnesia," the man replied. He grimaced as he tried to move his left leg.

"Ah, that's sore. Would you lot be able to get help? I don't think I will be able to move anytime soon."

Joe nodded. "But first, let's get you back into your car. It will be a lot warmer in there."

With all four providing a helping hand, the man was able to climb back into his vehicle. Noticing the presents, he frowned. "What are they doing here?"

"You must have been taking them somewhere," Will said.

The man's brow furrowed as he gazed at the presents. "I suppose so." He leaned back in his seat. "I'll just close my eyes and have a rest."

As the two dogs climbed into the car, the children moved away from the vehicle so that they could talk without being overheard.

"I wonder how long his amnesia will last," Amy said.

"I don't know," Joe replied. "It could be hours or even days. Best thing we can do is to split up. Two of us should stay to keep an eye on the old man and to listen for a passing car, while the other two head for the farmhouse on the other side of the river and see if we can get help."

Will nodded. "That seems like a good plan."

"But how would you get across the water?" Sarah piped up.

"I'm sure there will be a bridge around here somewhere," Joe said. "I saw one on our walk yesterday—"

"But that was when we were walking near Heather Hills," Amy interrupted.

Joe nodded. "I know that, but this will be the same river. And whoever built a bridge on that section, probably would have built a bridge around here."

"And if not?" Sarah asked.

"Then that pair can come back to the car," Joe said. "It's still fairly early in the day, so we'll have plenty of daylight left."

Will peered up at the sky. Dark clouds were drifting in. "Maybe, as long as it doesn't start snowing. If that happens, it's going to get dark much more quickly."

"We'd better get moving then," Amy stated. "So, who is going to do what?"

"I'll stay here with the old man," Sarah offered. "Since I'm the youngest, I'd only slow the other person down if I went to the farmhouse."

"And I'll keep watch on the road," Will said.

Joe nodded and tuned to his sister. "Do you want to come with me?"

"Yes, that's fine with me," Amy replied. "But what about Jock?"

Joe looked back at the car. "Let him stay here. He seems to enjoy being around the small dog."

"You know, I can't help feeling I've seen that dog before," Sarah said.

"Do you have any idea where?" Amy asked.

"No, I don't, that's why it's just a feeling," Sarah replied. "Anyway, that doesn't matter. All that matters is getting the man to a hospital."

Joe nodded and, without further ado, the group split up.

~

By the time Will reached the top of the hill, he was puffing. It had been hard work, since the slope was a lot steeper than it had appeared at first glance.

He took a moment to assess his surroundings. Since the road curved around, he was unable to see far in either direction. However, no sound of an engine or, for that matter, any sound at all, could be heard.

Suddenly, the tree branches began to move as wind whistled throughout the woods. As Will gazed upwards, he realized that clouds now covered the entire sky. That, along with the wind which was now gaining momentum, meant that a storm was on the way.

He frowned. If it started snowing, which was likely, it would impede Joe and Amy. Hopefully that wouldn't happen. He watched the two of them walk along the riverbank, heading away from him and the mine.

He decided he would stay up here until he saw the others reach the farmhouse, if he could see that far. So, finding a flat rock, he brushed the snow off it and sat down.

~

After Joe and Amy had been walking for ten minutes, they came to a small wooden bridge.

Amy smiled, thanking her lucky stars that they had been so fortunate. “How long do you think it will take to get to the farmhouse from here?”

“Probably another ten or fifteen minutes,” Joe replied. “If the bridge had been directly opposite the car, then it would have been quicker, but it could have been worse.”

“If there’s no one home, do we spend another twenty minutes going back to the car?” Amy questioned.

“I don’t know,” Joe said, glancing up at the sky. “It depends.”

As the brother and sister continued walking across the snow covered grass, the wind started to pick up. Glad that they were wearing warm, thick clothes, they shoved their hands into their coat pockets and resumed walking.

By the time they reached the outer buildings of the farmhouse, it had started snowing. Joe took one look up at the sky. “Looks like it’s going to get darker sooner rather than later.”

“Then let’s hurry up and see who is at home,” Amy said, quickening her pace.

The two of them were soon at the front door of the large, old house. Joe rapped on the wooden door and called out. “Hello! Is anyone at home?”

There was no answer.

“Can anyone hear us?” Amy yelled.

There was still no answer.

Joe led the way around the side of the building, calling out as he did so. After the two had walked around the entire structure, it was clear to them that no one was within hearing range.

Joe pushed open one of the heavy barn doors and peered inside. Darkness greeted him. He closed it, and turned to Amy. “We’ll have to search elsewhere.”

“If only this was Smugglers Cove,” Amy muttered. “If it was, we’d know where the nearest house was. But since we’ve only been here once before, I have no idea which direction to walk in.”

Joe nodded. “Which is why we should head for Heather Hills.”

“But where are we in relation to that?” Amy asked. “I got a bit lost following Jock’s paw prints through the snow.”

Joe nodded. “So did I, but if we head down the river, we should reach another bridge, then we can head for the mine. From there, it will be easy to reach our grandparents place.”

Amy frowned, uncertain. “As long as this snowstorm doesn’t get worse.”

“Well, there’s no knowing what it will do,” Joe stated. “We just have to walk as fast as we can and hope for the best.”

“Shouldn’t we run then?” Amy asked.

“Not unless we want to fall over or slip on any ice that might be underneath the snow,” Joe replied.

Amy nodded and followed her brother. As they walked, thoughts turned to the others and what they were doing.

~

As the snow began to pile up against the white sedan, Sarah began to get worried. Hearing a noise, she peered up the slope and spotted Will returning. She climbed out of the car and walked up to him. “Spot anything?”

Will shook his head. “No. If it wasn’t Christmas Eve, maybe there would be more traffic. But even then, it’s not a main road and so, since I was starting to get cold, I thought I would come back here and get warm in the car.”

Sarah nodded. “You should try having that terrier on your knees. You’ll get warm then.” After having a quick look around, she led the way back to the car.

~

By the time Joe and Amy had reached the bridge, the wind had picked up and the snow was falling faster. It had become harder to see, but still the two pressed on, determined to get help for the injured man. Deciding that it would be easier to stay close to the river for the time being, they did just that.

When they had been walking for roughly fifteen minutes, Joe decided that they must be getting close to the mine and thus, in order for them to reach it, they needed to head up the slope.

However, by this time, the snowflakes were falling thick and fast. Thus, it made it harder to walk, especially going uphill.

Amy struggled more than Joe, maybe because her legs were a bit shorter. But, determined to keep up with her brother, she pushed through and continued through the falling snow while the wind whistled through the woods.

Within five minutes, it was almost like walking through a blizzard.

If it wasn't for the man with the injured leg, Joe would have looked for a place to rest, but who knew how long the storm would last. What if they took shelter somewhere and then the storm lasted for hours and hours?

They had to take a chance. And so, the two of them pushed on through the woods. It was hard going and, even though they were wearing thick clothes, they were getting colder with every passing second.

Both Joe and Amy's fingers were freezing and they knew they were reaching their limit. Fortunately, before too long, they arrived at the entrance to the mine.

This gave them the strength to push on, knowing that Heather Hills was not far away. As the two of them caught sight of the large property a short time later, they smiled at one another.

"We did it," Joe said.

Amy nodded. "Yes, we did."

The two of them hurried down the snowy hill, wondering what their parents were going to say when they found out what had been happening.

~

As Jock and the small dog started barking, Will turned to Sarah. "They hear something."

"What do you think it is?" Sarah asked.

"I don't know, but I'm going to see," Will replied, climbing out of the vehicle.

Suddenly, the two dogs bounded out and raced up the slope.

As they did so, Will heard the familiar siren of a police vehicle. He smiled from ear to ear. "Help is here!"

Sarah beamed and turned to the man. "Did you hear that? Help is on the way."

The old man smiled. "I'm so glad."

Eager to see what was happening, Sarah followed Will up the slope, arriving just as a police car and an ambulance came to a stop.

As the police officer walked over to them, Will smiled as he recognized the man. It was Constable Bedford.

The local constable also recognized them. "Hello Will, Sarah."

Will grinned. "Hello! Did Joe and Amy tell you we were here?"

The police officer nodded. "They did indeed, along with an old man dressed in a Santa Claus outfit. Oh, and two dogs. I presume they are down this slope?"

Will nodded as the police officer peered down at the crash scene. "Yes, they are. But you'll have to be careful with the man. He's got an injured leg."

Constable Bedford nodded. "Don't you worry, the ambulance officers will take good care of him."

~

Half an hour later, the four children were sitting in the living room by a blazing fire. They had just finished drinking mugs of hot cocoa and were feeling cosy and warm once more. After their parents took the mugs and other dirty dishes into the kitchen, the children started yawning after their big day out.

Suddenly, the telephone rang and everyone perked up. Was the call in relation to the man that they had rescued?

They waited anxiously as Grandpa Mitchell answered the phone. After speaking and listening for a few minutes, he hung up.

"Was that about the Santa Claus man?" Joe asked.

Grandpa Mitchell nodded. "Yes, his amnesia cleared just as he was taken into the hospital."

"Who was he?" Amy questioned.

“Mr McGregor,” Grandpa Mitchell replied.

Shock was written all across the children’s faces. They were stunned. Then Sarah cracked a smile. “I thought I knew that dog. It was Scotty!”

“Is he going to be okay?” Amy asked.

Grandpa Mitchell nodded. “Yes. He’ll need to have his left leg put in a cast, but that’s all.”

“Hey!” Joe exclaimed. “What about the presents in the car? What was he going to do with them?”

“I don’t know,” Grandpa Mitchell replied. “However, you can ask him that question yourself if you want to join me at the hospital.”

“What?” Joe questioned. “Are you going to the hospital now?”

The man nodded. “He asked me if I could drive his wife in. So, I’ll give her a ring to let her know the situation, and then I’ll go and pick her up.”

As he walked away to make the telephone call, the children went into the kitchen and talked it over with their parents. After they said yes, the children put on their warm clothes and, making sure they had their torches with them, for they wanted to be prepared in case anything unexpected happened to them, they joined Grandpa Mitchell in the car.

It only took a minute or two for the car to arrive at the white cottage in which Mr McGregor lived with his wife. Upon hearing the vehicle pull up, the woman left the house and joined the others in the car.

“Next stop, Lochnell Hospital,” Grandpa Mitchell said.

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Thirty minutes later, as Amy entered the ward where Mr McGregor was being kept, she smiled as she saw the man was looking cheery. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better now, thanks to you lot.” Mr McGregor turned to his wife and clutched her hand tightly. “It’s good to see you.”

Mrs McGregor beamed. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

As the group crowded around the hospital bed, they listened as the man explained what had been happening to him since he had been awake. Afterwards, he turned to the children. “I expect you are wondering how I ended up facedown in the snow.”

Amy nodded. “Yes, we are.”

“Well, after a tree fell down on my car yesterday, I found out that one of my friends was going away to London for Christmas,” Mr McGregor explained. “So, he said I could use his car for the next week. This morning, while driving to a friend’s house, I lost control of the vehicle on a patch of ice. Before I knew it, I was hurtling down the hill. Luckily, a tree stopped me from going into the river. I had a pain in my left leg and knew I needed to get back to the road so I could flag down the next vehicle that passed by. But the hill was too steep and, last thing I recall, was tumbling down the slope. Next thing I knew, I was staring into your faces.”

Sarah frowned. “But why were you dressed up as Santa Claus?”

“Well, you see, ever since the Dunmoore mine closed down many years ago, a lot of people have been out of work,” Mr McGregor replied.

“But isn’t the mine going to reopen soon?” Will questioned.

“It was supposed to open in January, but now it has been delayed for another year,” Mr McGregor said. “I actually used to work in the mine many years ago, which is how I know these families. So, this Christmas, I decided I would do my part in making the festive season a little brighter for those who weren’t as fortunate as me. So I talked to a few people in the council and they agreed to hold a Christmas Eve get together for the families who aren’t well off. I then went door to door to people I knew were fairly well off and asked them to help out, which is how I managed to collect so many presents.” The man looked up at the clock on the wall. “I was supposed to get to the function at noon so any children could sit on my lap and have a photo taken with me. I was going to hand out the presents afterwards.”

“That was really good of you,” Sarah piped up.

Mr McGregor sighed. “I had good intentions, but now I’m in hospital and the children won’t get their presents before Christmas.”

“That’s such a shame,” Grandpa Mitchell stated.

“Hey, what time does the get together at the hall end tonight?” Amy questioned.

“In an hour’s time,” Mr McGregor replied. “But I won’t be released from hospital—”

“Grandpa could take your place!” Amy interrupted.

Grandpa Mitchell frowned. “I could?”

Amy nodded. “It was just the other day you were telling us how you used to dress up as Santa Claus.

“But that was years ago,” Grandpa Mitchell replied. “I’m not even sure if the clothes would fit. And what about the presents? They’re still in the crushed car.”

“So then let’s drive there and put them in our car,” Joe said. “Then we could drive to the hall and you could hand out the presents before the families go home.”

Grandpa Mitchell sighed. “I’m not sure.”

Mrs McGregor smiled. “I’m sure the children would really enjoy it. And even if the suit didn’t fit properly, as long as you looked a little bit like Santa Claus, no one would care.”

Mr McGregor nodded. “And all of the presents have the children’s names on them. All you have to do is hand them out.”

“Please Grandpa, say yes,” Sarah piped up, hugging him.

Grandpa Mitchell chuckled. “Okay, I’ll do it. But we’ll need to hurry if we are going to make it to the hall in time.”

After quickly wishing Mr McGregor a speedy recovery, the group hurriedly left the hospital.

Once back in the car, Grandpa Mitchell expertly navigated his way along the country roads. They were soon back in the outskirts of Dunmoore and, before long, were on the road that Mr McGregor had driven down hours earlier.

Since it was now dark, Grandpa Mitchell slowed the car to a crawl as they got near the place where the old man’s car had gone off the road. As they arrived at the scene of the accident, he brought the car to a stop. “Good thing you children brought a torch, otherwise we would have just have had to rely on the car’s headlights.”

Joe nodded as he switched on the torch. “Yes, this will make it easier to see stuff.”

With Mrs McGregor keeping watch from the top of the slope, the children led the way down.

Grandpa Mitchell took it nice and slow, not wanting to take a tumble, so the children arrived first and started carrying the presents up to the car.

Ten minutes later, all the presents had been carried up the slope. After they had all climbed back into the car, they went to Heather Hills and Grandpa Mitchell got changed into the Santa Claus outfit.

Once he was ready, they headed for the main street of Dunmoore. Since they had been less than one hour, they were confident that no one would have left.

And they were right. Actually, some were getting ready to depart but, as they saw Santa Claus enter, followed by the children and Mrs McGregor carrying the presents, they changed their plans.

And, as the four children stood beside the big Christmas tree, Grandpa Mitchell handed out the presents.

“This is so much fun,” Sarah whispered.

Amy nodded. “Yes, you can see how excited everyone is.”

As Joe saw one happy child hug Santa Claus, he smiled. “Yes, this is the best Christmas ever.”

“You know, we could try doing this every year,” Will pointed out.

Joe chuckled. “I was actually thinking the same thing. But why wait until next year? I have no idea what presents we’ll be getting tomorrow, but I’m sure there will be some other poor children who we could share them with.”

Sarah smiled. “That’s one of the best ideas you have ever had.”

Amy beamed. “Yes, that will make this Christmas truly the best one ever.” She turned to the others. “Merry Christmas everyone.”

Will grinned. “Merry Christmas.”

The End

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## The Mystery of Smugglers Cove

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### Chapter 1: Smugglers Cove

The bicycle skidded to a halt as Joe Mitchell stopped beside a huge oak tree. His slim frame rocked forward, causing a lock of brown hair to fall into his eyes. He glanced back at his two sisters who were still pedalling furiously. Grinning broadly, he called out to them. "I told you I'd win!"

"Well, your legs are much longer than ours," Sarah panted. "Next time we race, Amy and I need a head start to make it fair." Only eight years old, she was the younger of Joe's two siblings and had short blonde hair.

"Look!" Joe exclaimed as he caught sight of a large house in the distance. "That old place looks interesting."

They headed down a dirt road and, a minute later, found themselves in front of two big, steel gates. At the end of a long, overgrown driveway was a three-storey mansion.

"I wonder who lives there," Amy said. "It looks terribly old." The curious ten year old twirled a strand of her brown hair around her finger.

"I bet nobody does," Sarah stated, her green eyes filled with doubt. "Look at all those weeds and bushes everywhere. If someone lived there, wouldn't they keep the garden tidy?"

"Let's see if the gates are open." Like many twelve year old boys, Joe was always on the lookout for an adventure, and this place looked very intriguing. He tried to open the gates, but they didn't budge. "Help me, you two."

The girls threw their bicycles on the grass and joined Joe in trying to move the rusty gates but they had no luck.

Joe stepped back and glanced around. "I wonder what this place is called."

"Chandler Manor!" Amy exclaimed triumphantly a moment later. She pointed to an old metal nameplate attached to the gatepost.

"Yes, that's right," a cheery voice called out.

The children spun around and saw a boy of about Joe's age with flaming red hair. His freckles and cheeky smile gave him a goofy look, but he looked as though he would be fun to have as a friend.

"My name's Will," the boy said. "Actually, it's William, but most people call me Will. You're new here, aren't you? I haven't seen you around Smugglers Cove before."

"We just arrived yesterday," Joe said. "We're staying at Rose Cottage. It's a little place on the cliff overlooking the cove."

"What a coincidence," Will said. "That's where my father and I stayed while we were looking for a house to buy. "Have you got the bedroom with the skylight?"

Joe grinned. "Yes, it's fantastic."

"There was a fire at our house," Sarah piped up. "That's why we came here."

“Were you there at the time?” Will asked.

“No, it happened while we were at school,” Amy replied. “The house was too badly damaged to stay in, so our parents decided to rent a place here for the summer holidays. It’s a lot smaller than Danfield, though.”

“Isn’t that in London?” Will said.

“Yes, but how did you know?” Joe asked.

Will grinned. “We used to live quite close to Danfield.”

“Why did you move here?” Amy asked.

“My dad wanted some peace and quiet so he could write his novels, so we moved here after the war ended,” Will replied.

Joe turned back towards Chandler Manor. “Does anyone live here?”

Will shook his head. “No. The owner died five years ago, just after we moved in.”

“It looks very mysterious,” Joe said. “I wouldn’t mind exploring it.”

“If you want to do some exploring, I know just the place,” Will said. “Have you heard anything about the history of Smugglers Cove?”

“No, do tell us,” Amy said.

“How about we go and buy ice creams and I tell you all about it?” Will suggested. “There’s a place called Darby’s that sells really yummy ones.”

Sarah looked disappointed. “But we don’t have any money.”

“Don’t worry, my dad gives me heaps of pocket money, so I can buy ice creams for all of us,” Will replied.

The four children rode back into the village. As they passed the police station, they saw the local constable talking to the baker. Both of them were plumpish with round faces, but the constable was taller than the baker and wore thick-rimmed spectacles.

They brought their bicycles to a halt a few moments later outside Darby’s. It was an attractive little shop with tables and chairs both inside and outside. After grabbing an ice cream each, they went outside and sat at a table surrounded by pots of red geraniums.

Will launched into his story. “A long, long time ago, smuggling was a roaring trade around here. Ships used to anchor off the coast and smugglers would transport the goods to the beach and into the caves where, as legend says, there were a maze of tunnels. These tunnels criss-crossed all over Smugglers Cove, but to this day, only a few have been found.”

“Why didn’t the police discover where the tunnels came out?” Amy asked.

“Well, apparently the smugglers made the exits to the tunnels underneath houses,” Will replied. “That way, they could slip down to the cove, get the goods, transport them to the tunnels, and be back in bed by sunrise, all without going out the front door.”

Joe frowned as he licked the ice cream that was dribbling down the cone. “That sounds a bit farfetched.”

“Why would anyone go to all that trouble?” Sarah asked.

“Smuggling was an easy way to make money back then.” Will glanced around. Apparently satisfied that no one was listening, he looked back at the others. “Can you keep a secret?”

As the others nodded, Will continued talking. “Last week we had a massive storm that washed away a huge amount of sand and opened up a number of caves. I know the previous ones didn’t have anything in them, but if you believe the rumours, there’s a chest of gold hidden somewhere underneath Smugglers Cove.”

Joe’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “A chest of gold?”

“Yes,” Will replied. “But even if that isn’t true, I’m sure there would be something valuable in one of the caves.”

“Let’s get moving then,” Joe said, getting up from his seat.

Will shook his head. “We can’t go now. You can only get to the caves at low tide, so we can only explore them in the afternoon or early in the morning. By the way, how long are you staying here?”

“For the whole school holidays,” Sarah said.

Will smiled. “Great! That will give us plenty of time to explore.”

Joe looked at his watch. “We’d better go home for lunch. Why don’t we meet somewhere this afternoon?”

“How about the beach near your place?” Will said.

“Okay, we’ll see you then,” Joe said.

They parted ways. Soon, the three siblings were pedalling up the steep hill towards Rose Cottage. When they reached the top, they paused for a moment to rest their legs.

As Joe glanced around, he couldn’t help but think that the view was magnificent. The sea was a glorious shade of blue. The cliffs, edged with a narrow strip of golden sand, wound around the cove. Seabirds soared above the cliffs.

A minute later, they rode towards Rose Cottage, which was perched on top of the cliff. With its dazzling whitewashed walls and rose bushes climbing up the veranda posts, the two-storey thatched roof cottage looked like a picture postcard.

After throwing their bicycles on the grass, they rushed down the path, almost bowling over their mother as she opened the front door.

After eating lunch, they set off for the beach. Once there, they paddled in the water and made a sandcastle. The afternoon wore on, but Will never arrived. Wondering what could have happened to delay their friend, they headed back home disappointed.



It was early morning when Joe, awakened by a strange noise, sat up. He had been having a wonderful dream, flying in the sky with a number of seabirds, when something had disturbed him. He slipped out of his bed and walked over to his window. As he did so, a small pebble struck the glass.

Curious, he waited a moment and then opened the window slowly in case more pebbles flew in his direction. When it was fully open, he peeked over the side and, to his surprise, saw Will.

Will waved and called out softly. “Open the door.”

Joe headed downstairs. A few moments later, he opened the door and found Will waiting outside.

“I can’t stay long,” Will said. “My grandmother is sick and I’m going to see her for a few days.”

“What happened yesterday?” Joe asked. “We waited the whole afternoon and you didn’t come.”

“Sorry about that. My dad wanted me to do some errands for him. I got a puncture in my tire, so it took longer than I expected,” Will explained. “By the time I got back, it was time for dinner.”

“When will you be coming back?” Joe asked.

“In a few days. I have to go now. Say hello to the girls for me. Bye.” With that, Will was gone.

Joe closed the door and headed upstairs. He thought about going back to bed but, knowing that he probably wouldn’t be able to sleep, decided instead to explore the beach by himself. He changed out of his pyjamas and, grabbing his binoculars and a torch, hurried outside.

Glancing up at the sky, he was surprised at how different it looked from yesterday. The sun was slowly rising as storm clouds moved inland towards the coast. It looked very ominous. The clouds were very dark, the darkest he had ever seen them before. He sensed it was the calm before the storm, but that didn’t stop him. Will wasn’t coming back for a few days and he didn’t want to wait that long to have a look at the caves.

Joe thought he would have time to explore one of the caves before heading back. He’d brought his torch at the last minute as he thought that, even though it was daylight, it might be a bit dark in the caves. With this in mind, he headed towards the rocks.

Five minutes of brisk walking found him outside the first cave. After looking in the first three caves, he started exploring the fourth. Straight away, he noticed something weird. After looking around the cave with his torch, he found the answer. While the other caves were nearly all damp, part of this one was dry. Taking a closer look, he noticed that there was a fair amount of loose rock on the bottom of the cave.

He suddenly realised that this was the cave that had opened up after the storm. Wondering if the cave could possibly lead to a tunnel, he focused his attention on moving the rocks that had fallen down.

## **Chapter 2: Exploring**

As Sarah and Amy climbed out of bed and got dressed, they talked excitedly about what they were going to do that day.

As Sarah hurried downstairs, Amy went to wake Joe. “Wakey, wakey,” she called, tapping on the bedroom door. Not getting any response, she slowly opened the door. She planned to scare him, just as he had done to her many a time.

She stopped in surprise. Joe’s bed was empty. Fearing a trick, she opened the cupboard. No one was there. Not knowing what else to do, she raced downstairs to the kitchen. “Joe’s disappeared.”

Mrs Mitchell frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He’s not in his room,” Amy said.

“I’m sure I can find him,” her mother replied. “You search upstairs while I look down here.”

They went their separate ways. They searched everywhere they could think of, but Joe was nowhere to be seen. Mrs Mitchell slumped in the kitchen chair after five minutes of searching.

Sarah could see that her mother’s expression had changed to one of concern. Walking over, she gave her mother a comforting smile and hugged her. “Don’t worry. I’m sure Joe is—”

Amy suddenly rushed into the room. “You know those binoculars Dad gave Joe for his birthday last year?”

Mrs Mitchell nodded. “Yes, what about them?”

“They’re gone, as well as his torch and shoes,” Amy replied. “So he must be outside.” Just as she finished speaking, lightning flashed across the sky. A moment later, thunder rumbled.

Everyone rushed to the window and looked out. Rain began to pour down. The dark and threatening clouds blocked out almost all of the blue sky. It looked like dusk instead of morning.

“Wow. That’s one big storm,” Sarah muttered.

“I do hope Joe’s somewhere dry,” Amy said.



Joe hadn’t noticed that the weather had taken a turn for the worse, he had been too busy exploring. Moving the rocks had taken a lot longer than he had anticipated. By the time he had almost finished, he was tired out.

Looking around for a place to sit and rest, he was stunned by what he saw. In the short time he had been moving the rocks, water had crept in and now filled the cave entrance. He would need to duck his head underneath the water if he wanted to get out.

Luckily, the part of the cave where he had been working was still dry, but now the water was creeping towards where he was standing.

Peeking through the cave entrance, he saw that it was raining. He could also hear muffled thunder. He looked at his watch and was surprised to see that it was almost eight thirty.

The constantly creeping water was now knee deep. A shiver ran down his body. The water was rapidly rising and it would keep on rising. No longer concerned about the time, he tried to think of a way out of this mess.

With a sinking feeling, he realised that he could do nothing. He would just have to wait it out. He leaned against the wall and stared at the slowly rising water.

Time passed slowly. Joe tried to stay dry by standing on the pile of rocks that he had moved. He had thought about moving the rest of the rocks to see if there was a tunnel, but his arms were too sore.

After standing on the rocks with water up to his knees for what seemed ages, he noticed that the water was finally receding. He grimly smiled. The tide was finally going out and, by the sound of it, the storm had passed.

Moving towards the entrance, he discovered how stiff and cold his legs were. All that time standing in the water had taken its toll. He glanced at his watch. It was almost noon.

His stomach rumbled from hunger. He hadn’t even eaten breakfast. He tried to forget about it as he sat down on one of the wet rocks and waited for the water to recede.



It was unusually quiet at Rose Cottage. Sarah and Amy were trying to play a board game while their mother sewed, but every few minutes one of them would pause and glance through the window to look for any sign of Joe.

As noon came and went, Amy could tell that her mother was quite worried. She was sewing, but what she had done in half an hour could easily have been done in five minutes.

Amy had to do something. Looking out of the window, she saw that the storm had finally passed. The last drops of rain were falling and the sun was coming out from behind the clouds. She stood up. “Why don’t Sarah and I go outside to see if we can find Joe? I promise to be back here in an hour if I can’t find him.”

Mrs Mitchell thought it over. “Okay, but be careful.”

“Thanks, Mum.” Amy gave her a hug and rushed outside. Sarah followed her.

The girls decided they should go to the caves in case Joe had decided to explore them on his own. They walked along the beach until they reached them. However, they found that most of them were partly underwater due to the high tide. Deciding that Joe wouldn’t have been foolish enough to enter one of them at high tide, they started to walk away.

Suddenly, a brief noise in the distance caught Amy’s attention. It sounded like a voice. She looked across at her sister. “Did you just hear something?”

“No, why?” Sarah asked.

“I thought I heard someone call out,” Amy replied.

Sarah glanced around. “I can’t see anyone.”

Amy suddenly realised something. “Golly, he must be in the caves! Let’s yell out and see if he answers. That will save time going through all of them.” She shouted out. “Joe!”

Sarah joined in. “Joe!”

“Where are you?” Amy cried out. “Please answer!” She listened for an answer. There was no reply.

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