

# Chapter 1

Wow! I guess there are hundreds and maybe even thousands of stories around the world that are about Christmas. Some are true stories. Some are not so true. And then there are the tales that lie in between truth and fantasy, confusing librarians about what category to give them and bookstore workers on what shelf to place them. These are the stories that are as magical as Christmas itself. They are meant for kids like me to make up our own minds about what we wish to truly believe.

For me, eight-year-old Ryder Matthews, it was those in-between Christmas stories that I always loved so much, but as I dreamt away on *that* snowy December morning, I had absolutely no clue that I was about to be the main character in one! Maybe the biggest unknown Christmas story yet!

But how could I know?

After all, I was too busy snoring away, probably

sounding like my grandpa during an afternoon nap and not a second grader about to wake up to chase after the school bus.

But on that magical day when *my* Christmas story, or better yet my Christmas *adventure* began, there was so much snow falling I wouldn't have to worry about oversleeping.

But how could I have known that either?

I was still snoring away, probably now sounding more like a bear does right after eating ten jars of honey before hibernating for the winter.

I was hibernating alright! You see, I was beyond tired. The previous night, I had stayed up studying for my spelling test, and as a reward for my hard work, I got to talk on the phone with my uncle Ted.

Uncle Ted is a writer and he always tells me the coolest bedtime stories. You name it and he's told me about it. He has told me about knights who live in castles made out of dinosaur bones and about blue ghosts who eat bologna and cheese sandwiches, and once he even told me about a spaceman who landed on Mars and met aliens who rode around on French poodles.

Yup, Uncle Ted has told me the coolest stories, and I always looked forward to hearing a new one. But something strange happened when I talked to him the night before *my* Christmas adventure began.

"I'm sorry, Ryder, I'm really frustrated, I can't think of

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any new stories,” my uncle said sadly.

“But you always tell me new stories, Uncle Ted.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” he apologized.

“Well,” I said, “could you please tell me one of your old stories?”

“OK,” he replied. “How about the one about the sea captain?”

“Oh, yes, I love that one!”

For the next half hour, Uncle Ted told me the tale of Captain Salty Sam who was as mean and salty as a storm at sea until the day he discovered an entire island made out of chocolate. Then he became a lovable sweet tooth. That’s how my uncle always told the story and I *always* loved it. Before I knew it, I was asleep dreaming of the milk chocolate lake where the captain caught red Swedish candy fish. I was probably still dreaming of it when my mom woke me up.

“Ryder, are you going to sleep the day away?”

I rubbed my eyes awake and looked at the alarm clock. “Oh no Mom! I’m going to be late for school! I’m going to miss my spelling test!”

“Ryder, I don’t think there’ll be a spelling test today.” Dad came in and pointed at the window.

I poked my head up and my eyes bulged at the sight.

“Oh, wow! Mom and Dad! Look at all the snow! No school! No school! Yeah! Oh, wow! I want to build a snowman!” I pushed the covers off and started jumping

up and down on my bed while my parents laughed.

“Yup, this *is* a perfect day to build a snowman! Enjoy your day off, Buddy. I have to go to work.” Dad gave me a hug goodbye.

“I wish you could build a snowman with me, Dad.”

“Me too, Buddy, but I’m looking forward to seeing one in the yard when I come home.”

“OK, Dad! It will be my mission.” I saluted Dad and he saluted back.

After breakfast, I put on my snowsuit and asked Mom the same question I had been asking her all morning.

“Mom, are you sure you don’t want to build a snowman with me?”

“I wish I could, Ryder, but I have to watch your baby sister and she’s too little to go outside.”

“I understand, Mom. I’ll build the best snowman right in front of the kitchen window so Baby Jenny can enjoy it. It will be my mission.” I saluted again.

“That’s a good brother.” Mom kissed me on the cheek, zipped me up, and I was on my way out the door.

Now, you might think building a snowman isn’t much of a Christmas adventure, but as I think back on how it all began, it really started the day I made that snowman. So please be patient and stay with me because this story gets pretty crazy!

Anyway, my dad was right. It *was* the perfect day to build a snowman, and I quickly got to work. First I

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made a snowball that I rolled and rolled until it became the huge bottom for the snowman's body. Then I rolled the middle and finally finished by making his head. After I gave him some small tree branches for arms, I knew what I had to do next.

"Alright, Mr. Snowman, it's time to give you a face." I patted him softly with my glove before going back into the house and opening the refrigerator door.

"Are you done already?" Mom asked while holding my little sister.

"No, Mom. I need to make Mr. Snowman's face. Do we have a carrot for his nose?"

"No, I was actually going to ask your dad to pick up some carrots and some milk on his way home from work."

"Aw, Mom. That will be too late. I need to make his face before Dad comes home."

"I'm sorry, Ryder, but you'll have to wait."

"Can I walk to the store and buy a nose for my snowman?"

Mom laughed. "Do you mean buy some carrots?"

"Yes. Please, Mom, please?"

"I'm sorry, but it's too far for you to walk. Maybe when you're older you can drive to the store by yourself."

"By then Mr. Snowman's face will be just one big old giant puddle," I said sadly.

Mom thought for a minute and then smiled. "I bet

if you go to Miss Haggerty's house and shovel her walkway she'll give you as many carrots as you want."

Miss Haggerty lived alone in a very old house just three houses away from us. Well, I shouldn't say she lived alone. She did have thirteen cats, six dogs, and a bird named Raven Ron. A few of the neighborhood kids were mean to Miss Haggerty and always called her "the Old Hag." I didn't know what that name meant but I knew it wasn't nice, so I just called her Miss Haggerty. But let's get something straight: that doesn't mean I didn't think Miss Haggerty wasn't a little creepy because she *was* creepy!

She would only come outside at night with Raven Ron perched on her shoulder while she walked her cats and dogs up the street. I have to tell you it was a weird sight to see thirteen cats on leashes and six dogs sniffing around leading Miss Haggerty up the street to who knows where. The other weird thing about her was that she only seemed to come out of her house just before Christmas time. I never saw her in the fall, spring, or summer!

Since it was the season, a couple of nights before I had seen her, so I had followed her home. I hid behind some bushes in her backyard and watched her pull out of her pockets what looked to be rocks. She then dumped them into a rusty old storage container. I was never able to get a look at what kind of rocks they were because Raven

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Ron heard me and squawked at the bushes and then flew after me until I sprinted home for safety. Wow, talk about creepy!

So, now you know the reason I hesitated when Mom asked me to shovel Miss Haggerty's walkway.

"Ryder, Miss Haggerty doesn't have anyone else to help her and you do need a nose for your snowman." Mom pointed out the window at Mr. Snowman's blank face.

Yeah, but what if Raven Ron takes *my* nose, I thought, but then nodded. "OK Mom, I'll do it."

I grabbed my shovel and soon I was clearing a pretty good path to Miss Haggerty's old house. Well, I was until I felt an army of snowballs hit me in the back of the head. I turned around and saw three of the meanest fourth graders from my school. I didn't know their names. But I don't exactly ask people their names when they are knocking my books down, or pushing my face into a puddle, or in this case pelting me with snowballs.

"Why are you shoveling the Old Hag's place?" the biggest kid asked while he crouched down to scoop up more snow.

Even though I was a little scared, I said, "That's not her name. It's Miss Haggerty."

"Old Hag! Old Hag!" they all yelled together and fired more snowballs. I had nowhere to take cover, and I was in a bit of a daze. All I could hear was them laughing, and all I could feel were the snowballs exploding against my

head. The mean kids did have good aim, I'll give them that. I was so scared that I didn't know what to do.

The front door suddenly opened and a hand waved to me, followed by a voice shouting, "Ryder, get in here! It's safe! Get in here, now!"

What was I going to do? It was either face the bullies or run into Miss Haggerty's house. When the ninth snowball hit me, I knew I didn't have any other choice, so I sprinted for the front door.

I slid into the house and Miss Haggerty shut the door behind me. When I looked around the dark house, I realized that the thirteen cats, six dogs, and Raven Ron were all staring at me.

"Hey second grader! I bet she's going to feed your eyes to her cats!" I heard the biggest kid yell from outside.

"Or she'll have that bird peck them out!" another kid added and they all laughed.

I had the same thought as I looked at Raven Ron's black eyes staring down at me. But then something strange happened. Miss Haggerty laughed and then she kept laughing, but not in a creepy way.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

She caught her breath and giggled. "It's just funny that bullies never change. They still say the same things that they were saying when I was a little girl. So Ryder, do you know how we get back at bullies like them?" She gave me a mischievous smile.

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"No. How?"

"Like this." She opened the door and ordered to her animals, "Go get them!"

A second later, all the animals ran out the door. There were barks, meows, and squawks, but then came one of the best sounds ever. I peeked out and felt myself smiling when I saw where that sound was coming from.

One of the kids was shouting, "Oh, no! She let them loose!"

Another kid pointed. "They're coming for us!"

"Run! Run!" the biggest kid yelled in fright as all thirteen cats, six dogs, and even Raven Ron chased the bullies down the street.

When they were out of sight I turned to Miss Haggerty and we both burst into laughter. We continued to laugh and laughed even more when all of the animals came back into the house with their tongues dragging, even Raven Ron!

"That was *so* cool!" I said as Miss Haggerty led me into the sitting room where there was a warm wood fire.

"Yeah, it *was* pretty cool, wasn't it? So, Ryder, your mom called earlier and said you needed a carrot for the snowman you're building."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Well, wait here, and I'll get one in the kitchen."

When Miss Haggerty left I realized something. She wasn't creepy at all, just a little different.

“Here you go.” She handed me the best carrot nose ever.

“Aw, thanks,” I said.

“No. Thank *you*, Ryder, for shoveling my walkway.”

“No problem, Miss Haggerty. It turned out to be a lot of fun.”

She smiled, walked over to her desk, sat down, and began writing in a big book.

“Ryder, what are their names?”

“Who?”

“The boys who were picking on you.”

“I don’t know.”

She stopped writing and glanced up at me. “It’s OK. I promise not to tell anyone you told me their names.”

“Thanks, but that’s not the reason. I really don’t know their names. I just know they’re really mean fourth graders.”

“Oh.” She put her pen away and shut the book.

“Miss Haggerty, why did you want to know their names, anyway?”

“Oh, it’s nothing for you to worry about. I’m sure I’ll find out who they are soon enough. I always do.” She sighed.

“Well, I should get going,” I said, but paused, looking at the front door, wondering if they were waiting down the road for me.

“If you’re worried about those bullies, Ryder, you can

go out my back door and cut through the back yards to get home.”

“Thanks. How did you know I might be worried?” I asked.

“Remember, I *was* little once. You see, everyone has to deal with mean people at some point in life; even those bullies will someday meet bigger bullies. But remember, Ryder, you can't *always* go out the back door. There will be a time when you'll have to face them just like you faced me, 'the Old Hag.'”

“What?”

“I know you were afraid of me.”

“Well, maybe a little, but Miss Haggerty, you're not an old hag.”

She laughed. “That's OK. In a way, the name those boys gave me was actually a compliment.”

“Huh?” I was confused.

“You see, Ryder, it frightens them that I'm not like everyone else, so that's why they call me 'Old Hag.' But what they don't know is it's a lot safer in life to be like everyone else than to truly be who you are meant to be. But where is the fun in that? I'd rather be an original person. Being like everyone else, well, that's just boring.”

“Well, you're certainly *not* boring and you're certainly *not* like everyone else, Miss Haggerty.”

“Thanks but please call me Old Hag.” She howled with laughter.

“OK, Old Hag.” I smiled.

“Well, good luck on your long journey, Ryder Matthews.” She nodded and shut the door behind me.

*Long journey*, I thought. Journey meant trip. It was hardly a long trip to my house. I stood there for a moment thinking of what an interesting character Miss Haggerty, the Old Hag, was. At least, that’s how my uncle Ted would’ve described her, I thought as I stepped off the back stoop and was about to leave her backyard. But then I stopped when I noticed something. I was standing only a few feet away from the rusty old storage container. I always wondered why she had collected rocks at night, and what kind of rocks they were. Maybe they weren’t even rocks. Maybe they were gold nuggets.

I bet it *is* gold, I thought. That’s why she puts them there at night! It made sense, and now was my chance to find out.

I looked over my shoulder at the door and Miss Haggerty was nowhere in sight. Yup, I thought, I have to find out. I hustled over to the bin and took a deep breath before pulling the cover up. I expected to see pirate treasure rescued from a sunken ship or maybe even gold bars hidden from a bank robbery. But what I saw surprised me more than anything at all—coal.

Yes, hundreds and thousands of lumps of coal. I had no idea why Miss Haggerty had collected lumps of coal in the middle of the night, and why she would store it in

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an old, rusty container. I mean, nobody had a coal stove anymore! It made no sense.

What I did know was there was no way she needed all that coal, and I *did* need to make a face for my snowman. I figured Miss Haggerty wouldn't miss a few lumps so I grabbed six pieces and tucked them into my pockets. I walked home thinking of how my snowman would now have the perfect smile.

And I was right! After I used two buttons from my mom's sewing basket for eyes, branches for arms, the best carrot nose ever, and six pieces of coal for a wide smile, my dad announced it was the best snowman he had ever seen!

That night I tossed and turned but I couldn't sleep. Maybe it was because I had overslept that morning or maybe I was still excited from my day of building Mr. Snowman and meeting Miss Haggerty. Who knows?

Either way, I had run out of counting sheep and now I was counting pigs so I decided to go into the kitchen and get a glass of water. I turned on the outside light and then looked out the window to check on my snowman and couldn't believe it! Mr. Snowman's smile was glowing! Seriously, I mean glowing!

I almost dropped my glass. It made no sense. It looked like the coals were actually burning.

Maybe, I thought, my eyes are playing tricks on me. I knew what I had to do. I grabbed my red snowsuit and

wiggled into it, almost tripping, and then ran outside.

“Oh, man! That’s so cool!” I marveled at Mr. Snowman’s glowing, red smile.

“It might look cool to you but it’s not cool at all.” The voice from behind startled me.

I turned around and there were Miss Haggerty’s thirteen cats and six dogs all staring at me. Beside them stood Miss Haggerty with Raven Ron perched on her shoulder. This time she wasn’t smiling or laughing, and neither were her animals.

“Ryder, why did you take my coal?”

“I . . . ah, ah, ah, I, didn’t think you’d mind.”

“You took the coal out of *my* bin,” she stressed.

“Yes, but Miss Haggerty, there was so much coal and you don’t even have a coal stove. I didn’t think you’d miss it. I was going to give the coal back when my snowman melted.”

“I see,” she said, and it looked like she was thinking of what to say next. I know *I* sure didn’t know what to say. I could barely speak!

“Well, Ryder, you should always ask people before borrowing something. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I nodded over and over.

“Good.” Her smile returned and she walked over and one by one she took the lumps of coal off the snowman and placed them into her coat pocket.

When she was finished, she turned to me. “Ryder, you

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now understand that this coal isn't meant for you or your snowman?"

"Yes, Miss Haggerty."

"I thought I told you to call me Old Hag."

"Oh, yes." I smiled. "Yes, Old Hag. Well, I should get back into the house. I'm really sorry Old Hag. I should've asked you for the coal."

"Yes, you should've, but I forgive you. I wasn't positive but now I know why I am here," she said.

"Huh?"

"Before you leave, Ryder, I have something for you." She reached into her pocket and handed me a necklace with a silver key attached to it. On the key was the letter S.

"What is this for?" I asked.

"This key necklace is for your secret journey. You can use it only once. So use it wisely."

"What secret journey?"

"It wouldn't be a secret if I told you, now would it?"

Miss Haggerty turned around and disappeared into the winter night with her thirteen cats, six dogs, and Raven Ron.

Yup, as I think back on it, I'm pretty sure that *was* the day my Christmas adventure began!

