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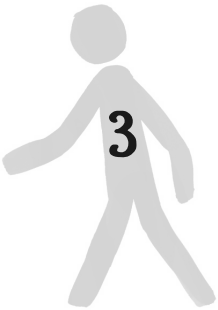
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Bill's road winds steeply down from the cliffs. Down and down and down, all the way to the seafront, and Craggelton beach, where the caves are.

But as soon as me and Bill set off I spotted a shadowy figure, crouched behind a tree further down the road…

Waiting.

Snapper—otherwise known as Samuel Snare.

'Bill!' I said, grabbing his arm. 'Snapper alert!'

Too late. Snapper had spotted us. Out he leapt from behind the tree, and came charging up the road towards us.

We ran. Ducked down the side alley by Bill's, swerved into Cross Street, and took the first right turn we could.

Snapper has lived in Craggelton—near the bottom of Bill's road—as long as I have. And for years now, he's been pranking me. Ambushing me, squirting cream in

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my face, tripping me up, dropping water bombs on my head from trees…

But lately he's changed. Gone from being a nuisance, a pest, like an annoying buzzy wasp you can't get rid of—to something worse. Something meaner. Something nastier.

He's shifty and sneaky. He punches and shoves. He kicks, and does angry stuff. Bullying stuff. Stuff that *hurts*.

And he does it to Bill too—any time he spots him coming out of his house.

I could hear Snapper now, yelling behind us. 'Ned!' he yelled. 'Neddy boy. Bill! Wait for meeee!'

'Keep running,' I panted, ducking and swerving my way through the maze of back streets in Craggelton, Bill by my side.

But Snapper was hard to lose. He's wiry and strong—and whippet-fast. And I could *still* hear him yelling after us.

'Faster,' I said to Bill. 'FASTER!'

I thought we'd *never* get rid of him. But we did eventually. His yells tailed off and I stopped in Salt Street, right by the seafront, gasping for breath.

'I think we lost him,' I panted. Then, cautiously, I stuck my head round the corner. Stared right, then left, all along the promenade. Checking, double-checking.

No sign of Snapper. He was gone… for now.

* * *

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I stood on the seafront, staring at the sea—glistening and gleaming, with little waves breaking far out on the sand. I took big sniffs of the salty air.

The sea . . . the beach . . . I had missed it all summer.

It's a big beach, Craggelton beach. Curving and sandy, with cliffs towering up at each end. And there are rocks, big lumpy rocks piled up at the far end of the beach. Rocks spilling over the sand and right out to sea.

That's where the caves are—beyond the rocks.

At low tide, like now, the sea goes right out, and you can walk round the rocks from the beach to the caves. But me and Bill never bother. Because the rocks are brilliant for climbing. So that's the way we always go.

We did today. We ran across the beach, scrambled to the top of the rocks, then down the other side. And there were the caves.

We hopped down from the rocks, then across the soggy sand. Past the big notice . . .

CAUTION!
CHECK TIDE TIMES!
DON'T GET CUT OFF BY INCOMING TIDE!

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Me and Bill know to check the tide times. Because this bit of beach disappears when the tide comes in. It gets swallowed up by the sea. And all the caves get swamped with water.

But not now. Not for a few hours yet. So me and Bill went into the caves. One main cave, not that tall, but wide—with four smaller caves off it. Damp, drippy sort of caves.

When I first decided me and Bill were being a secret society, I thought the caves would be a good meeting place. And that we could call ourselves the Champion Cavers.

But then I realized something. It was no good planning meetings for every Saturday afternoon when some Saturday afternoons the cave would be underwater. That's how we ended up the Tower Two instead.

They're strange-looking caves, the Craggelton caves. All old and wrinkly looking. With lots of lines in the rock, like ridges.

Dad told me the ridges are called striations. Lots and lots of striations, formed over thousands of years. Going up and down and along the rocks.

And somewhere in the caves there's supposed to be a tunnel. A secret tunnel with a hidden entrance. A

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tunnel built by wreckers, leading from the caves up to the cliffs.

Because back in the olden days, lots of ships got wrecked at low tide—dashed to pieces on the rocks around Craggelton Bay. And wreckers would rush to plunder and loot them.

But the wreckers got in BIG TROUBLE if they were caught. So rumour has it they built a tunnel from the beach to the cliffs. A way to get their loot hidden, fast as they could.

No one's ever found the tunnel though.

Not YET.

But maybe today—the Tower Two would *succeed*.

The Tower Two didn't. Me and Bill searched the caves—looking around the main cave first, then the smaller ones. Not a sign of the secret wreckers' tunnel. No hidden entrance—nothing. Not anywhere.

And it was getting a bit boring looking for a secret wreckers' tunnel—so I had another idea.

I led Bill back into the main cave. 'Let's carve a secret message,' I said. 'On that bit of wall.'

Because there's one bit in the main cave that doesn't have too many striations. Hardly any ridges or wrinkles. A smoothish bit. Perfect for a secret message.

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I got out my code wheel—made by following instructions from *Secret Sleuth*, number one of my top ten favourite books—and sorted us a code. Then I found a sharp bit of rock, and me and Bill got carving, doing letters in turn…

MAX MHPXK MPH YHK XOXK!

'There,' I said. 'The Tower Two for ever!'

'The Tower Two for ever!' beamed Bill, and we did our secret handshake and left the cave.

Then I heard a noise. A cracking, slithering noise, high above us.

I looked up. A small chunk of rock was tumbling down. Down and down—heading straight towards Bill. And Bill was just standing there, staring up at it. Goggle-eyed, not moving.

'Bill! Watch out!' I shouted, then I hurled myself at him. I pushed him to one side, just as—SMASH!—the rock hit the sand.

Bill stared down. Then he stared at me. Gave me the sort of look a boy would give a superhero. 'I think you just saved my actual LIFE,' he said.

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I nodded proudly. 'I think I just did,' I said. Then I looked down at the rock—and my insides gave a lurch just thinking of what that rock might have done to Bill. A big BIG lurch…

And that was my first lurch of the day—but *not* the last.

Because I looked up at the clifftop—and straight off, I got ANOTHER lurch.

Someone was up there. Someone broad and burly, staring down at us.

The Hulk…

Well, that's what me and Bill call him. He's maybe four years older than us. Big and tough and strong-looking.

He's been in town the last few months, smirking and swaggering his way around. But he never bothers us, not like Snapper does.

Although, as that big burly figure swaggered off, for a moment I wondered… Did that rock fall by itself? Or did it not?

And that was NOT the end of the lurches. Because on the way home, I stopped off at my secret spot. And I got my THIRD lurch of the day.

My secret spot is on the riverbank, over the wall at the bottom of the Ivy Lodge garden. Because the

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river Daunt runs behind Ivy Lodge, then on through Craggelton and down to the bay.

It's not a big deep river, the Daunt—not near Ivy Lodge anyway. It's shallow, and busy, and fast-moving. And my secret spot is a bit of flat riverbank, with a pebbly beach and big boulders scattered about—just right for a kid to jump about on, or sit on.

It's got long views, my secret spot, across the hills to the sea. And it's peaceful, because no one else uses it. Not the sisters, and not Vine Cottage next door.

Vine Cottage also has a wall backing on to the riverbank. But Vine Cottage has been empty for over a year. And before that, Mrs Diggle lived there, who was much too old to climb walls. Especially high ones, like this one.

So, as soon as I got home, I ran through the side gate and down the garden. I scrambled my way up the wall, and over the top. Then jumped off and slithered down the bank to my secret spot.

And that's when I got the third lurch.

There was someone there. Sitting right on my FAVOURITE boulder, reading a book. A girl with corkscrew curls and big clompy boots…

I stared, shocked. Who was that girl? What was she doing here? At my secret spot?

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Whoever she was, she turned, and stared back at me. She had scary eyes—the shape of almonds, the colour of conkers. And glinty. *Very* glinty.

I glared at her. 'You're trespassing,' I said.

She glared too. '*You're* trespassing,' she said.

I scowled and narrowed my eyes. She scowled and narrowed hers. 'I live here and this is MY secret spot,' I said.

'I live here too,' she said. 'There.' And she pointed over the wall.

Oh no. Oh no no *no*. Vine Cottage… She must have moved in.

I'd been hoping and hoping a kid would move in. A kid my age. But not a girl—I've got sisters, that's enough girls. And definitely not THIS girl. All scowly and glinting, with a pointy sharp face.

'And how is it secret?' she said, glinting more. '*I* found it. Easily. A secret spot should be one no other kids can find. ANY kid could find this, just like I did. So it's just a *spot*—not a secret spot.'

'But… I was here FIRST,' I said. 'I made a den and everything.'

Which I have. Just a bit further along the riverbank, in the bushes.

'Saw it,' she said. 'Not much of a den. Could do a LOT better.'

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Then she stood up. And standing, she was WAY taller than me—towering over me in her big clompy boots.

She snapped her book shut and shoved it in her bag, but I saw the title and—oh no—I got my FOURTH lurch of the day.

She had *Secret Sleuth*—the OMNIBUS edition. All six *Secret Sleuth* books in one big fat book.

I felt my teeth grind. I only have two of the *Secret Sleuth* books—*Tracking and Trailing*, and *Surprises and Disguises*. She had the WHOLE LOT. It was not *fair*. So I scowled at her.

She scowled back. 'Next time,' she said, 'look before you leap.'

Then she pointed at a bag on the ground behind me. 'See that?' she said. 'That used to be a panini until you squashed it.'

She picked up the flattened bag and with one last scowl, she was gone. Scrambling up her own bit of wall and into the Vine Cottage garden.

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