

A MILLERVILLE MYSTERY

**The Mystery  
Of the  
Grinning Buddha**

by

David R. Christensen

*Books by David R. Christensen  
available from Prismatic Publishing*

Tivoli's Christmas

MILLERVILLE MYSTERIES

The Mystery of the Grinning Buddha

*coming soon*

The Mystery of the Ugly Bottle

Stanley Billings: That's Me

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To my parents

**MERLIN and RUTH**

who loved to read and

who passed that love on to me

CONTENTS

This book is also dedicated to young boys  
and girls who are willing to pick up a  
dictionary once in awhile and  
look up the meaning of  
an occasional word

Let me get you started:

**newel:** a post that supports a handrail at the bottom, top, or  
landing of a stairs

**wainscot:** the lower portion of a wall finished with a different  
material than the upper portion

**hostile:** \_\_\_\_\_

**maneuver:** \_\_\_\_\_

**desperate:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## Chapter One

### THE UNINVITED GUEST

It was a chill-you-to-the-bone kind of afternoon—gloomy and frigid. The sky was thickly overcast and it felt as though the sun had set hours ago.

School was done for another day.

Mike and Bonnie were a block from home when Mike noticed two vehicles in front of their house. Seeing the mail truck there was not surprising, though how long it remained was. And the station wagon parked across the street was dreadfully familiar. It had been in a different place, yet within sight of the house, each afternoon for more than a week.

Mike's nose wrinkled and his eyebrows crunched

together. “What *is* she up to?” he asked. “And, why on earth is she just sitting there without the engine running? She must be freezing!”

Bonnie shrugged her shoulders. “What difference does it make?”

Mike sighed hopelessly. “I guess they don’t teach anything about nosy busybodies in the third grade. Remember what the last visit from Aunt Thelma was like?”

“Oh, yeah. But she isn’t hurting anyone. And she isn’t visiting.”

“Just wait and see. Any day now she’ll climb out of that old beat-up jalopy and *visit*,” Mike said as he shivered to emphasize his disgust. “I’ll race you home.”

“Don’t they teach fifth graders to wait for their little sisters? You know I can’t keep up.”

Mike ran on ahead. “If you can’t keep up, catch up. I’ve got to find out what’s going on.”

As Mike reached the driveway, he slowed to a walk, letting the air in his lungs warm up. The mailman was just returning to his truck.

“I left a package and some letters with your mom, Mike. I didn’t know she was sick, or I would’ve just left the package on the porch. But I know how she looks forward to hearing from your dad. I hope she feels better soon.”

The mail truck pulled away, leaving behind a billowing plume of bluish-gray exhaust that hung in the cold December air.

When Bonnie caught up, she was breathing hard. “What was that all about?”

“Mr. Clark took the mail to the house.”

“I could see that. Why didn’t he just leave it in the mailbox?” Bonnie asked.

Mike pinched his chin and gazed skyward. “Hmmm.”

“I saw you two talking. He must have explained.”

Frustrated, Bonnie snapped, “Didn’t he say anything?”

“Well, he mentioned Mom was sick.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Bonnie said and darted toward the house.

Soon Mike caught up and sang as he passed by. “Actually, he did say something else that might interest you.”

“What?” Bonnie demanded, running a little faster.

“I’m not telling.”

Bonnie stopped in the driveway and stomped her foot on the packed snow. “Mike!” she said pleading.

“Okay, I’ll make a deal with you. If you can answer just two measly questions, I’ll tell you what else Mr. Clark said.”

Bonnie tried to bore into her brother’s conscience with her dark brown squinted eyes, but it didn’t work. With a sigh, she gave up. “What two questions?” she asked

“Why is Aunt Thelma staring at us? And why is she trying to hear what we’re saying?”

Bonnie whirled around and peered across the road. Aunt Thelma quickly looked the other way. Turning

back, Bonnie said, “Okay, Mike. Why?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t say I knew the answers.” As Mike leaped onto the snow-covered edge of the porch, he added, “Why don’t you go ask her?”

“Not me!”

Mike left the front door ajar for Bonnie and ran down the hall. “Mom, we’re home!” He grabbed the first newel cap and gave it a spin as he started up the stairs. Mike stopped at his mother’s room. She wasn’t there. The door to the master bathroom stood open; she wasn’t there either.

When Bonnie entered her parents’ room, she asked, “Where’s Mom?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s in the kitchen. I’ll race you downstairs.”

“No racing for me.”

Bonnie arrived in the kitchen just as Mike shot out.

“She’s not in there either,” he said as he darted back up the stairs.

Again Mike peeked into his mother’s room. She was still gone. When Bonnie caught up this time, Mike was sitting on the chair next to Mother’s bed. “This is so strange. I know the mailman just spoke to her. And she really should be in bed. I’d give a dollar to know where she is.”

Bonnie grinned at her brother. “Pay up, Mike, and I’ll tell you where she is. But first, answer me two questions.”

“Come on, Bonnie, where is she?” Mike demanded,

unwilling to let his little sister play his game.

Bonnie wrinkled her nose and pointed to the end of the dark, second-floor hall. “There,” she said.

Mike leaped from the chair and ran to see.

There was Mother. Holding a handkerchief over her mouth and nose and coughing, she moved slowly toward them. Her housecoat was tied loosely around her waist, her hair in disarray.

Now, the only thing at the end of the second-floor hall was the stairway leading up to the Tower in which Mike had a room. Derek, Mike’s 15-year-old brother, had named it the Tower after claiming it had a history of horrors more evil than the Tower of London.

Mother slogged slowly toward her room, continuing to cough and hack. “How was school, children?”

“Fine,” Bonnie answered.

Before Mike could respond, the front doorbell rang.

Mother sank onto the side of the bed. “Oh, lordy, who could that be?”

Mike rolled his eyes. “I bet I know.”

“Go see, would you please?” Mother said. Fluffing her pillow, she placed it against the headboard, eased herself back, and, with her eyes gently closed, she waited.

“Elizabeth, dear!” an artificially sweet voice cooed. “What’s this I hear about you being down with the flu? You know, I was having my nails done and Rita—didn’t she do a wonderful job—and everyone else at the salon was so concerned. I came as fast as I could.” The portly

woman gazed passively at Mike and Bonnie. Turning back to their mother, she said ever so softly, “Now, you leave everything to me. Just you lie there. Two or three days of peaceful sleep and you’ll whip the flu.”

Aunt Thelma tucked Mother into bed and pulled down the window shades. She placed the back of her hand briefly on Mother’s forehead and then on her cheek. “Hmmm,” she mumbled indifferently. Then, with a hand on one shoulder of each of the children, she squeezed firmly, the sweetness in her voice barely lingering. “Come along, now. Let’s let your mother rest.”

Aunt Thelma guided Mike and Bonnie into the hall, released her grip, and pulled the door closed behind them. After she drew in a deep breath, any kindness she had shown in front of their mother disappeared entirely. “Don’t you two have homework?”

“Yeah, but...” Mike began.

“But nothing, Mike. Go to your room and get started on it. You too, Bonnie.”

“But I don’t have any.”

“Well,” Aunt Thelma thumped more than patted Bonnie on the head. “Be a good girl. Find something to do to keep yourself busy, okay? And be quiet so your mother can sleep. That goes for you as well, Mike. I don’t want to hear a peep out of either of you. Understand? Where’s Matt?”

“He’s still taking his nap. He usually wakes up about now, though” Mike said. “I’ll check if you’d like.”

“No!” Aunt Thelma snapped. “Let him sleep. Maybe I’ll look in on him myself after I fix your mother a nice cup of tea.”

Mike walked to the dark end of the hall and paused at the bottom of the Tower steps. Hoping Aunt Thelma had gone downstairs, he glanced back. She was staring at him, her fists planted on her broad hips. As she opened her mouth to comment, Mike quickly said, “I’m going.”

“Good,” Aunt Thelma said as she turned away. Mike glanced back around the corner to make sure she was leaving and heard her mumble, “I have one hour to...” followed a moment later by a wicked sort of chuckle coming from halfway down the stairs.

Mike shuffled reluctantly up to his room, where he plopped down on his bed. “I wouldn’t have any homework if it wasn’t for that blasted English report.”

The report was due right after Christmas vacation, and it too might have been postponed a little if he’d already found a topic to write about.

Mike’s conversation with himself was interrupted by a tap on his bedroom door.

“Who’s there?” Mike asked as he threw his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up.

Slowly the door opened and Bonnie appeared. “Can I come in?”

“Sure, as long as you’re not Aunt Thelma in disguise. So, what’s up?”

Bonnie ignored Mike’s suggestion that she might resemble the uninvited visitor downstairs.

“Aunt Thelma’s what’s up. She gives me the creeps. Why is she so bossy and mean, anyway?”

“Beats me. I plan to steer clear of her.”

“And I will too,” Bonnie said firmly. “Are you really going to start your homework?”

“Maybe,” Mike said. “All I have is a report to write during the holidays. I was lying on my bed hoping to think of a good topic when you knocked. You see, as I was leaving school today my teacher pointed out what a great report Peggy wrote three years ago. She expects mine to be every bit as good. Just think, Bonnie, in two years you’ll be in the fifth grade and you can spend your Christmas holidays working on some stupid report.”

Though the front door was two floors below, both Mike and Bonnie jumped when it slammed.

“Derek’s home,” Mike groaned.

Bonnie said, “I wish that was Aunt Thelma leaving.”

“No such luck,” said Mike. “Besides, I heard her say she had just an hour to get something done.”

“What did she say she had to do?”

“I don’t know. I only heard the first part. And now, to top it all off, Derek’s home. That makes two people not to be excited about.”

“Look on the bright side, Mike. Peggy’s home, too,” Bonnie added happily.

Mike sighed. “I wish *Dad* was home. That’s what I wish.”

“Me too,” Bonnie said sadly. Then her face lighted up. “Hey, Mike! There’s the topic for your report!”

“What? Dad coming home?”

“No, silly, write about Alaska. Remember all the pictures he’s sent us. And his letters are full of interesting things.”

“That’s a good idea, Bonnie. You are smart as well as cute...a...well...I mean....”

“Yes?” Bonnie sighed, lending Mike her full attention.

Mike plopped back down on his bed and talked to the ceiling. “I could write about the White Alice project he’s working on. How does *Secret Project in the Alaskan Bush* sound? Gee, I hope it’s not too secret.”

Mike stopped talking when he heard clomping footsteps on the stairs just outside his bedroom. The door flew open and Derek entered.

“Why did you let Old Rattlesnake in, Mike?”

“I didn’t let her in. All I did was open the front door and in she slithered, right past me and up to Mom’s room.”

“Well,” Derek continued, “she wants all of us downstairs, right now! She seems ticked off about something.”

As the children entered the kitchen, Aunt Thelma was wiping her hands on the apron she had just removed from her waist. Tossing her apron onto the counter, she declared, “Well, I’m going.”

The smiles the children exchanged disappeared when she added, “But I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ve given your mother a cup of tea and something to eat. She’s sleeping

peacefully, no thanks to the front door being slammed half off its hinges. Really, Derek, I would think a high school sophomore could find a quieter way to let everyone know he's alive. And you, Peggy, why can't you control your brother?"

"But I...", Peggy began.

"Now, all of you do your mother a big favor and stay quiet this evening. Understand? The same goes for tomorrow morning. I'll be back before you leave for school to keep an eye on her and Matt."

As if to drive the message further home, Aunt Thelma glared at the children with a chilling, dark stare. A moment later, she spun around to leave the kitchen, bumping into Matt, who gazed up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with one hand and dragging his blanket behind him with the other.

Aunt Thelma paused long enough to make sure Matt was all right, and then finished pulling on her long, black coat.

"I understand your mother has only been in bed a few days. So, why is the house such a mess? Well, tomorrow afternoon, when you get home from school, you will clean it top to bottom. As I recall, your Christmas tree is normally up by now and the house decorated. If you all pitch in and do a good job of cleaning, we'll go get a tree tomorrow evening. It would be nice to have everything ready for the holidays by the time your mom is well again, don't you think?"

Aunt Thelma grabbed her purse and paused just

a moment as the children moaned at the thought of cleaning the entire house. "And, won't it be fun to put the gifts from your dad under the tree?"

Matt jumped up and down, clapping his hands. "Where are they, Aunt Thelma? Where are they?"

"They arrived today, Matt. Somewhere in the house there is a brown package full of presents. Go see if you can find it."

Matt scampered into the living room and a few minutes later ran into the dining room.

"Now, let me repeat what I said before," Aunt Thelma began. "Your mom is pretty sick with the flu. Keep the noise down. Do your homework or whatever else but keep things quiet. Before you know it, she'll be up and around and I'll be gone."

Matt returned, his face long with disappointment, tears in his eyes.

"Didn't you find a package?" Aunt Thelma asked sympathetically as she ruffled his hair. Turning to the other children, she continued. "Remember, keep it quiet. If I find out that any of you have been rowdy or noisy or have in any way disturbed your mother, well, I have a packed suitcase out in the car. If I have to, I'll bring it in and spend my nights here, too. Either way, until she is up and around again, you'll clean the house, maybe even the cellar and the attic."

With that, Aunt Thelma turned and marched militarily down the hall and out the front door.