

A Season of Happiness



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KIT AND KABOODLE

There was a special connection between Natalie and her Uncle Claude. They seemed able to read each other's minds. Even when far apart, one of them could sense if something was amiss with the other, and they would be straight on the mobile phone to ask the question: "Are you alright?" It might have seemed strange to outsiders, but Natalie and Claude accepted it as quite normal; for them, anyway. Even they, however, were not to know that their very special bond was soon to prove a life-saver...

When he was younger, Claude had begun studying to be a chemist, but somewhere along the line he discovered a liking for art; so he decided to become an artist. He always hoped to make a living by selling his paintings and drawings; unfortunately, not many people wanted to buy them. The reason could have been that Claude liked realistic pictures of landscapes and scenes which were easily recognised. When he painted an old church in a country town it was exactly that; and it was so good that it might have been a photograph taken by a camera. But abstract art had become very popular. This was the sort that you really had to use your imagination to figure out what the artist had painted; because to some, Claude included, it just looked like a mess of shapes and colours that had no meaning – merely splodges, dribbles and streaks.

People, however, were still fond of art in general; and many who weren't particularly arty-crafty often wished they could paint. Let's call them hobbyists. Someone clever had realised there was money to be made from them, and they thought up the idea of Painting by Numbers. It came in a pack that contained a large sheet of paper on which was printed the outline of the subject. This might be anything from a city street in Paris, to a roaring tiger. Just the outline, mind, as if it had been drawn on white paper with a pencil; but not coloured. That part had to be completed by the hobbyist using the little tubs of different-coloured paints and a set of brushes, also included. To help the budding artist, on every bit of the outline were other shapes with numbers printed inside them. These numbers were the same as the ones on the little tubs of paint; so, as long as the hobbyist used the right numbered paint to colour in the shape with that number, their picture would look exactly like the one on the small colour photo of the finished article.

Fair enough, thought Claude – that would be one way to make money from art. The trouble was, there were already lots of companies selling Painting by Numbers; so, he decided he would do something similar, but different. He had been working on the new project for a while and was pretty sure it would give the hobbyists much better satisfaction than ordinary Painting by Numbers; because their finished painting

would be something quite special. You see... But, wait a minute: we can't tell you Claude's secret just yet. Read on, and you *will* find out about it – I promise.

Claude had mentioned his idea to Natalie in a roundabout way, not saying exactly what it was because he was hoping his niece would test it for him; just as if she was a hobbyist trying it for the first time. All he was prepared to say was: "I haven't quite got the paint additive right yet, but when I do I think you will find it er... interesting."

Natalie hadn't a clue what he was talking about and realised she would simply have to be patient while her uncle did what he had to. Every day he would shut himself in his studio; and to avoid being disturbed, he put a big sign on the door: NO ENTRY – EXPERIMENT IN PROGRESS. Whenever he came out, Natalie would be there, eagerly waiting to ask the same question: "Is it ready yet?" And each time she would receive the same disappointing answer: "Not quite." Then, one morning, something unexpected happened.

Natalie was heading to the kitchen for breakfast, and as she glanced at her uncle's door in passing as she always did, she was surprised to see that the sign had gone. Pausing, she knocked on the door. "Uncle Claude – are you in there?" There was no reply, so she tried knocking again with the same result. Going to the kitchen, she found her mother there and asked: "Have you seen Uncle Claude?"

"He went out early," her mother replied, "Apparently to take photos; although he wouldn't say of what, or where he was going. He was most peculiar, sort-of secretive. He did say to tell you there's something in his studio for you." Then she queried: "Is there something going on between you two that I should know about?"

Hearing the news that her uncle had left something for her, the girl spun and hurried out, calling over her shoulder: "No, nothing Mum; nothing for you to worry over." In seconds, she was in the studio; and there on a work-table was what looked like a flat, bigger-than-normal pizza box. Resting on it was an envelope addressed to her. Picking it up, she noticed there were words on the top of the box:

KIT AND KABOODLE

Magnetic Mystery Art

What was that all about, she wondered? Presumably there was a letter in the envelope and that would reveal all. Buzzing with excitement Natalie opened the envelope and began to read the enclosed letter:

Dearest Natalie,

Here is the long-awaited, very first Magnetic Art Painting which I would like you to test for me. You already know about Painting by Numbers, and this is similar; but not quite, as you will discover. There is no photograph yet of the subject which I have produced from memory; but you should have no trouble painting it, providing you follow the instructions. I will make any necessary alterations after I return from photographing the scene.

I shall be gone for a few days, so you have plenty of time to complete it before I get back. Please enjoy. See you soon.

Your Loving Uncle

With trembling fingers she took the lid off the box. Inside were two packages, one nearly as big as the inside of the box, and written on it was the word **KIT**. Beneath was a much smaller pack labelled **KABOODLE**. Perhaps she ought to have opened the large packet first, but the strange word Kaboodle intrigued her and she needed to know what it meant. In a moment she was frowning at what she had taken out of the pack – a flat piece of black plastic the shape and size of a postcard. Stuck on it was a label which said: **place this KABOODLE on the almost-finished painting**. More mystery: apart from the unknown word, what did Uncle Claude mean by *almost-finished painting*? Surely it was either finished, or not? Maybe there would be clearer instructions in the big packet; hopefully so, anyway.

Putting the Kaboodle to one side, she opened the **KIT** package. It contained what might have been expected from a Painting by Numbers kit. There were small tubs of paint, each with a number hand-written on the tops; presumably not printed in ink because Uncle Claude hadn't got that far yet. There were also three paint brushes and a large sheet of white paper which ought to have been a guide for the painting; except there was no drawn outline of a scene. It was just crammed full of shapes with a number written in each. How, Natalie wondered, was she supposed to paint something when she had no idea what it should look like?

Carefully sliding the paper out, she noticed one more thing in the pack - a card the same size and shape as the Kaboodle. Of course: here would be the photo of the scene that was supposed to be painted; except, according to the letter, Uncle Claude hadn't taken it yet. This would account for the fact that there was nothing on the card. Turning it over there was at least something on the other side – instructions which were quite puzzling: *Match the paint with the numbers to solve the Mystery*. Whatever did that mean, Natalie wondered?

Uncle Claude had picked the right name for his new project. It certainly was a mystery that Natalie was keen to begin solving. Fortunately, it was school holidays, so she had plenty of spare time; but it would have to wait. "Come and get your breakfast," her mother called, "Your cornflakes are going soggy."

With a sigh and a tut, Natalie trudged back to the kitchen where she bolted her cereal, darted to the sink to wash the bowl before hurrying back to the studio. As she was clearing a space on the table, she moved the Kaboodle out of the way and noticed a paper clip stuck to it. Picking the clip off, she put it just to the side. It slid straight back to the Kaboodle. The rectangle of plastic had to be like a fridge magnet, which would explain the Magnetic bit of the Mystery art. To test the theory, Natalie tried bringing a metal palette knife close; and, like the paper clip, it too stuck to the Kaboodle. If one mystery had been solved, there still remained another much greater. But to discover what the Kaboodle actually did, she would have to start the painting; at least enough of it to place the magnetic plastic on.

Spreading the sheet of paper out on the table, she was ready to start painting. The shapes with the numbers in gave no hint of the picture they must eventually create; and some of them were so small they were hard to read. Funnily enough, there happened to be a magnifying glass on the table. Natalie smiled – Uncle Claude had thought of everything. Deciding to work on the bottom right corner of the paper, she selected a suitable brush and opened the tub with a 5 on top. Dipping the brush in, she began filling in the number 5 shapes – easy. Having painted all the shapes of this colour in the corner section of the paper, she took a moment to review her work so far. With this colour alone, there was still no hint of what she was painting. Something odd struck her, though.

The colour was a light grey, pretty ordinary really; except for a kind-of shimmering. It seemed a bit like the paint on her dad's car as if there were tiny grains of silver in it. Maybe that was what her uncle had been experimenting with. It was unlikely to be the water-based paints she was used to, because there was a single larger tub with the words Brush Cleaner written on it. After cleaning the brush and wiping it on a cloth which, like the magnifying glass, was also on the table, she selected another colour - number 14. Continuing in this way, Natalie cleaned the brush each time she changed the paint colour until the corner of the paper had been completed.

It did depict something, but it was really vague; mainly because all of the different colours were very light shades and looked much the same. Her eyes flicked to the Kaboodle. It was time to try it. Picking up the piece of plastic, she gingerly placed it on what could be described as the *almost-finished* part. Waiting a few seconds, Natalie stared at it. The plastic just sat there, apparently doing nothing; but lifting it off, she gasped: "Wow!" The image was no longer vague. The colours had darkened and were much sharper, so much so that the image was now obvious – she had actually painted a cluster of rocks.

A buzz of excitement rippled through her. She had discovered the secret of Kit and Kaboodle art. Now she could paint more and solve the mystery of Uncle Claude's scene. Natalie worked and worked, and as each part of the picture was *almost-finished*, she used the Kaboodle to *actually* finish it. The scene grew section by section. One part, though, was rather peculiar. It was at the far end of a beach where there was a rocky cliff with what looked like a cave part way up. The section at the foot of the cliff was the bit giving her trouble because the paint didn't seem to want to take properly as if something had been spilt on the paper.

Maybe it was just coincidence; but as she was puzzling over this, Natalie's mobile phone began ringing. Her excitement over the painting faded and she was suddenly concerned. There was no real reason – it was simply a feeling; but when she picked up the phone and saw it was her uncle calling, she became tense. Jamming the phone to her ear, she said: "Is something the matter, Uncle? Where are you? Are you okay? "

"...really. I... ad... all." The call was breaking up, probably because he was in one of those areas which weren't good for mobile phones. After some hissing and crackling his voice came through again: "...ug ... o..." Then the line went dead.

Natalie was stunned, hardly breathing. Her uncle was in trouble and he hadn't been able to tell her what had happened, or where he was. Dropping the phone on the table, she was about to race off to find her parents when her father entered. "Dad," she blurted out, "Something's happened to Uncle Claude! He phoned and said something I couldn't make out; then the line went dead. We have to go to him."

"How do we know where that is?" he asked. "Mum said he'd gone to take photos, but he didn't tell her where?"

"I think he's here," said his daughter, rushing back to the table and pointing at the painting. "In his letter, he said he was going to take a photo of wherever it is."

Looking at the painting, her father said: "I know this place. It's Smuggler's Cove. Claude and I used to play there when we were boys. We pretended we were pirates and hid our booty in a cave at the far end of the beach, just here." Natalie's phone was apparently resting close to the spot he was talking about. Picking it up, he caught his breath. Just below the cave, the figure of a man was lying on rocks. "That's Claude, I'm sure it is," he said, and with a frown added: "How can that be?"

“You’re right,” whispered Natalie, “It does look like Uncle Claude, but he wasn’t in the picture when I painted that part. Well, actually it wouldn’t paint properly at all; and even the Kaboodle didn’t seem to make it any better.”

“The Kaboodle?” queried her father, “What’s that?”

“Here.” Natalie handed him the piece of plastic. “It’s magnetic, like a fridge magnet, and it must do something to the paint to make it brighter and clearer.”

The man took a few moments to ponder; then thought of something: “Your phone was sitting over that part, and I believe the battery in it is magnetic. Could that be it? No, surely not, otherwise the Kaboodle would have worked. Unless...” He looked long and hard at his daughter. “You and Claude do seem to have some weird connection...”

“That’s it, Dad!” Natalie cut in. “Uncle Claude’s in trouble, and even though his call was breaking up and I couldn’t hear most of what he said, I reckon my phone’s memory still recorded it and somehow sent us the message on the painting. However doesn’t matter. What does is that Uncle Claude’s hurt; maybe he fell and can’t move. We have to go to him!”

Whether he believed Natalie’s theory or not, her father had to admit that his brother and daughter could communicate in ways that did seem rather fanciful; ways, however, that had been proved too many times in the past to be dismissed now.

Although the drive to Smuggler’s Cove was only thirty minutes, it seemed to take forever. Then they had a bit of a scramble down the steep, rock-strewn slope to the beach; plus another dash over soft sand before they reached where it was suspected Claude might be.

And there he was, lying on the rocks below the cave where he had fallen. Although obviously in pain, he was still conscious and was very glad to see them. Forcing a smile, he said to Natalie: “You got my message, then?”

Squatting down beside him, she took Claude’s hand. “Sort-of,” she said, “Except the mobile kept breaking up...”

Her father had been checking his own phone and he butted in: “That’s because there’s practically no signal here. You stay with your uncle, sweetheart. I’m going back up the hill. We need an ambulance. With any luck I can make a call from there.”

Natalie waited until her father was out of earshot before asking: “Did you do something special to the paints? I mean, you actually appeared in the painting right here where you had fallen. That’s how we found you. Even the Kaboodle didn’t work. It was my phone that made the painting change. Did you know that would happen?”

Claude remained silent as he thought over what his niece had just told him. Eventually he shook his head. “I didn’t plan it. I have no idea why it happened.”

“Maybe we’ll just have to accept the whole kit and kaboodle as a magnetic mystery,” said Natalie with a smirk. “On the other hand, maybe it’s just us.”

“Being perfectly honest, my dear,” Claude said, and he managed a pained smile, “I don’t think there’s any maybe about it.”