

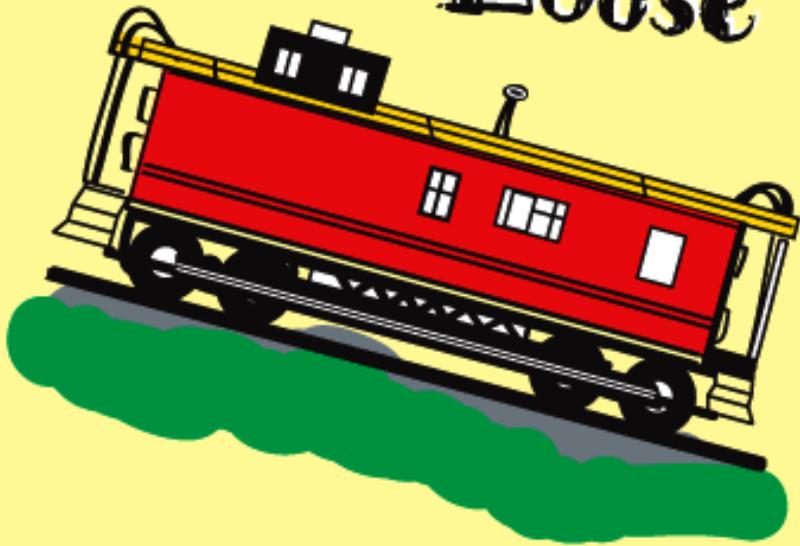
Mystery  
Ryders

#6

# Caboose

on the

# Loose



by  
Criswell & Carli  
Freeman

## Sample Chapters

**Caboose**

on the

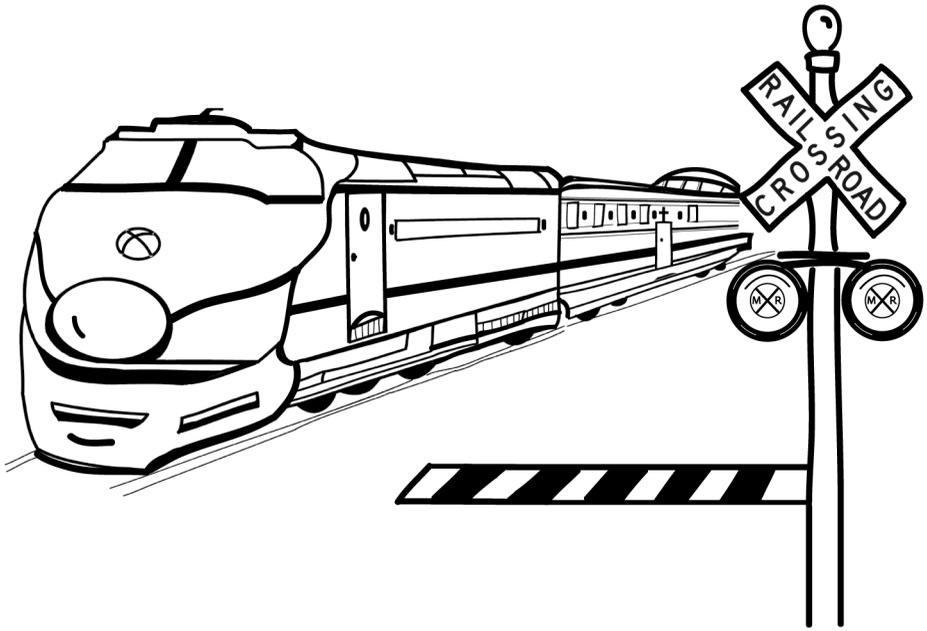
**Loose**



by  
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# CHAPTER ONE



## *Caboose on the Loose!*

“Knock-knock,” said Quinn, for the ninth time in a row. Yes, I was counting.

“Who’s there?” I asked cheerfully.

If you must know the truth, I was less interested in the quality of Quinn’s jokes than in their quantity. You see, I could not stop wondering how many knock-knock jokes he would tell without stopping.

His current record is twenty-two.

“Orange!” squealed Quinn.

“Orange,” by the way, is my younger brother’s favorite way to start a knock-knock joke. And, yes, I keep track of that, too.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

“Orange who?” I asked.

“Orange you glad we’re going to ride in a caboose?” Quinn laughed out loud at his own joke then said, “I’m hungry. Maybe I can get Mom to make me a snack.”

With that, my younger brother spun around, jumped up from his seat, and ran toward the kitchen of our train.

In an instant Quinn was gone.

“What kind of snack do you think your brother wants?” asked Dad.

“Normally Quinn would prefer a cookie,” I said. “But, after all those riddles, I think he’s got something else on his mind: an orange.”

My father chuckled, and so did his friend, an older gentleman named Kenneth Charles Jones, who’s called K.C. for short.

Mr. Jones was wearing a pair of blue-and-white-striped overalls and an old-fashioned train engineer’s cap that was slightly tilted on his head.

With his white beard and well-rounded tummy, K.C. Jones reminded me of Santa Claus.

## CABOOSE ON THE LOOSE!

Or perhaps he reminded me of what Santa might look like if he'd been working on the railroad all the livelong day.

“John, thanks for giving me such a fun ride on your train,” said Mr. Jones. “I’ve had a fine time visiting you and seeing Spring Valley, but I can’t wait to get back to my train museum. I’ve missed my old caboose, even though I’ve only been away for three days.”

“Mr. Jones, how did you decide to buy your own caboose?” I asked.

“I’m glad you asked,” he said. “When I was a young man, I worked for the railroad as a train conductor, so I spent many happy years watching the world go by from the window of a caboose. For me, a caboose was my home away from home.”

Mr. Jones paused and took a deep breath.

“But the railroad business changed,” he said, “and they didn’t need conductors or cabooses anymore. So, when the railroad company decided to sell all those old cabooses, I went to the bank, took out my life savings, and bought one.”

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

“That’s when K.C. got his idea for the *Chattahoochee Choo-Choo Museum*,” said Dad. “And that’s how K.C. and I became friends. We’re both train lovers.”

“So, who owns the choo-choo museum?” I asked.

My father pointed to Mr. Jones. “K.C. owns the museum *and* the caboose,” he said. “He takes care of everything. Does it all by himself.”

“How did you decide to name your museum the *Chattahoochee Choo-Choo*?” I asked.

“My little train museum happens to be right next to the Chattahoochee River,” said Mr. Jones. “It’s just about the prettiest spot in the whole state of Georgia.”

“Everybody who visits K.C.’s museum gets to see a real caboose,” said Dad. “And the museum has a toy train that fills up an entire building.”

“Yep, I’ve got a tiny train museum with a tiny little railroad inside,” said Mr. Jones, “and when I’m driving that miniature train, I feel like I’m out there riding the rails again.”

## CABOOSE ON THE LOOSE!

“Knock-knock!” shouted Quinn, as he ran toward our seats, this time with a peeled orange in his hand.

“Who’s there?” I asked.

It was time for me to start counting again.

“Wayne!” screamed Quinn.

“Wayne, who?” I asked.

“Wayne are we going to get there?” squealed Quinn.

“I can answer that,” said K.C. Jones. “I know this train track so well that I can tell you where we are without even looking out the window. We’ll be pulling up to the *Chattahoochee Choo-Choo Museum* in a minute or two.”

“Wow!” said Quinn.

“And when we get there,” said Mr. Jones, “I’ll be proud to give you a personal tour through the nicest little caboose you’ve ever seen.”

Quinn pushed his face up against the window. “I see the museum!” he shouted. “It’s got a real railroad track right next to it. But where’s the caboose?”

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

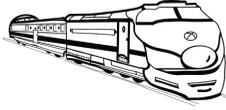
“Oh, the caboose always stays on the track right beside the museum,” said K.C. Jones, who was so familiar with the landscape that he had not yet bothered to look out the window.

“Then you must have a very *small* caboose,” said Quinn, whose face stayed flat against the glass, “because I can’t see it from here.”

“That’s odd,” said K.C. Jones, as he reached into his overalls and pulled out a small pair of wire-rimmed glasses. “It’s bright red, and it’s on the tracks. You should be able to see it by now.”

Mr. Jones looked out the window and gasped, “It’s gone! Vanished! It’s just not there! Somebody stole my caboose!”

# CHAPTER TWO



## *Hello Again...*

Welcome back! As you might know by now, my full name is Mary Catharine Ryder, but everybody calls me May. I'm twelve (almost thirteen), and I live on a train, at least some of the time.

The rest of the time I live—along with my two parents, my two brothers, and my dog—at 4722 Bluefield Court in Spring Valley, Missouri.

My big brother, Hutson, is two years older than I am, and we call him Hut. He's very smart. He's also rather tall for his age, quite athletic, and extremely quiet until he has something important to say.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

My younger brother, Quinn (the one who loves knock-knock jokes) is six years old, quite cute, and knows it.

My mother, Catharine, was a middle-school English teacher. But now, her full-time job is homeschooling my brothers and me as we travel from place to place in our very own train car.

If you've read any of my other stories, you already know how we got our train. But, just in case you haven't, here's how it happened.

Before my father became *the* Jonathan Ryder, best-selling mystery writer, he was just plain, old John Ryder, editor of the *Spring Valley View*, our hometown newspaper. Back then, Dad wrote articles about weddings, graduations, and other Spring Valley "news," but he wanted to become a mystery writer. So he wrote stories in his spare time.

It didn't seem to bother Dad that none of his books ever got published. He just kept writing mysteries and sending them off to publishers. His stories were always turned down, but he kept writing anyway.

## HELLO AGAIN...

One day, to everyone's surprise except Dad's, his hard work paid off. That's when my father got a book deal from a big New York publishing company. And pretty soon he was famous.

At first, my dad traveled the world doing interviews, making speeches, and signing books. But he didn't like airports, and he didn't like spending time away from Spring Valley. So one day, my father told his New York publisher that he wanted to be a full-time dad and a part-time author, not the other way around.

That's when his publisher made Dad an offer that he couldn't refuse: Skip the planes, take the train, and bring the whole family along for the ride!

Now, we ride the rails on our own private train, finding adventures along the way.

One of those adventures began when we arrived at the *Chattahoochee Choo-Choo Museum*. That's where we were supposed to find K.C. Jones's famous red caboosie, the one we were planning to haul to a train convention in Atlanta, Georgia.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

Everything was rolling along quite smoothly until our family—with Mr. Jones as our guest—arrived at the cabooses' parking spot only to find that the railroad tracks were caboose-less.

Somehow, his antique train car had been swiped while Mr. Jones had been visiting us in Spring Valley.

Thus began the amazing adventure I call *Caboose on the Loose*.

It happened like this...

# CHAPTER THREE



## *A Caboose-less Museum*

“Gone,” moaned K.C. Jones. “My caboose is gone!”

“But it’s impossible to steal a caboose...” said my dad, who thought things over for a moment and then added, “...isn’t it?”

“Impossible or not,” I said, “it looks like somebody just did.”

Hut, who had been studying in his room, walked up to our train’s observation deck. My mother followed close behind.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

“What happened, Dad?” asked Hut. “Did I just hear you say something about a missing caboose?”

“You heard right,” said my father. “Mr. Jones’s caboose is missing.”

“Missing?” asked my mother, who looked surprised. “Is that possible?”

“Yes,” said Hut. “A caboose could be lifted off the tracks by someone who owned a crane. Then the crook could haul it away on an over-sized trailer like the ones that carry big earth-moving equipment.”

“Or, someone could use a locomotive like the one that pulls our train,” I said.

“I bet a super-crook could get a really huge helicopter with some rope,” said Quinn, “and steal it that way.”

My little brother was just trying to be helpful.

“That would require a very big helicopter and some very strong rope,” said Hut.

“How strong?” asked Quinn, his eyes opening wider.

## A CABOOSE-LESS MUSEUM

“An average-sized caboose weighs about 60,000 pounds,” said Hut. “The biggest helicopters can only lift about 25,000 pounds each.”

Please don’t ask me how my big brother knows about caboose weights, helicopter pulling-power, or any of the million-and-one other facts he keeps stored in that brain of his.

“Well, maybe they used a rocket ship instead,” said Quinn, trying hard to sound smart.

“The crooks probably used a locomotive,” said K.C. Jones. “A locomotive could roll up to my museum in the middle of the night, hook up my caboose, and take it away.”

“But you were only gone for three days,” said my father.

“I know,” said Mr. Jones. “But that’s plenty of time to haul a caboose just about anywhere in America.”

“Don’t worry,” said Quinn, who was still trying to sound smart. “Me and Hut and May will find it. We’ve solved mysteries that were lots harder to figure out than this one.”

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

“Now, Quinn,” said my mother, “let’s not make promises we can’t keep. You kids are talented, but you’re still amateurs—not professional detectives.”

“I did get paid once,” I said. “Remember the reward I got at the Palo Alto Pet Palace?”

Our little dog, Fudge, who never strays far from our family, jumped up and wagged his tail.

“Yes, I remember,” said Mom. “And I must admit that you and your older brother are quite a mystery-solving team.”

I looked at Hut, and we both smiled.

“But, this time,” said Mom, “I think the police can manage without you. After all, how could anybody hide a 60,000-pound caboose?”

I was wondering the same thing.

And I was determined to figure it out.

# CHAPTER FOUR



## *Officer, We'd Like to Report a Missing Caboose*

We had expected to pull up to K.C.'s *Choo-Choo Museum* and haul his prized caboose to the Atlanta train owners' convention.

Okay, I know what you're wondering, and the answer is yes: Some people really do own trains, mostly antique ones.

And the answer to your next question is also yes: Train owners really do get together at conventions all across America.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

One of the highlights of this year's Atlanta train convention was supposed to be K.C.'s caboose. But then everything went wrong. Very wrong.

After Mr. Jones discovered that his caboose had been stolen, he immediately called the police. Within a few minutes, several officers arrived, but what could they do?

There wasn't any real evidence, only an empty spot on a railroad track that ran from a main line to the little museum.

The policemen searched around for a few minutes, jotted down some notes, and promised to report the missing caboose to anybody they could think of.

Then they left.

As the police car faded into the distance, we all stood beside our train, saying nothing. Finally, my father spoke up.

"Well," said Dad, "it doesn't look like the police are going to be much help."

"Nope," said Mr. Jones.

"What should we do now?" asked Dad.

## WE'D LIKE TO REPORT A MISSING CABOOSE

“There’s not much we can do,” said Mr. Jones, “except wait.”

“Okay,” said Dad. “But, if you’re going to stay here and wait, we’re staying right here with you.”

My father was trying to be helpful.

“That’s mighty kind of you,” said K.C., “but you don’t need to do that. You’ve been looking forward to the Atlanta convention all year.”

“It’s the least we can do for a friend,” said Dad. “We’ll skip the convention and stay right here to help you look for clues.”

“Excuse me,” said Hut, “but I may have a better idea.”

Like I said, my big brother is a quiet guy *until* he has something important to say. This happened to be one of those times.

“All ideas are welcome,” said Dad. “What are you thinking, Hut?”

“I think we should get back on our train,” said Hut, “and go to Atlanta as fast as we can.”

“Why?” asked my father, who’s much better at writing his own mysteries than solving real ones.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

“Because whoever stole the caboose was not a sloppy crook,” said Hut. “I’ve already looked over every inch of track within half a mile of this museum. It’s clue-less.”

“Well, why go to Atlanta?” asked my dad. “Mr. Owens is one of the best engineers in America. He can drive our train anywhere we need to go. He could take us up and down every railroad track in the whole Southeast. Maybe we could find K.C.’s caboose that way.”

“That’s a generous offer,” said Mr. Jones. “Maybe it’s worth a try.”

“It may be worth a try,” I said, “but I think Hut’s plan might have a better chance of catching this crook.”

Both my father and K.C. Jones looked slightly puzzled.

“Mr. Jones says the person who stole his caboose probably used a locomotive to pull it away,” I said.

“Right!” said K.C. Jones.

“I agree,” said Dad.

## WE'D LIKE TO REPORT A MISSING CABOOSE

“And where will the people who own private locomotives be staying for the next few days?” I asked.

Both Dad and Mr. Jones answered at the same time: “Atlanta.”

“Yes,” I said, “those owners will park their trains in one place: the convention. That’s where we can see all those locomotives lined up in nice, neat rows.”

“Good idea,” said my father.

“Now that you mention it,” said Mr. Jones, “plenty of folks at the convention have tried to buy my caboose, but I was never willing to sell.”

Mom spoke up. “Hut and May could be right. Maybe the most likely place to find a caboose thief *is* at a train convention.”

My father turned to K.C. and asked, “If we go to the convention, will you go with us?”

“You bet I will!” said Mr. Jones.

“That settles it,” said Dad. “You can have Hut and Quinn’s room. They can sleep up on the observation deck.”

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

“That’s awfully kind of you, John,” said K.C., “but I’d hate to do that to your boys.”

“It’s not a problem,” said Hut.

“Besides,” said Quinn, “whenever we sleep on the observation deck, I get to stay up late and get up early. It’s fun!”

“Okay. We’re going to Atlanta,” said my dad. “I’ll tell Mr. Owens to warm up our locomotive.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, and so did Hut.

We both knew that our best chance of finding that missing caboose was not at the *Chattahoochee Choo-Choo Museum*.

We needed to be in Atlanta.

And that’s where we were going...



## *That's The End of This Sample*

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