

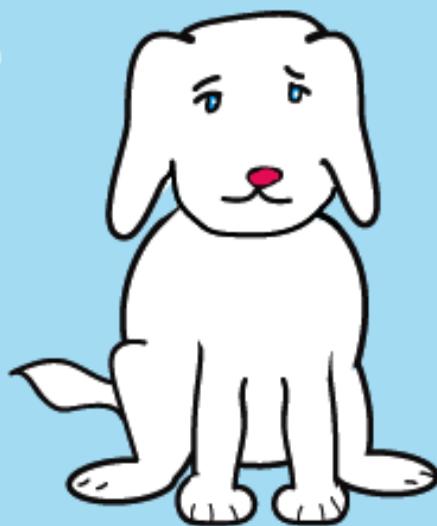
**M**YSTERY  
**R**YDERS **#1**

**The  
Mystery**

of the

**Disappearing**

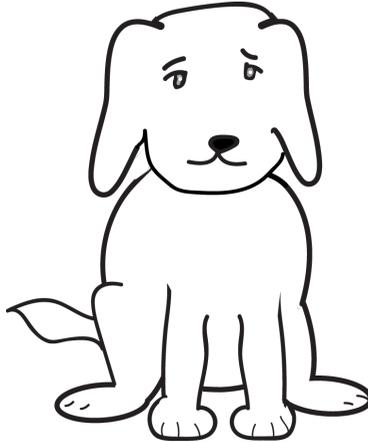
**Dogs**



by  
Criswell & Carli  
Freeman

**Sample Chapters**

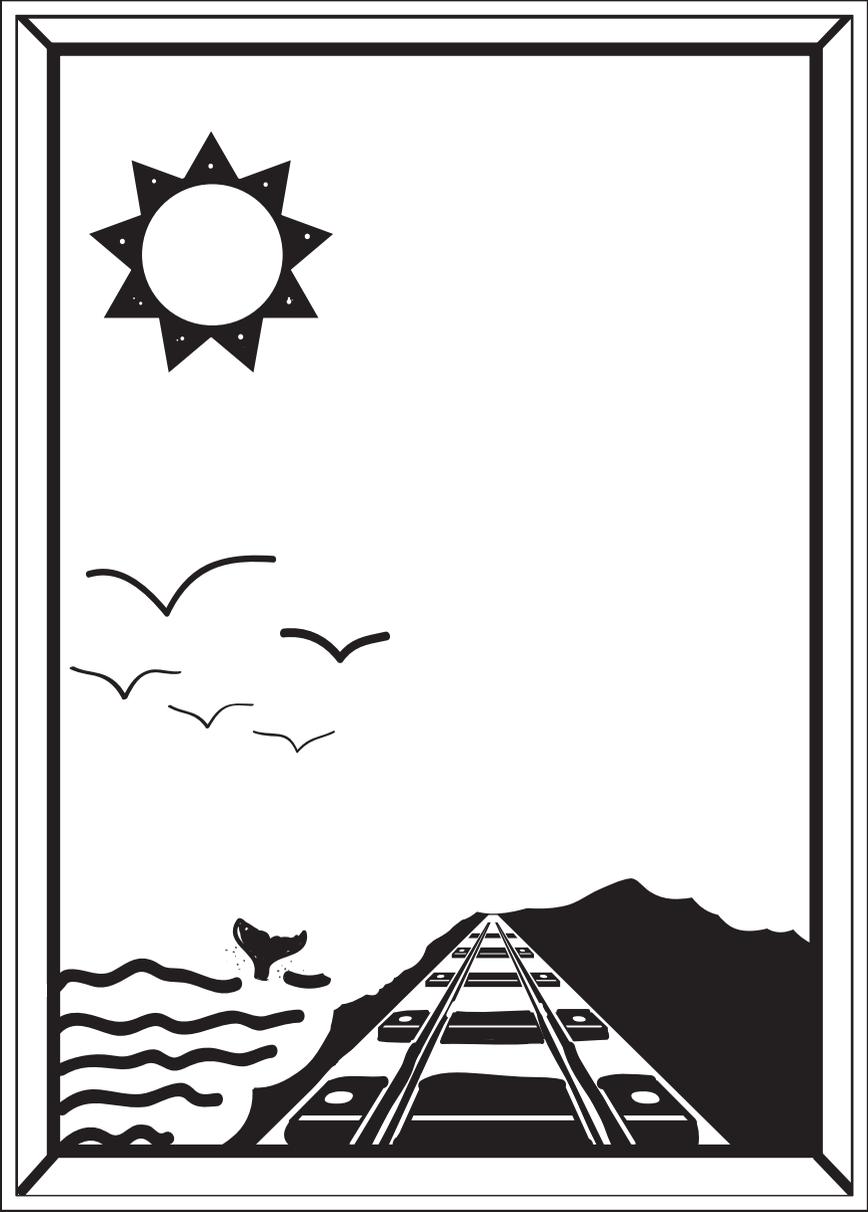
The  
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# CHAPTER ONE

## *Rails & Whales*

“Whale!”

My father almost never raises his voice, but this time he made an exception.

“I’m not making this up, guys!” he shouted. “You’d better come over here right now. You won’t believe what I just saw.”

As my two brothers and I hustled out of our seats, Dad pointed toward a spectacular view of the bright-blue Pacific Ocean that filled the left-side windows of our train car.

We waited for a few moments, looking carefully at the horizon, and then suddenly another big plume of white spray billowed up from the ocean.

All four of us gasped in amazement. It was an awesome sight, especially from a train.

“Why did they put a water fountain in the ocean, Dad?” asked my younger brother Quinn, who was still slightly confused.

“That’s not a fountain, Quinn. That’s a whale. It sprays water every time it takes a breath.”

“Is it gonna jump, Dad?” asked Quinn, who was too young to know that whales seldom do.

“I doubt it, Quinn,” said my father. “Whales swim up and down the coast of California all the time—but they don’t jump out of the water very often. You see, it’s like this...”

My father was about to begin a lecture on the travel habits of large sea mammals when, before he could finish his sentence, the waters parted, the huge whale leapt, hung in the air for a second, and crashed back into the ocean with a massive splash.



Our jaws dropped. We couldn't believe what we had just seen. A whale. Jumping out of the water. Seen from a train. *Our* train.

Just then, my mother walked into the room with a big bowl of sliced apples.

"Anybody want a snack?" she asked.

"Mom!" shouted Quinn. "You missed it! We just saw a flying whale. It was *amazing!*"

"A *jumping* whale," corrected my father, who quickly added, "but Quinn is right about one thing: It *was* amazing."

"Well, maybe it will jump again," said my mother, with a distinct tone of hopefulness in her voice.

“I doubt it, Catharine,” replied Dad. I could tell my father was about to resume his little lecture, this time for Mom’s benefit.

“Humpback whales swim up and down the coast of California all the time,” he said. “But they don’t jump out of the water very often. Let me explain...”

But, before Dad could say another word, the massive animal jumped *again*, almost as if it were putting on a special encore performance, just for my mother.

Mom’s jaw dropped, she shook her head for a moment, and then she spoke a single word: “*Amazing.*”

By now, you may be wondering how we happened to spot such a spectacular sea mammal from the windows of our very own train car.

The answer may take awhile, but I’ll try not to bore you with it. You see, it’s like this...

# CHAPTER TWO



## *All Aboard!*

My full name is Mary Catharine Ryder, but you can call me May. Everybody else does.

I'm twelve.

My big brother, Hutson, is two years older than I am. He is nice, quiet, athletic, tall for his age, and—I must admit—*very* smart. We all call him Hut. My younger brother, Quinn, is quite cute, very curious, and well behaved (most of the time).

My mother, Catharine, teaches middle-school English, and my father is a mystery writer named Jonathan.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

Long before my father became *the* Jonathan Ryder, best-selling author, he was just plain, old John Ryder, editor of the *Spring Valley View*, our town's local newspaper. Six days a week, Dad wrote stories about weddings, church happenings, high-school football, and other Spring Valley "news."

But, Dad had always dreamed of becoming a famous mystery writer. So, in his spare time, he wrote novels.

It didn't seem to bother my dad that he never actually *sold* any of his mysteries. He just kept writing them, week after week, month after month, year after year.

And finally, his persistence paid off.

One day, Dad came home and announced that he had sold his first mystery to a big New York publishing company. I guess you could say that's when my father stopped being John Ryder, editor of the community newspaper, and became Jonathan Ryder, world-famous mystery writer.

For a few years, Dad flew millions of miles on airplanes crisscrossing America, selling his

## ALL ABOARD!

books to anybody who would buy them. Dad visited bookstores from sea to shining sea. All that hard work paid off, because his mysteries made it to the top and stayed there.

But one day, my father decided that he wanted to be with his family more than he wanted to be famous. So, after writing four blockbuster best-sellers, Dad told his publisher that he missed his wife and kids too much to keep traveling alone.

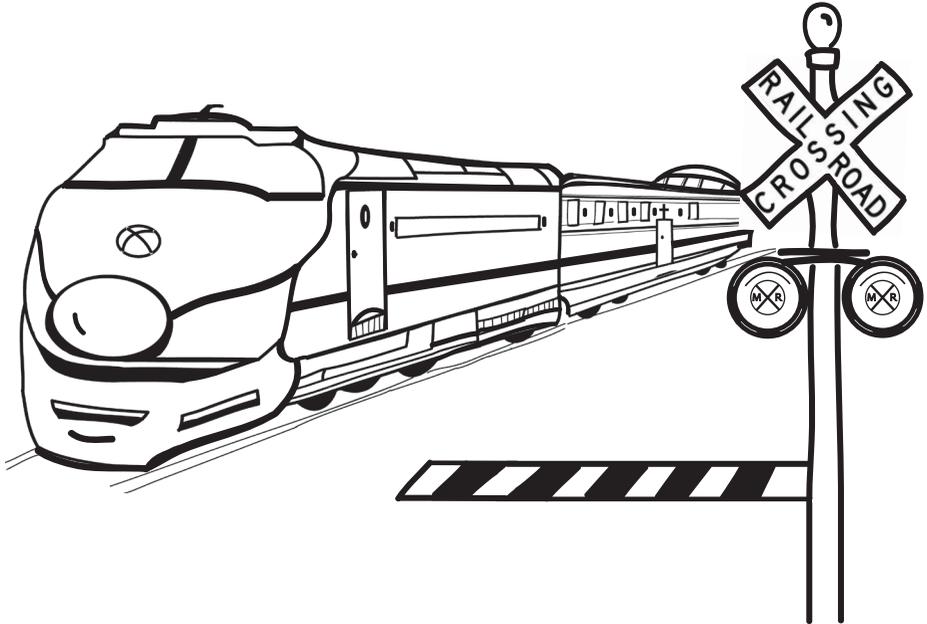
That's when the publishing company made Dad an offer he couldn't refuse: Forget the plane and take a train!

A few days later, Dad barged in the front door of our house, called the family together, and said he had a very big surprise. He asked us to follow him outside.

Off we marched, tromping behind Dad, one block, then two blocks from our house, to the Spring Valley train station. My father led us to a shiny locomotive with a spotless passenger car attached. Then, with a smile of satisfaction on his face, he spoke.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

“Okay, it’s no surprise to you guys that this is a train,” Dad said. “What may surprise you is that this is *our* train.”



Dad looked directly at Mom and said, “Now, Catharine, I know what you’re thinking, and the answer to your question is ‘no.’ I didn’t buy this train. My publisher gave it to me as part of my new book deal.”

Dad took a deep breath and continued, “When I go on my next book tour, I’m bringing you guys with me. And we’re taking this train.”

“Yeah!” said Quinn. “That means I’ll *never* have to go to school.”

“Not exactly,” said Dad. “Your Mom can be your teacher—*if* she’s agreeable.”

Dad looked at Mom with an expression that was half questioning and the other half pleading. For a moment, my mother didn’t say anything, so Dad kept talking.

“Catharine, I’ve heard that lots of people home-school these days. And, you’re the best teacher I know.”

By now, Dad was *really* selling.

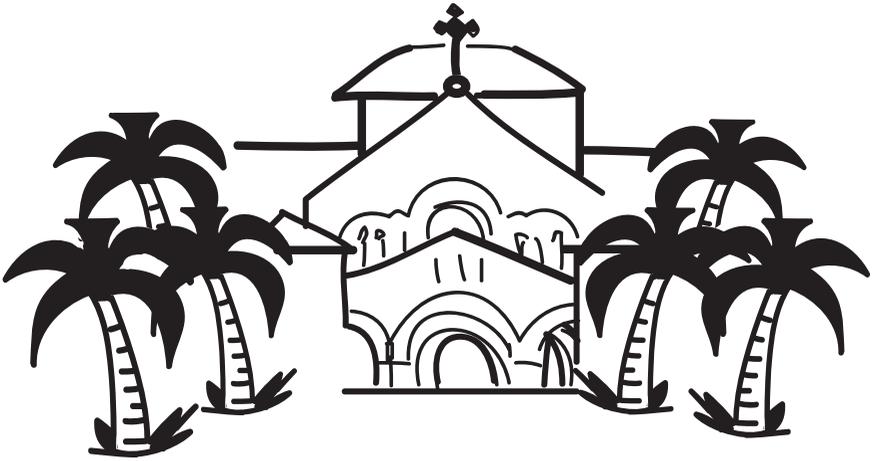
“If you want to get technical, John,” answered Mom, “what you’re describing isn’t exactly home-schooling. It’s train-schooling.”

Then, my mother smiled a broad smile, and I could tell that she was on board with Dad’s plan.

I could hardly contain myself! Of course I was excited to ride on a private train car with my family. But, I would have been even more excited if I had known that our train would carry me down the tracks, straight to my first big adventure.

# THE MYSTERY RYDERS

It happened in a California town called Palo  
Alto...



# CHAPTER THREE



## *Breakfast at the Royal Garden*

Palo Alto is a cozy California city situated at the front gates of Stanford University. We were staying there for a few days because my father was scheduled to give several lectures at the college.

While we were staying in town, our family could have slept on our train. But, after making the long trip out West, my parents decided to stay at the Royal Garden Inn instead.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

The small hotel is well named because of its flower gardens, fruit trees, and flowering shrubs. The grounds are crisscrossed by little gurgling streams fed by big bubbling fountains. The Royal Garden is a landscaper's dream and a very nice place to stay.

It's also a nice place to eat breakfast, because the pancakes are terrific and the maple syrup is, too.

That's why Hut and I got up early, dashed to the coffee shop, sat down, and placed our pancake orders. When our food arrived, we were not disappointed.

"Please pass the syrup," I said to Hut, as I surveyed a stack of pancakes that deserved to be eaten as soon as possible, if not sooner.

"Sure, May," he said. "Maple, blueberry, or boysenberry?"

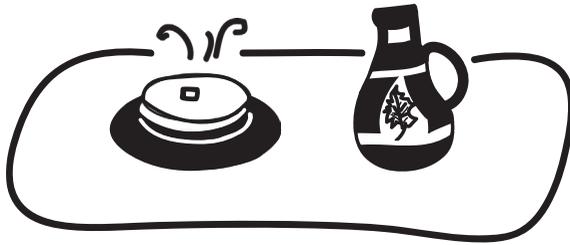
Who, I wondered, ever actually chooses boysenberry? And, what exactly is a boysenberry, anyway? And, where do they come from? Boysen?

"Maple, please," I replied.

## BREAKFAST AT THE ROYAL GARDEN

It was an easy choice to make. In fact, it was a no-brainer, because the Royal Garden Inn serves real, honest-to-goodness, straight-from-the-tree maple syrup.

All the way from the other coast. No artificial anything.



I was in breakfast paradise.

My brother was experiencing breakfast bliss, too, but not because of the syrup. In fact, Hut had barely touched his pancakes. He was totally—and joyfully—engrossed in a brand new math textbook that he had found on sale at the Stanford University Bookstore.

“How can you possibly stand to read that thing?” I asked. “It’s hundreds of pages long, with absolutely nothing but equations and formulas.”

“Formulas and equations can be really interesting,” he said, without even looking up from the page.

“Interesting to some people, maybe, but not to me,” I replied.

“It’s really not as complicated as it looks, Sis, if you understand what all the symbols mean. This book is about statistics—surveys, averages, predictions—stuff like that. I’ll let you read it when I’m finished. With your brains, you could figure it out in no time.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I said. “I like books with a few more pictures and a few fewer formulas.”

Hut nodded absentmindedly, took a bite, and kept reading.

In a few minutes, our server came to the table. She was in her early twenties, rather tall, and seemingly distracted. She wore a nametag that read “Mary.”

“My name is Mary, too,” I said, trying to make her smile. “But everybody calls me ‘May.’”

## BREAKFAST AT THE ROYAL GARDEN

“Nice to meet you, May. Are your pancakes okay?” she asked.

“My pancakes are wonderful,” I replied. “We’re having a great morning. I hope you are, too.”

“Not so great...” was all Mary could say before her eyes welled up with tears. Without speaking another word, she turned and walked away. I saw her say something to another waitress, and then she quickly left the restaurant.

“Hut, did you see what just happened?” I asked. “Our waitress pulled a vanishing act without even leaving our check. What’s that about?”

My brother, who is usually very observant, had noticed nothing. His nose had been deeply buried in that book.

“Sorry, May,” he said. “I guess I got caught up in this chapter on probability. I didn’t even notice our waitress. Which one is she?”

“You mean which one *was* she. She’s the waitress who’s no longer here,” I said. “I told her good morning. Then she disappeared.”

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

“I suppose she’s just having a bad day. It happens,” observed Hut vaguely, as he kept his eyes on a page that was brimming with squiggly lines and weird mathematical symbols.

I thought to myself, but didn’t say, that I would just have to solve this little mystery—the mystery of the missing waitress—all by myself, because Hut was going to be no help at all.

I hoped this miniature mystery, tiny though it might be, would keep me occupied for at least a few minutes. Clues, I thought, should be arriving soon. After all, *somebody* in this restaurant still needed to bring us our check.

And, when that check arrived, I was planning on asking a few questions.



## BREAKFAST AT THE ROYAL GARDEN

Soon after our first sever had dashed away in tears, a different waitress bearing a nametag that read “Judy” walked up with our check.

“Sorry for the delay,” she said. “Mary is having a tough time this morning. Somebody took her dog.”

The news made me very sad.

No wonder Mary couldn’t wait on our table—she was heartbroken. Although I didn’t have a dog of my own, I suspected that I would be crying, too, if my pet went missing.

Hut looked up from his book and said, “What makes her think the dog has been stolen? Maybe it escaped. I bet if she just looks around her neighborhood, she’ll probably find it.”

“I wish it were that simple,” said Judy. “But the dog isn’t lost; it’s definitely stolen. Mary lives with her parents, and their backyard is totally fenced in. They have a gate that they always keep locked. Whoever took her dog broke open their lock. It’s all really upsetting.”

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

“Who would be cruel enough to steal somebody else’s dog?” I wondered out loud.

“Anyone who would steal a dog is beyond cruel,” Judy replied. “It’s a really rotten thing to do to Mary *and* to her dog.”

Hut just shook his head. And, I shook my head, too.

I knew Mary would be sad for a long time. *Very* sad. For a *very* long time.

# CHAPTER FOUR



## *Quinn's Discovery*

No matter where we are, my parents make sure that school comes before fun and games. They say, “First things first.” So, after breakfast, it was time for Hut and me to hit the books.

When we returned to our hotel suite to gather up our schoolwork, we found my mother and Quinn dressed in hiking clothes. Quinn was jumping up and down with excitement. Of course, I love my little brother, and he's fun to be around. But, sometimes Quinn can be like hot sauce: a tiny bit goes a long, long way.

## THE MYSTERY RYDERS

So, to be perfectly honest, I wasn't exactly heartbroken when Mom told Hut and me that we'd be studying on our own while she and Quinn went on a walking tour around Palo Alto.

I decided to study English while Hut placed his nose squarely inside a two-inch thick science book. Instead of sitting inside our hotel room, we chose to go outside and do our work in the fresh air. Meanwhile, my mother and Quinn walked, talked, and took in the sights.

At noon, Mom, Quinn, Hut, and I met at the very same coffee shop where I had experienced those delicious pancakes just a few hours before.

"How did your studies go this morning?" Mom asked Hut and me as she stirred sugar into her iced tea.

"Great!" I spoke quickly. "We sat at the nicest picnic table, underneath the prettiest tree, and I even splurged and fixed myself a cup of hot chocolate."

"That's wonderful, May," Mom said, trying to hold back a laugh. "But, I was more interested

in *what* you learned, not *where* you learned it.”

Hut spoke up: “I studied science. It was *really* interesting.”

Mom smiled and said, “Science has changed quite a bit since I was in school, Hut. Perhaps I’ll get *you* to teach *me* sometime soon.”

“I’d love to, Mom. Did you know that Stanford has a particle accelerator where they smash atoms? It would be a great place to visit. They give tours. And, admission is free.” As usual, Hut had done his homework.

“We’ll see,” Mom replied. “But, before we go on any more field trips, I’d like for us to hear from Quinn.”

With that, Mom pointed to Quinn and asked, “What was the most interesting thing you learned on our walk through Palo Alto?”

Quinn thought about Mom’s question for a moment and said, “I learned that it’s hard to keep up with a dog around here. They’re always getting losted.” We all knew what he meant, but my mother looked puzzled.

“But, Quinn, I didn’t see any stray dogs,” said Mom.

“Oh, I didn’t *see* any losted dogs, Mom, but I saw lots of signs about them.” Quinn replied. “Dog signs here; dog signs there; dog signs everywhere. People have lots more losted dogs around here than they do back home.”

Back in Spring Valley, dogs do get lost occasionally. And, sometimes worried owners do put up missing-pet posters on telephone poles. But, it’s not an everyday occurrence. From what Quinn said, things were different around here.

“Did you notice any of those posters, Mom?” I asked.

“Now that you mention it, maybe Quinn is right,” said Mom. “I didn’t think about it at the time, but I suppose there *were* quite a few missing-dog posters.”

Suddenly the wheels in my brain began to turn. “Maybe it’s just a coincidence,” I said, “but this morning at breakfast our waitress was in tears because *her* dog was stolen.”

Quinn's eyes widened. "Do you think there really are dog-stealers around here?" he asked.

"I don't know, Quinn," I answered. "But I intend to find out."

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

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