

MYSTERY
RYDERS #3

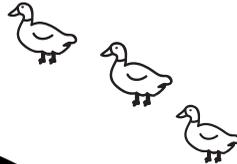
The
Duckmaster
Disaster



by
Criswell & Carli
Freeman

Sample Chapters

The
Duckmaster
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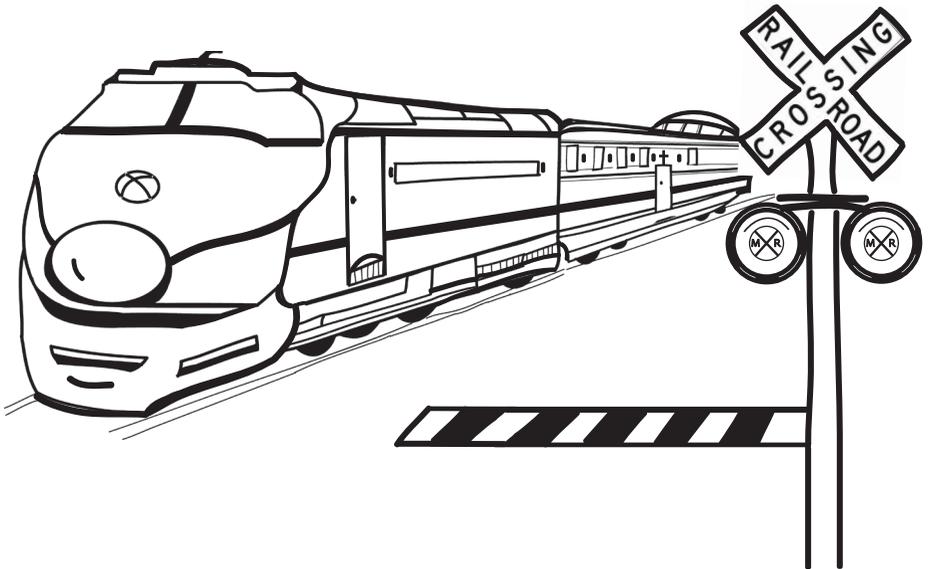


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THE
Mystery
Riders

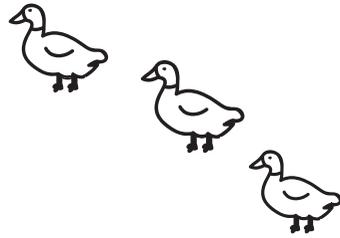


Hello again! My name is Mary Catharine Ryder, but everybody calls me May. I'm twelve, and I live on a train some of the time. The rest of the time, I live at 4722 Bluefield Court in Spring Valley, Missouri.

I live with my dog, my two parents, and my two brothers, Hutson and Quinn. My older brother, Hut, is fourteen and very tall. Quinn is six and kind of short. My mother's name is Catharine, and she still calls my father John.

But, most people know my dad as Jonathan Ryder, world-famous mystery writer. A few months ago, when my father got tired of traveling by airplane, his publisher said, "Forget the plane and take a train!"

Now, we travel in a private passenger train car that's big enough to carry our whole family. Some people call us the mystery riders, since we ride across America while Dad writes mysteries. But, we're also the *Mystery Ryders*, since we discover *real* mysteries along the way. Like this one...



CHAPTER ONE



Daily Duck Parade

“Dad a duckmaster?” I asked.

“That’s right. Dad has agreed to lead a duck parade,” Hut said.

“What’s a duckmaster?” asked Quinn. “And where’s the parade?”

“The parade is in the lobby of the Downtown Drake Hotel in Memphis,” said Mom. “It’s where we’ll be staying for the next few days.”

“Do you mean ducks get to live inside a fancy hotel?” I asked. By now, I was curious.

“Yes,” Mom said. “Your father will be the guest of honor at a mystery writers’ convention being held at the Downtown Drake. As their special guest, Dad has been invited to lead a little line of ducks through the grand hotel lobby until the ducks finally waddle into a lovely fountain.”

“Ducks are a tradition at the Downtown Drake,” Hut said. “I’ve read all about them. These famous ducks are a huge tourist attraction.”

“Does Dad have to waddle like a duck when he leads the parade?” Quinn asked.

“No, Quinn,” said Hut, trying not to laugh at our little brother. “Dad will walk normally, and the ducks will waddle behind him down a long, red carpet.”

“Surely your father won’t have too much trouble being a duckmaster for just one day,” said Mom, “since the Downtown Drake ducks are very well trained.”

“Do the ducks get their own hotel rooms?” Quinn was quite excited.

“I bet they do, Quinn,” I teased.

DAILY DUCK PARADE

“Actually, May, you’re right,” said Hut. “They do have their own rooms—but they’re on the rooftop of the hotel, ten stories high. The ducks live in their very own ‘palace,’ and they have their very own human who takes good care of them. The caretaker is actually called the duckmaster. It sounds like a funny job, but it’s serious work.”

“Okay kids,” said Mom. “Memphis in the morning, bright and early. It’s time for bed now.”

I wondered if I would ever get to sleep thinking about tomorrow morning, when we would be riding to Memphis on our train.

CHAPTER TWO



Mystery in Memphis

The next morning, when we arrived at the Spring Valley station, our engineer, Mr. Owens, had our train ready to roll. Hut and I climbed on board and immediately went to the kitchen to fix ourselves some breakfast.

MYSTERY IN MEMPHIS

While we sat down to enjoy our cereal, Quinn raced through the train's narrow hallway, chasing our dog Fudge from room to room. The squeals from an energetic six-year-old and the yips from our favorite cocker spaniel let me know that both of them were having a good time.

In a few minutes, my little brother ran past the dining-room table with something small and soggy in his hand.

"Yuck!" he shouted as he squeezed past Mom and tossed his gooey blob into the kitchen trashcan.

"Quinn," I said, "what was that?"

"I'm not telling," he said. "And, you can't make me because I've already thrown it away."

"Oh, come on, Quinn," I said. "If you don't tell me, I'll just go into the kitchen and dig it out of the trashcan myself."

"Well, I didn't eat it," Quinn quickly said. "I just tasted it."

"But, what is *it*?" I asked, this time more firmly.

“A dog biscuit,” he said casually, as if nibbling dog food was the most normal thing in the world.

“Are you serious?” I asked. “You actually put one of Fudge’s dog biscuits in your mouth?”

Quinn said nothing. But, his mischievous little smile let me know that he was, indeed, guilty of taste-testing pet food.

“Quinn,” I asked, “why would you do that? It’s not people food.”

“But, Fudge is family. He’s like people to me,” Quinn explained. “Fudge likes his new dog biscuits so much that I wanted to see if they were as good as he makes ’em look.”

“Well,” I asked the obvious question, “was it any good?”

“Yuck!” was all he said. Then, Quinn turned and ran down the hall.

While the dog biscuit drama was unfolding, Hut noticed nothing because he was looking intently at his tablet. My older brother had a serious look on his face.

Finally, Hut announced: “They’ve got trouble

MYSTERY IN MEMPHIS

at the Downtown Drake Hotel.”

“What kind of trouble?” I asked.

“Last night,” Hut explained, “somebody stole their most famous duck from the ‘palace’ on the rooftop. The duck’s name is Mr. Mickey, and he’s the mallard who leads the whole parade down to the fountain every day. From what I can tell, most of Memphis is upset by the news.”

“Why would anybody want to steal a duck?” I asked.

“Who knows? Maybe when we get there, we can learn more about it,” Hut replied.

I hoped Hut was right. And, I secretly wished that Memphis might have another mystery waiting for us.

CHAPTER THREE



Welcome to Memphis!

Our train stopped at the busy station in downtown Memphis. We walked to a nearby parking lot where, almost like magic, an official-looking driver pulled up in a shiny black van with gold cursive writing on the side. The passenger door flung open, and a cheerful young woman hopped out, waved, and walked up to us.

WELCOME TO MEMPHIS!

“Welcome to Memphis!” she exclaimed. “I’m Janie Jackson, Director of Public Relations at the Downtown Drake Hotel. We’re so glad you’re paying us a visit.”

The uniformed driver took care of our luggage while we said goodbye to Fudge, who was staying on the train with Mr. Owens.

Dad stopped to give Mr. Owens our hotel-room number at the Downtown Drake.

“Call us if you—or Fudge—need anything,” Dad said.

“And here’s a basket of goodies for you, Mr. Owens,” said Janie Jackson. “Mr. Ryder’s publisher told us that you prefer to sleep on board the train.”

Janie reached for the basket, “So, our hotel’s catering crew sent you these fresh-baked cakes and cookies. They even added homemade dog biscuits for Fudge.”

Janie Jackson seemed to know all about us. She was well-informed about Mr. Owens, and she even remembered our dog.

“Mr. Owens,” interrupted Quinn. “Would you mind saving one of those dog biscuits for me? I’d like to give it to Fudge when I get back.”

Surely Quinn wasn’t planning another taste test. Was he?

“Oh, and one more thing, Mr. Owens,” said Janie Jackson. “Expect a special delivery this afternoon. Our hotel is sending you a five-course dinner including their specialty, Memphis barbeque.”

“You can save some of *that* for me,” teased Dad.

Janie jumped in the van beside Mom, while we three kids slid in behind them. Dad rode up front and waved to Mr. Owens as we left. We then headed straight for the fabulous Downtown Drake.

“We’re happy you decided to visit Memphis,” said Janie. “Mr. Ryder is the highlight of the mystery writers’ convention.”

Dad didn’t say much, so my mother did the talking for him.

WELCOME TO MEMPHIS!

“It’s an honor for us to be here, Janie,” said Mom. “We’re looking forward to our stay.”

“Miss Janie,” interrupted Quinn. “I really wanna see the ducks.”

“Oh, gosh, the ducks...” Janie hesitated.

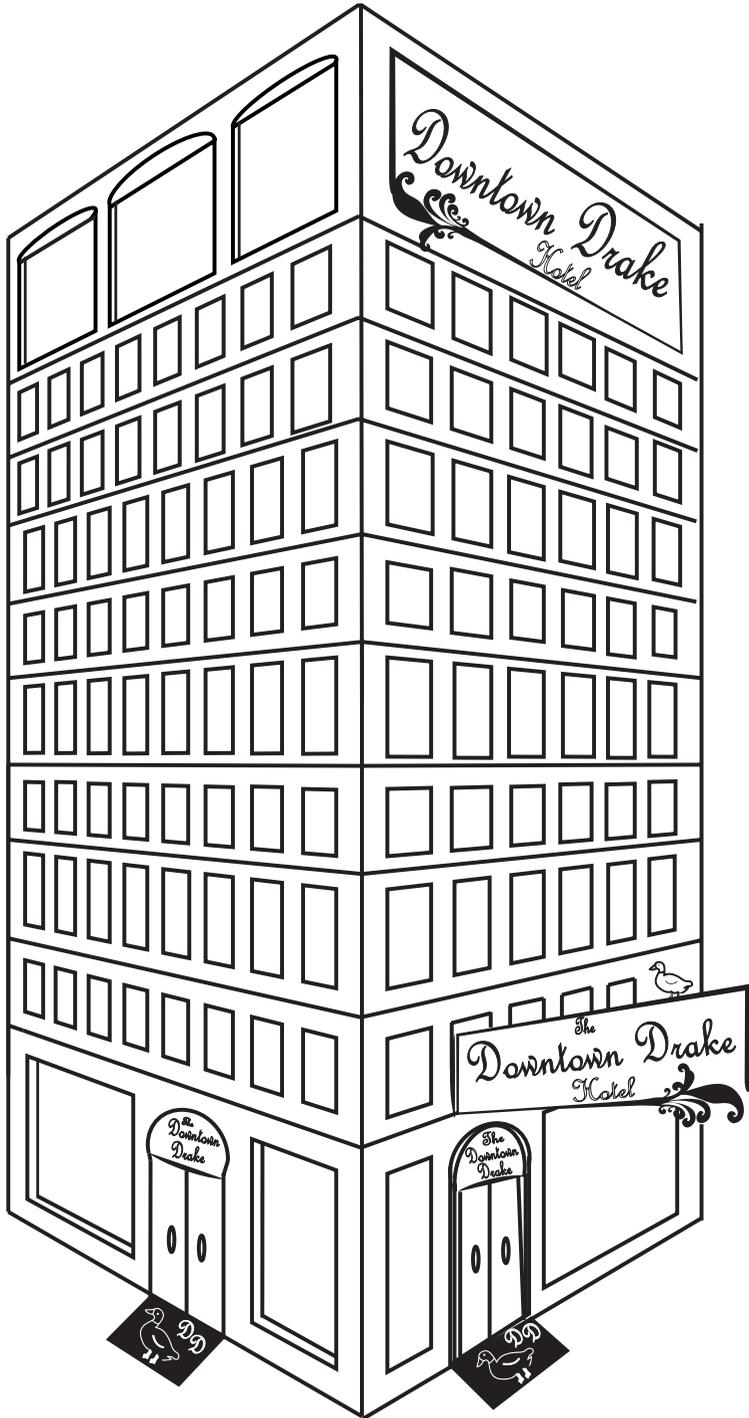
Dad suddenly remembered, too.

“Hut says that one of the ducks was stolen,” said Dad.

“It’s true, Mr. Ryder. It’s terrible!” said Janie. “Mr. Mickey, our most famous duck, was stolen last night. Every television station in town has sent reporters over. They’ve parked news trucks all around the front of the hotel and set up cameras and microphones everywhere.”

By now, Janie’s cheerful smile had turned into a frown.

“Unfortunately, I’m the one who has to answer all the questions from the press,” said Janie. “So I’ll be busy giving interviews this afternoon. I’m really sorry I won’t be able to tour you around Memphis.”



WELCOME TO MEMPHIS!

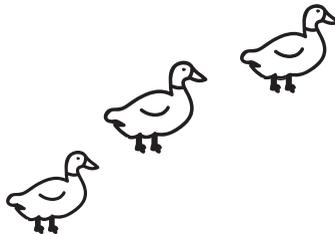
Sooner than we expected, the Downtown Drake Hotel came into view.

It was a grand, old building, very elegant and very stylish. But, in front of the hotel, television trucks were squeezed into almost every parking space, and people were scurrying across the sidewalks.

Janie had been right: The missing duck was a big deal in Memphis.

As we walked through the lobby, we had to step over thick, black cables and cords that were connected to bright lights and oversized cameras. Nearby, anxious news crews were standing around waiting for Janie to appear.

Janie Jackson was about to become the most widely watched hotel spokesperson in Memphis.



THE MYSTERY RYDERS

That night, I had a hard time falling asleep again. Of course, I was excited to be in a different town, seeing different sights. But, that wasn't the only reason I was wide awake.

You see, when we arrived at the hotel, Quinn went straight to the gift shop and discovered Elvis Presley. Thanks to thousands of tiny plastic statues in the store, my little brother became quite interested in this man who wore sparkling outfits and wiggled while he sang.

Elvis, Elvis everywhere...



WELCOME TO MEMPHIS!

So, long after the lights were turned out in our hotel room that night, Quinn lay awake on his rollaway bed, listening to the only song his new Elvis statue played whenever he pressed its shiny silver belt buckle. The song went something like this:

 *You ain't nothin' but a hound dog,* 
Cryin' all the time.

“Quinn, aren’t there any more songs that statue can sing?” I asked.

“Nope. Only one. Do you know any more?” Quinn asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m not an Elvis expert.”

“Well, that’s okay, May,” said Quinn. “Maybe Mom will buy you your own statue. They’ve got tons more in the gift shop. Every Elvis sings a different song.”

THE MYSTERY RYDERS

Quinn must've thought I wanted more Elvis music. But, what I actually wanted was some sleep.

Then, Quinn began to sing the one song that, by now, he had memorized:

♪ *You ain't nothin' but a hound dog,* ♪
 Cryin' all the time.

Quinn mumbled the same words over and over until finally my little brother sang himself to sleep. A few minutes later, I drifted off to dreamland myself.

But, in the middle of the night, I was awakened by an unusual murmuring that was a cross between a hum and a whisper. At first I had no idea what it was, but I soon figured it out...

Quinn was singing Elvis's "Hound Dog" in his sleep!

CHAPTER FOUR



Man in the Dark Suit

The next morning, our whole family went down to the hotel café for breakfast. By the time we finished our meal, things were getting pretty crazy in the lobby.

Three different TV crews had arrived from three different stations. Every channel started setting up its own on-the-scene production studio. Spotlights were beaming, and TV reporters were whisking around with microphones in their hands and cameras near their faces.

As the official spokesperson for the Downtown Drake Hotel, Janie Jackson was the only approved source of information about the missing duck. So, every reporter wanted to talk with her.

During all the commotion, a serious-looking man in a dark suit walked up and tapped Janie on the shoulder. Both Hut and I took notice.

“Hut,” I whispered. “Something’s up. That guy who’s talking to Janie is wearing an earpiece, which means he’s either listening to music or he’s a member of the security squad. And, I don’t think he’s interested in music right now.”

Hut nodded. “I agree. He’s probably the hotel detective.”

“I didn’t know hotels *had* detectives,” I said.

“Big hotels do,” Hut replied.

Hut and I watched with great fascination, soaking in the scene. When Janie finished, we walked over and asked how she was doing.

“I’m a little tired,” she sighed. “I haven’t eaten yet. But, in about an hour, I’m supposed to

meet my fiancé for lunch. Until then, I'll have to settle for a quick cup of coffee. You guys want to join me? They have hot cocoa and complimentary cookies.”

Of course, Hut and I jumped at the offer of free cookies. And we definitely wanted to hear about Mr. Mickey. So we accepted Janie's invitation and followed her into the café, where she began to tell us about the crime.

Janie told us that on the night of the duck-napping, a person with a stolen pass-key went to the roof of the Downtown Drake. Security cameras showed that the crook was wearing a bright-yellow raincoat. To hide his identity, he had pulled a baseball cap down low over his eyes.

The thief must have known quite a bit about the Downtown Drake's security system, because not a single camera got a clear picture of his face. But, once the duck-napper got onto the roof, security cameras did capture video of the criminal going directly to Mr. Mickey's cage.

The famous waterfowl was coaxed into a small pet-carrier, which the crook quickly covered with a dark cloth. The crook then took the service elevator to the ground floor and walked out of the hotel. When last seen on camera, the duck-grabber was strolling casually away from the Downtown Drake with the caged bird.

When Janie finished describing the duck-napping, she sighed.

“I know he’s only a duck, so it’s not like this is the crime of the century. But, why would anybody want to take Mr. Mickey?” she asked.

I’d wondered the same thing.

“Plenty of reasons,” offered Hut. “I think an animal-rights protester would do it. Or, an angry employee here at the Downtown Drake might want to mess things up. Or maybe the crook plans to treat the missing duck like a missing person and ask your hotel for money as a reward. Anything is possible.”

“I guess you’re right,” said Janie. “Anything

is possible. But, today just about everything seems absolutely impossible.”

She sounded very tired and a bit discouraged, so I decided it was time for some positive input.

“Well, Janie, maybe it’s not how you wanted to become a star, but at least you’re famous now,” I said.

Janie thought about that for a moment, but before she could say anything, the man in the dark suit—the same guy I’d sized up as the Secret-Service-type—walked up to our table.

In the lobby, he’d been all business, but now he seemed more at ease.

Mister dark suit said, “Hey, Janie, it’s been quite a day. I don’t know how you made it through all those interviews. Are you okay?”

“Thanks for asking, Steve,” said Janie. “I am tired, but otherwise I’m fine. By the way, I’d like you to meet two of our guests, Mary and Hutson Ryder. Their father is Jonathan Ryder, the guest of honor at the mystery writers’ convention.”

Janie gestured to the man and said, “May and Hut, I’d like you to meet Steve Strong.”

Mr. Strong appeared to be about fifty years old, with just a touch of gray in his hair. He stood straight as an arrow and turned toward Hut and me.

“Nice to finally meet you,” he said. “I’ve had my eye on both of you. And I’ve been watching the rest of your family, too. You see, it’s my job. I’m the head of hotel security.”

“You must’ve had a very busy day,” I said.

“You’re right, May,” said Mr. Strong. “I haven’t slowed down since the duck disappeared. To make matters worse, I’m short-handed here at the hotel, and the Memphis police say they have bigger crimes to solve than a missing mallard.”

“But I thought Mr. Mickey was big news here in Memphis,” said Hut.

“Well, it’s big news in town, for sure,” replied Mr. Strong, “but the police officers tell me their main job is to protect people, not ducks. So, I guess I’ll be solving this one alone.”

My heart began racing at the idea that Mr. Strong really could use our help with his hotel detective work.

“Unfortunately,” said Mr. Strong, “I don’t have any clues right now. To be honest, I have no answers, and I’m not even sure if I know what the questions are.”

Janie offered a suggestion.

“Why don’t you talk to May and Hut’s dad?” she said. “Since Mr. Ryder is here for our mystery writers’ convention, I bet he’s got plenty of good ideas about crime-solving.”

I glanced over at Hut, who sent a knowing look back at me. We both knew that our dad was far better at writing mysteries than solving them. But, we wisely kept our opinions to ourselves.

Mr. Strong spoke next.

“What a great idea!” he said. “Do you kids think your dad might be interested in hearing about the duck-napping? Maybe he could give me a few tips.”

Before Hut could say a word, I jumped in, “I’m sure Dad would be happy to help, Mr. Strong.”

I told the truth, since Dad *is* willing to help people. What I didn’t say was that sometimes my father is more willing than able. Anyhow, if Mr. Strong wanted to get my father involved, I wasn’t about to stop him.

At that moment, Janie’s phone rang. Her fiancé was waiting out front, so she excused herself and left us alone with Steve Strong. In a few moments, I got my nerve up and made a suggestion.

“Mr. Strong,” I said, “Dad is really busy with the mystery writers’ convention. But, Hut and I are available and happy to help, too. If you give us a few more facts about your case, we could tell Dad all about it tonight when we see him for dinner.”

Steve Strong thought for a moment.

“Well, I don’t suppose it could do any harm,” he said. “But the best way to tell this story is with pictures. If you want, we could go to my office and take a look at the security videos.”

MAN IN THE DARK SUIT

Of course, Hut and I jumped at the chance to see the hotel's security headquarters. So, Hut phoned Mom and told her that we had a terrific way to spend our day—you know, one of those “great learning opportunities” that doesn't come along very often.

“Mom,” said Hut, “you won't believe the great field trip May and I have been invited to take. I'll tell you more later but just wanted you to know that we'll be in the hotel security office for awhile... No...we're not in trouble or anything. We're just doing some homework for Dad.”

Hut always knows the right things to say.

With Mom's permission, we soon found ourselves following Steve Strong down a long hallway, past a locked door, through another passageway, into a small room that contained at least a dozen video screens.

As we walked in, we noticed a guard dressed in a dark-colored uniform with bright-gold letters on his pocket that spelled “Security.”

The guard was watching several of the screens very carefully. Each screen showed a different location either inside or around the Downtown Drake Hotel.

Mr. Strong nodded to the security man then guided us into his private office. It was a spotless room with a neat desk, a sleek computer, two phones, and an extra-large video screen on the wall.

Steve Strong sat down at his desk. He reached for a remote-control device and made the screen come alive.

“What I’m about to show you,” he said, “is one of the craziest things I’ve seen in twenty years of detective work.”

That's The End of This Sample

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