



Riley and Noah's quest for a canine companion takes a turn when they discover the town they're visiting once had a camp for prisoners of war. When suspicion and sabotage take place, the kids are on the case. An adventure in trusting God through disappointment and danger.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Road Trip!

**"H**ow about Bongo?" suggested my younger brother, Noah.

"Or maybe Chester," I said.

"Chester?" exclaimed Noah. "What kind of name is that for a dog?"

"Okay," I said, "how about Toodles? Or Bitsy Boo? Oooh, I know—Sir Ruffalot."

"Riley! Would *you* want to be called Sir Ruffalot?" Noah ran his hands through his sandy hair, which is clipped short in back but grows longer in front. (Noah always says he's a regular kid in the front, soldier's kid in the back.)

I giggled, and Noah chucked a fluffy dog toy in my direction. I chucked it back.

"Okay, you two!" warned Grandma Suzie from the front seat of her blue Chevy. But her voice was smiling. In the rearview

mirror, her eyes darted toward us from behind her purple glasses.

That October day was Alabama gorgeous—cool but not cold, and no need to run the air conditioning in the Chevy, for sure. In fact, my sweatshirt felt pretty good.

Grandma Suzie had her driver's window down a couple of inches "to catch the country air," she said. As we cruised down the interstate, the breeze was flinging her short white hair in more directions than ever.

"We don't have to choose a name this minute," Grandma said. "I'm not even sure I'm going to get the dog."

"Of course you're going to get the dog, Grandma. He's adorable!"

Grandma's country air made me reach for a hair tie in my bag. My curly red mop probably looked like I'd stuck my hand on one of those static electricity plasma balls at the science museum.

"His picture *is* really cute, isn't it?" she said, smiling.

"Yeah, makes me wonder what his owner is up to," added Noah. "Who gets rid of a dog that cool?"

I had to admit that had crossed my mind too. What kind of strange person could this owner be?

"She sounded very nice on the phone," said Grandma Suzie.

Nice or not, the three of us were driving to a small town in Alabama called Longfield to check it out.

Actually, my dad is responsible for Grandma Suzie considering a dog, even though he's far away right now in Somewhere. His Army unit got deployed, and we don't always know where he is because of their secret missions. I'm proud of him, but I miss him every single day. Every night I ask God to protect him and bring him home safe and *soon*—it's my opinion that

nine months and twelve days is long enough.

One day when Mom and I were video chatting with Dad, Mom said something like, “I think Mom is a little bored, now that she’s retired.” (She meant *her* mom, which is Grandma Suzie.)

Grandma was our middle school librarian for like thirty years, and always said she helped raise half the population of east Alabama, where we live. Actually, that might be true, now that I think about it.

And I wanted Grandma Suzie to be happy. I really did. But I did *not* think she would like goat yoga or whatever it is that bored grandmas do.

“How can Grandma be bored?” I asked. “She picks up P.J. from marching band every day, and she takes me to gymnastics and Noah to soccer. Plus, she gets us to school early for choir and video club.”

“Still, I feel she needs something all her own.” Mom wasn’t letting this go.

That’s when Dad had his great idea. Although he might have been joking because he chuckled when he said, “Maybe Suzie needs a dog.”

“Oh, Dad, that’s brilliant!” I said.

A dog would be perfect for Grandma Suzie! And besides, Grandma just lives one street over from us, so if she got a dog, he would practically be ours too.

We used to have a dog—Simba. Technically, he belonged to our whole family, but I always knew he was my dog. When I was two and it was naptime, he would let me use him for my pillow. And when I broke my arm on the last day of third grade and couldn’t swim or do gymnastics that whole summer, Simba

would sit with me and put his head on my lap while I watched everyone else. I cried in my closet, holding his favorite Squeaky Squirrel toy for like three hours, when he died last year. Sometimes I still expect to see him waiting by his food bowl.

And then my dad's Army unit got deployed, and then my Great-Grandma Addie passed away. Life without all of them seems like a desert sometimes. I can't do much to change the US Army's mind or bring back Great-Grandma Addie, but I keep hoping that someday Mom will give in and let us have another dog. Squeaky Squirrel stays in my room and reminds me to keep trying.

Meanwhile, a dog at Grandma Suzie's would be almost as good!

After we hung up the video chat with Dad, I briefed Noah and my older sister P.J. on the idea and they were absolutely on board. Operation Perfect Pooch was activated!

We mentioned it to Grandma Suzie, and she didn't say no, so we took that as a yes.

Step one, check!

Then P.J.'s friend said her great-grandma's dog needed a new home.

Step two, check!

P.J. had a picture of the little guy, and that did it. Grandma Suzie called the friend's great-grandma, who said we could come and meet him. Then we hit a small hitch: The owner was two hours away from Sandersville, where we live.

But a small hitch was not going to stop us! Phillips Intermediate School (where I'm in sixth grade and Noah is in fifth) was out for a teacher workday that Friday, so Noah and I talked Grandma Suzie into a road trip.

Initial operations commenced, check!

Noah was double excited because he was working on earning a Master Filmmaker Badge in video club at school. He had to shoot video clips and then edit them together with background music to make a funny story. He's always writing Director Notes in a notebook now, and he was sure he could find some good clips on our road trip.

P.J. had a student retreat with the high schoolers at church that day, so she couldn't go. But she gave us strict instructions to keep Grandma Suzie out of trouble.

Now, it's not that Grandma would get into much *actual* trouble. Probably. She's traveled to fourteen different countries, including Australia, and she knows how to handle lost passports and—oh yeah—that whole kangaroo stampede thing.

But if you want to know the truth about it, road trips with Grandma hardly ever turn out like you expect. Noah and I would be her safety net.

But I should have thought of this detail—who would be ours?







## CHAPTER 2

# Where the Locals Like to Eat

So, there we were, catching the country air in Grandma's blue Chevy. The back seat between Noah and me was occupied by a laundry basket full of doggie treats, chew toys (including Squeaky Squirrel), and a new fuzzy blanket with paw prints stamped on it.

Our mission was almost complete. Just a few more miles and Operation Perfect Pooch would be a success.

"I'm hungry!" said Noah suddenly.

In addition to video club, Noah plays on the fifth-grade soccer team. Since the fall season started, it's like somebody flipped a switch to Hungry and forgot to turn it off. I thought about

messing with him about that, but I was also hungry. Instead, I said, “Me too.”

“Well, it *has* been a while since breakfast,” agreed Grandma Suzie, “and it’s good timing. Here’s our exit.”

She steered onto the off-ramp and then turned right, where a sign said County Road 97.

“Grandma, are you sure this is our exit?” I asked. “I don’t see a town.”

“Yeah, I don’t see anything but trees,” agreed Noah, “and a huge field of—whatever that is.”

“Looks like soybeans,” said Grandma. “They’ll be harvesting those soon. We’re supposed to stay on County Road 97 for five more miles before we get to Longfield. But maybe we’ll see a fun café along the way. You know, a place where the locals like to eat.”

“Uh, maybe like that one?” asked Noah, pointing to a building just ahead on the right.

It was a long, low building with lots of windows across the front, and it easily could have been a train car for passengers, except it was tinted blue. The red and white sign on the roof had an old-fashioned apron painted on it with the words “Dottie’s Diner.”

“A diner! Perfect!” said Grandma Suzie. She turned in and parked on the gravel lot. “It’s too early for the lunch crowd, but let’s see what’s on the menu.”

I unfolded out of the back seat, pulled my hair tie out, and shook out my arms and legs. “Whoa, this is one giant farm out here.”

On the right side of Dottie’s Diner was a field of—*oh fun!*—ready-to-pick pumpkins. It made me think of our field trip to Farmer Pete’s Pumpkin Patch when I was in kindergarten. On

the left side of the diner, brown plants that held white, fluffy balls were planted in neat rows. I was pretty sure it was cotton, and the gigantic green farm machine in the middle of the field made me think that a farmer would be harvesting the white fluff soon.

In the distance, tall trees hemmed in the edge of each field. The leaves on a few trees had just started thinking about doing their fall thing and morphing into red and yellow and orange.

### NOAH'S DIRECTOR NOTES:

- > Backgrounds = important for shooting videos
- > Farm fields can make cool backdrops.
- > Fall leaves could create some dramatic color.  
But not necessarily here. Maybe the leaves in some parts of the United States start to change in September and early October, but not in this part of Alabama. Our fall colors kick in about late October or early November, and sometimes it's not till Thanksgiving!<sup>1</sup>

By the diner's door sat a worn wooden bench next to a bunch of dried cornstalks, pumpkins, and yellow chrysanthemums. A friendly stuffed scarecrow wearing overalls and an orange plaid shirt was propped on the bench. He was ready for conversation, I guess, because he was definitely *not* scaring the happy wooden crows perched around him.

Noah pulled out his phone, aimed it at the scarecrow, and narrated a clip for his video, which apparently will be about space invaders.

"Surprise encounter with alien from Saturn. Subject attempting

to blend in with local Earth citizens. Perfect clip for scene three.”

I ran to sit on the bench beside the scarecrow while Noah was still filming. I whispered in the scarecrow’s ear, then pretended to listen while he whispered in mine.

Noah narrated. “Contact made with Earth spy. Invasion postponed.”

“Come on, moviemakers!” called Grandma Suzie. “Thought you were hungry!”

She pulled open the diner door, which made a bell jingle overhead. We paraded into the long, narrow restaurant. More pumpkins and yellow chrysanthemums decorated the inside.

Grandma Suzie sniffed the air for her favorite aroma. “Mmm, coffee!”

I’ve never actually understood the fascination grown-ups have for coffee. But the cinnamon and bacon combination was pretty awesome!

Noah spotted his happy place right away. He held out his arms and walked zombie-style toward three pedestal cake stands perched on one end of a high counter that had stools. The counter stretched down the side of the diner opposite the windows. Clear glass domes protected a pie in one stand, a pink cake with white icing in another, and some kind of giant pastries—bear claws, maybe?—in another.

Noah reached the counter and grinned. “Yep, perfect!”

Grandma laughed. “Let’s at least sit down first.”

A waitress looked up from where she was pouring coffee for a customer at a table and smiled. “Sit anywhere you like,” she invited. “I’ll be right with y’all.”

She swept her hand to direct us toward the vinyl-covered

booths by the windows and the square tables that ran down the middle between the booths and the counter. The only other customers in there were a man sitting in the far back booth, texting on his phone, and the guy whose coffee the waitress was pouring.

I pointed. "Grandma, window?"

Grandma Suzie nodded and headed for a booth that was a couple of tables away from the Coffee Guy. She slid into one side of the booth, and Noah and I scooted into the other side.

The waitress bustled over, carrying a round tray that held paper menus and three short glasses filled with water. She was wearing a red-and-white apron like the one on the outdoor sign. She was maybe a little younger than Grandma Suzie, and kind of sturdy around the middle. Her hair was black with a little gray, pulled up in back with a big clip. A yellow pencil was perched behind her ear.

"Welcome to Dottie's," said the waitress. Her face was lit with a smile as she set a water glass in front of each of us.

"Are you Dottie?" I asked.

"I am!" she said, her face lighting up even more. She reminded me of one of those lamps you can touch to make the light bright, brighter, or brightest. "Are y'all in town for the reunion?"

Grandma Suzie cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. "Reunion?" She glanced at Noah and me. "We don't know about a reunion."

Uh-oh. Grandma could get off on the wrong mission if we weren't careful.

"No, we're here about a dog," I said quickly.

Dottie chuckled and handed each of us a menu. "Sorry," she said. "I just assumed. We're expecting visitors through here today, on their way to the POW reunion in Longfield."

I frowned. “Wait, I thought POW stood for Prisoner of War.”

“You’re right, it does,” answered Dottie. “It’s a World War II thing.”

Now *that* was interesting. World War II for me is what Mom calls a “special interest pursuit,” ever since I won a contest with an essay about my Great-Grandma Addie and how she built B-25 airplanes during the war.

At the table behind Dottie, the Coffee Guy turned in our direction like he was listening to our conversation. He had been slouching in his chair, but now he sat up straighter.



He was kind of a young man wearing jeans, a denim work shirt with a brown vest, and beat-up cowboy boots. Behind his trim beard, his frowning face looked like a thunderstorm. Coffee Guy was unhappy about something, for sure. Maybe he had something against World War II. Or reunions. Or maybe he was just hiding a dark secret that made him grumpy.

I turned back to Dottie. "I've been doing research on World War II lately," I said.

Dottie's face lit up to the brightest setting. "Very nice!"

She rested her serving tray on the edge of our table and leaned her short self toward Noah and me, like she was going to tell us a secret.

"So," said Dottie, "did you ever wonder what the American troops and their Allies did with the enemy prisoners they captured during World War II?"

"I never thought about it," I said. "Maybe they took them to their Army bases in Europe?"

"Hmm," said Grandma Suzie. "I don't think America had that kind of real estate overseas."

Dottie nodded and pointed at Grandma Suzie. "You're right," she said. "My dad fought in France during the war, and he told me they made some temporary places for prisoners over there. But when the Allies kept capturing more and more prisoners, they needed more space."

Dottie swung herself around and sat right down in the booth next to Grandma Suzie. She was on a roll now.

"Scuse me, hon," she said.

Grandma broke into a surprised smile but scooted over to make room.



“See,” Dottie continued, “America was sending troops and supplies over to Europe and other places on Liberty Ships. And we started bringing some of the prisoners to the United States in the empty ships.”

“And put them where?” asked Noah. “In the jails or something?”

“You would think so,” said Dottie with a nod. “But no, they needed a better plan because there were hundreds of thousands of prisoners being captured. So, the government started building camps all over the United States to house the POWs—”

“Like Camp Longfield,” said a man’s gruff voice.

All four of us jumped. Who had spoken?

It was Coffee Guy.

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