

Chapter 1

THE ROAD TO CLIFFSIDE



Most people think all kittens are adorable. That's what I used to think. But not anymore. I should probably start at the beginning.

My grandfather and grandmother live in a small house in a colorful little town by the sea. Imagine with me, a place where houses, big and small, rise from the sea, climbing to the top of steep cliffs. The houses glow in the bright sunshine, painted in every color you can imagine. It's as though a colossal rainbow wave washed over the cliffs, leaving behind a town of cotton candy dreams.

Too bad it's a two-day car ride to get there. But it's totally worth it because colorful Cliffside is a magical place where adventures take me by surprise every time I visit. Each and every July, for as long as I can remember, my family takes the long road trip to Cliffside for a visit. Mom and Dad usually stay for a few days, then leave me with my grandparents for the rest of the month.

But where are my manners?

Hi! My name is Crissy. And boy. Or girl. Do I have an adventure story for you! This year, my visit to Cliffside was even more colorful than usual. Colorful as in exciting. That was mostly because of two unusual kittens. Actually, there are more than just two kittens. It's a little complicated. Everyone likes kittens, right? But this is NOT some purring little kitten tale. You'll see.

This year on my journey to Cliffside, I'm keeping track of my trip in a journal. It was my mom's idea. I had never kept a journal before. At first, it sounded like a lot of work. But Mom knows stuff, so I gave it a try. One of the things she knows about me is that writing in the car for very long would make me carsick. Yuck!

My cousin, who has the same misery, got right to the point when he said, 'I feel like I'm going to puke my head off when I ride in the car too long.' It's not quite that bad for me. But I do have to be careful about things like reading and typing in the car.

Mom hurled the answer to my writing in the car carsick concern even before I asked. Keep it short and sweet. That works for me. My journal can also record, so I can just talk and it will do the writing. It sounds like a good idea. Right? The problem is, I can chatter away a mile a minute and end up on a totally different topic before I'm done. I like to type. Short and sweet. And a lot of little is a lot.

Bonus points! I find that writing stuff down can be helpful in a lot of ways. If you have a busy brain like I do, it helps with remembering important things. Other people write to get their feelings out. That sounds better than stuffing them down in some deep and dark hole in their soul. Okay, let's move along.

Day one of a long car ride is the worst. I have no brothers or sisters to bug me. Or keep me company. I love to read. But reading in the car makes me. Well. You know the answer to that one. It's the same with video games and movies. So, I fidget and stare out the window. Or, I daydream.

Oh! Just to make things clear about a brother or sister. I actually do have a brother. But my brother Jack is not with us on this trip. He's staying back home with a friend because of some special football camp. My brother is a couple of years older than me. He's good at sports. Actually, Jack is basically good at everything. Sports, math, science, making friends. My big brained brother is actually some kind of computer genius. He's won awards and things. I think he has some kind of patent or something. Good for him.

Even if he was here in the car, Jack wouldn't be much company. He recently got his hands on a cool virtual reality headset and a bunch of games, which he bought with his own money. My bro is even good at finding good jobs. Most of the time, Jack is also good about sharing things. I'm not totally sure how sharing his VR set on a car ride would work out. But, I'm pretty sure, if Jack was here, the question of me borrowing the headset would go like this.

I would ask, ever so nicely, "May I use your VR headset, Jack?"

Jack would say, "Of course. Except then you would get VR sick."

"I'm pretty sure getting carsick doesn't mean a person will get VR sick."

"You are in a car. Do you want to risk it? Besides, you don't need VR. You have your Imagivacations. At least you will until you grow out of them."

Do you see how he changed the subject, sounded totally reasonable, and upset me all at the same time? I am NOT going to grow out of my Imagivacations. They usually sneak up on me, those make-believe worlds of IMAGIVACATION! The regular world kind of grows dim and

fades away until I find myself somewhere else. That's normal. Right? Daydreaming? Okay. I might have an overactive imagination to go along with the daydreaming. I'll share some of my Imagivacations with you. I mean, who wouldn't want to go on a magical imagination vacation?

By magical, I mean, extraordinary, which is so much better than extra ordinary.

Extra ordinary is basically a whole lot of ordinary. But if you stick the two words a little closer together, you get extraordinary. Remarkable. Exceptional. Outstanding. Tell me the truth. At the amusement park, or fair, or whatever, which ride do you want to go on? The extra ordinary regular old ride? Or the extraordinary ride? Oh, never mind. It's hard enough for me just to ride in a stupid car. Especially on an extra ordinary, very long car ride. Like this one.

Sorry. Sometimes the words just fall out before I have a chance to catch them. It's time to try typing again instead of yapping. Memories of my Imagivacations usually stick with me for a while. I should start writing them down. Wait!

What was that? It sounds so lonely, way out here, in the middle of nowhere. A train whistle is blowing, probably to warn an animal off the tracks. And what is this I see? We're about to go into a tunnel. Cool! Honk the horn, Dad! No honking? I am so bored. This sure is a long tunnel. Now, the light is fading away as the whooshing of air becomes the only sound to reach my distracted ears.

IMAGIVACATION! Operation Golddigger. The Gopher Guts Gang.

Look out, evil-doers everywhere. Special agent Crissy Crash is coming for you! Bad guys fear her name. Well, they do most of the time. At the moment, Crissy is tied up tight inside a speeding train. Stupid seat belt. Wait! What did the bad guy just say?

A bandit wearing a red bandana around his neck had an evil grin as he said, “The Big Cliff Bridge is broken. And that means Crissy Crash is heading for an extra big crash at the bottom of Big Cliff Canyon.”

The actual fight leading to Crissy’s unfortunate capture was epic. Bandits had stolen a small train. Not small as in tiny. It was a full-sized train. But it only had three cars, two train engines and only one freight car, with one engine pushing as the other pulled. Crissy’s helicopter drone dropped quietly toward the speeding train as she scratched her head, wondering why two engines were needed for just one boxcar. She looked again at her assignment sheet and decided she should actually read all the way through her mission reports before she left for a job.

To: Crissy Crash. Urgent. Bandits have taken the National Pacific gold train.

Your assignment: Get the gold back. Play nice with the two train engines. The boxcar is heavy with gold. You will need both of them to bring the gold back. There are 3 bandits on the train. Probably.

Of course! Gold is super heavy. Two engines were needed to get the heavy, gold carrying freight car up and over the mountains. She looked at the mission map. There was a railroad switch farther down the tracks. One set of tracks led to the bridge over Big Cliff Canyon, but there was a danger sign in bright red letters. DANGER. BROKEN BRIDGE. The other tracks led to Gopher Gulch and beyond. Headquarters believed the bandits had a hideout in the area. The train had already made it over the mountains and was on a downhill run, probably toward Gopher Gulch.

Crissy noticed movement in the front train engine car.

She took over control of the helicopter drone from the artificial intelligence. The high-tech drone was a marvel of science. Until it wasn't. For one thing, there are a bunch of gyroscopes to give the thing amazing stability. That sounds pretty good. Right?

The drone is, normally, super steady. Unless one of those gyroscopes stops working. Then, it's like, every gyroscope for yourself. Things can go crazy for a few moments until the main computer calms them all down and puts the brakes on Gyroscope 5. That one gyroscope, number 5, even has a nickname. Billy always wants to go for an extra spin or two when it gets the chance. You would think the people who buy expensive machines for the Agency would ask more questions. Like, why does one of the gyroscopes have a nickname?

Crissy's helicopter drone dropped toward the train and hovered a foot above the freight car. Crissy had Billy on her mind as she stepped down, but ignored the nervous feeling nibbling at her toes. Still, she breathed a sigh of relief when both feet hit the bouncing, rattling rail car, and the drone rose to hide in the clouds.

It was time to focus! Headquarters said there would only be three bad guys on the train. She patted her backpack filled with spy gadgets. Three bandits would not be a problem. But headquarters could, often as not, be wrong. She peeked in the window of the rear locomotive. No one was home. Good. Anyone in there would have seen her land. Everyone must be up in the front engine.

She slinked forward, to the edge of the freight car, and looked down at the coupler holding it to the forward locomotive. Even if she could break the freight car loose from the front engine, she would not be able to make a run for it. One train engine would not be strong enough to haul the heavy freight car back up and over the mountains. She would need the whole train. Too bad for the bad guys.

Crissy took a long look at the empty space between the freight car and the front engine. She took a few steps back and sprinted to make the long jump just as the train hit a big bump and the brakes squealed. Oh no! Crissy slid along the roof of the forward locomotive, unable to stop. When her slide finally slowed, she was looking in the front window of the engine car. And one of the bandits was looking back at her! The backpack full of secret agent gadgets had stopped her fall. That was good. But she was dangling from the backpack, which was hanging on a hook, and everything was bouncing.

The bandit's eyes grew wide, but he smiled an evil smile when he saw her situation, and said, "Look, boys! It's that famous secret agent girl, Crissy Crash. And she's come for a visit."

Crissy decided right then she should be more careful about letting news reporters take her picture. She wriggled out of her backpack and grabbed onto a metal thingy to swing into the locomotive cab. The five bad guys laid their playing cards down, their grim looks making it clear they had no desire for company. If only she had her bag of gadgets!

One of the robbers swung a board at Crissy. She ducked, but the guy coming from behind did not. Ouch! That must have hurt. Another one moved in to grab her, but she dodged to the side, pushing him into someone else. Both ended up on the ground, but quickly regained their feet. Crissy spun around the train cab, throwing punches and kicks, like a tiny tornado trapped inside a hurricane. But there were just too many bad guys.

And the bandits were happy to fight with Crissy Crash in order to keep all of that cash. That is pretty much exactly what one of them said.

Special Agent Crissy Crash, always the practical one, decided it was time to take a short break and come up with a better plan. She glanced at the open locomotive doorway. Two of the bandits

moved in to block it. Another grabbed a handful of her hair. Hey! That hurts! It was not long before she was tied up tight and could barely move. Stupid seat belt.

As Crissy struggled to get free, the train screeched to a stop at a railroad switch. Gopher Gulch was to the right. The tracks to the left led to the broken bridge over Big Cliff Canyon, and a very big crash.

The boss bandit laughed as he gave the order, “Disconnect the front engine. We are over the mountains and don’t need it anymore.” He then bowed toward Crissy, his face twisting into a sneer. “You can have this engine all to yourself for the rest of your short trip, secret agent girl. And we will be famous. The gang that crashed the famous Crissy Crash. Remember our name, special agent. We are the Gopher Guts Gang.”

One of the bandits took off his hat, scratched at a surprisingly thick tuft of hair on the top of his head, and said, “That don’t make no sense, boss. The bridge is broke. She won’t be around to remember nothing.”

The boss pointed at him and replied, “Good point, Pat. Too bad for you, Crissy Crash. I could say it’s nothing personal. But you wouldn’t want me to tell a lie, now, would you? Have yourself a nice trip. And an even nicer crash.”

Pat was laughing so hard he wound up rolling on the floor, saying, “Ha! Ha! Crissy Crash is going to crash.”

Crissy smirked at him and said, “As though I haven’t heard that one before. We’ll see who’s going to crash. Loosen these ropes, Pat, and I’ll give you a nice tap. Upside your head. Pat. Tap. Get it? Untie me. Or are you chicken?”

Pat had a very confused look on his face as he took a step toward Crissy. “I ain’t no chicken. How about we take this outside?”

The boss grabbed Pat's arm. "She's just trying to get loose. Get out there and switch the switch."

Pat gave Crissy a menacing look as he climbed down to work on the rail switch. The rest of the bandits unhooked the front train engine and sent it chugging toward the broken bridge over Big Cliff Canyon, with poor Crissy tied up on the floor! Then the bad guys switched the switch back and headed down the tracks toward Gopher Gulch, with all that gold!

The end of the line was coming for Crissy Crash.