

Chapter 1

Strange, Shiny Object

What's that? Right over there? Mozart, a white, fluffy dog, had never seen anything like it.

The small object was very shiny. At first, he sniffed it. Then he pawed it. Licked it. Shook it. Flung it. Buried it . . . and then dug it up again. It never moved. It never made a peep.

What was this strange object?

He picked it up in his mouth, deciding to take it home.

He only took a few steps when he heard, "Morning, Mo. What ya got there?"

It was Monta the Moose who gave Mo his nickname. Mo's real name was actually Mozart. He was named after a famous classical music composer. But Monta couldn't say the letter "z." So, after calling him Modart, Mogart, and Mofart (especially when Mo's stomach got upset), he just shortened it to Mo, and the nickname stuck.

Mo dropped the item on the ground.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

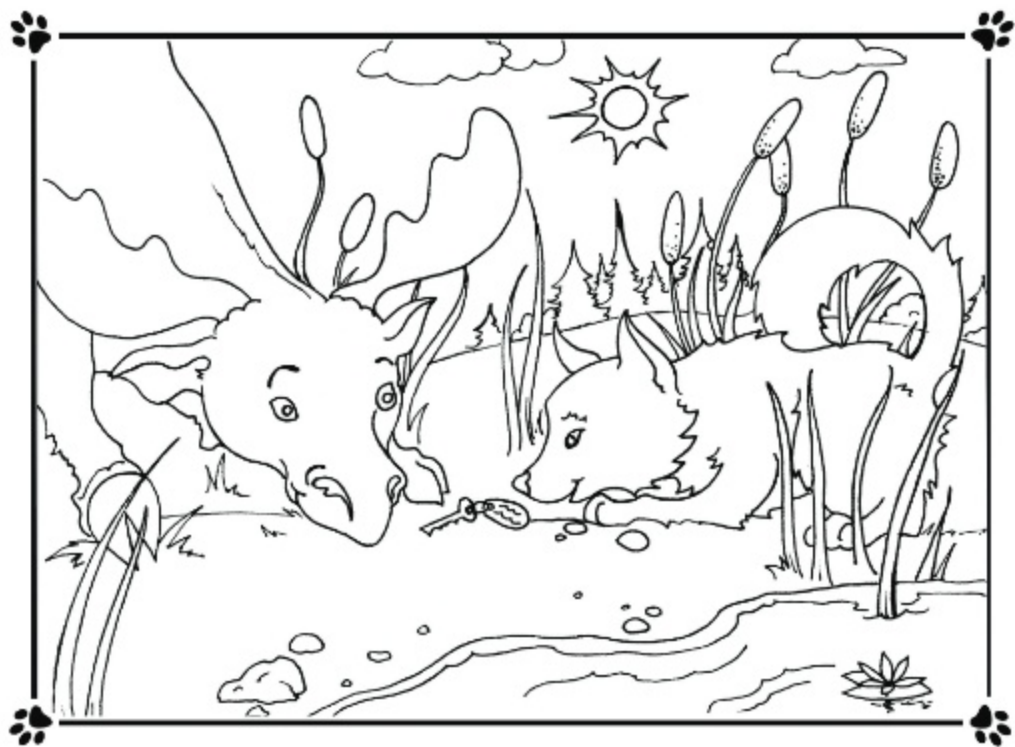
Monta looked at it from the left and then from the right. He tried chewing it but quickly spit it out. The surface was flat and smooth like ice after a gentle rain. But it had no flavor



and was attached to a jagged metal object.

“Look, there’s a word on it,” said Monta (one of the few animals who could read). He sounded out each letter.

“F-L-O-O-R-I-D-A-Y.”



He repeated it several times. They had never heard such a strange-sounding word.

“It’s a message,” said Monta. “A secret message. Maybe for someone smart like me!”

Mo started laughing.



“What’s so funny?” asked Monta. “I, unlike many animals, can read and solve hard math problems. One plus one equals two. Two plus two is four. Three plus three is six . . .”

Monta worked all the way up to seven plus seven before getting stuck. Although Mo liked Monta, he was always annoyed when Monta showed off.

“Fourteen,” said Mo impatiently. “Seven plus seven is fourteen. Now, any idea what this is?”

A bit embarrassed, Monta shook his head back and forth. “Not a clue.”

The curious pair showed the object to every creature they knew. Gray the wolf. Castor the beaver. Cross the fox. But by mid-afternoon, they were no further ahead in solving the mystery.

Tired from traveling all day, they finally stopped and rested by the ocean shore, wondering what they should do next.

Suddenly, several huge waves rushed ashore, completely drenching both animals.

Blue, an enormous whale, came as close to the shore as possible, lifting her huge head out of the deep ocean.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” she shouted.

Mo and Monta shook the salt water off their bodies.



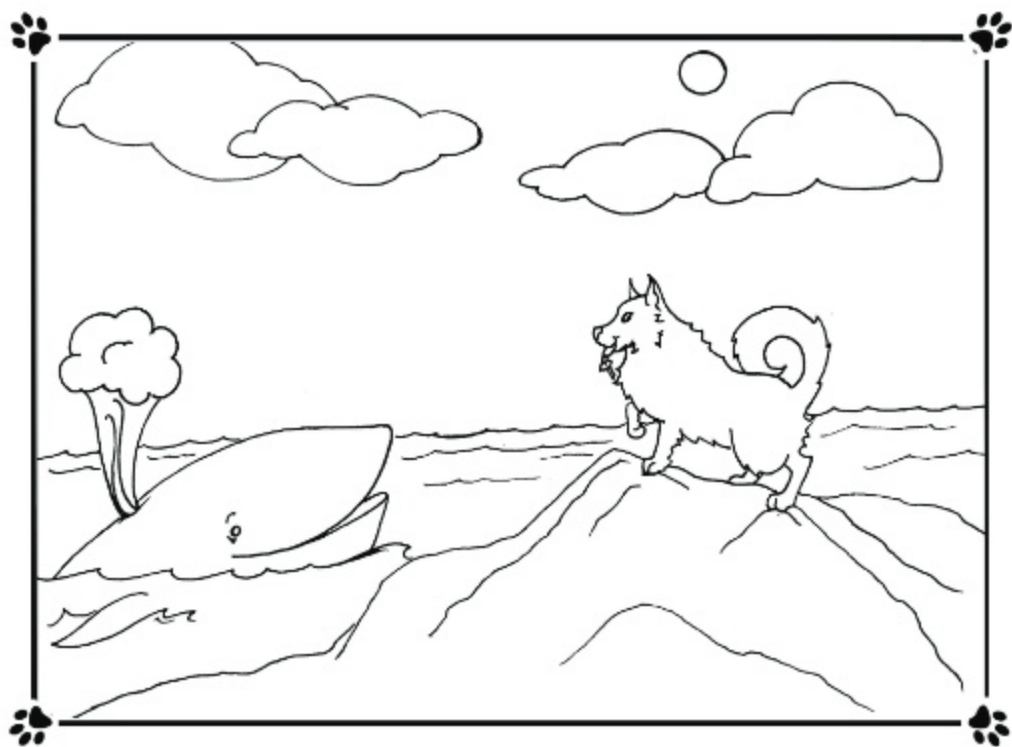
“Blue, can you give us some kind of a warning before you pop up like that?” complained Mo. “Geez, this salt water really tastes awful.”

“Sorry about that,” said Blue. “Big whales make big splashes. What’s that shiny thing next to you, Mo?”

“We don’t know,” said Mo after spitting out more salt water. “No one else does either. I found it this morning.”

“Can I see it?” asked Blue. “I probably know what it is. I’m very smart, you know.”

Mo clenched the shiny object with his teeth and climbed on



top of a giant rock near the shore. He dangled it from his mouth so Blue could take a better look at it.

“I know what that is!” said Blue. “It’s a key attached to a key chain. Humans use them. They collect things and lock them up in special places so no one else can use them. They don’t like sharing. Very selfish creatures, if you ask me.”

“What does the word on the keychain mean?” asked Mo.

“It’s a state that’s *waaaaay* south of here,” Blue said. “I think it’s in the Lower Forty-Eight, near New York. Or maybe Georgia.”

Mo and Monta were confused. What was a state? What did south mean? What was the Lower Forty-Eight? What was New York or Georgia? They had so many questions but mainly wanted to know what the key unlocked.

“Now that’s the mystery,” said Blue. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know,” said Mo. “Our forest meeting is next week. I’ll bring it with me.”

But by the next day, word about the key and keychain had reached every animal in the forest. An emergency meeting of all the local animals and trees was held that afternoon.

“Quiet, quiet,” chanted several grey-headed chickadees flying over the group site. “The meeting is about to begin.”



Everyone settled in. The trees lifted their branches so everyone could see the key and keychain.

“There’s only one question we must answer today,” said Guy, an old grizzly bear who led the meeting. “What should we do with this valuable object?”

“This is why you woke me up?” said Oscar, an owl who lived in a nearby tree.

“Throw it back in the ocean,” shouted Nann, a chocolate brown mink. “It could be cursed!”

“If you can’t eat it, what good is it?” asked Lexi the wolf.

“Isn’t anyone curious?” asked Mara, a reindeer. Many others nodded their heads in agreement.

They decided to take a vote.

Curiosity won. The object would be returned to its owner. Since Mo found it, he would return it. Someone, somewhere, had to know something about it.

When Mo told Blue about the group’s decision, she offered to take him south, through the ocean. That’s where his search would start.

The next day, Mo climbed aboard the beautiful blue whale.

“Just tell everyone you’re from a very special place,” shouted Guy, who stood on the beach with the other



animals. “Our home is called North to the Future.”

As Mo waved goodbye, his big, fluffy tail drooped between his legs. His pointy ears fell flat against his head. Although he was excited, he was also nervous and sad.

What would he find? Who would he meet? Would he ever return home, to Tongass?

The only thing he knew for certain was that nothing would ever be the same.

