

Introduction

Listen kid, there's a way we can both make money off of this. I'll tell you all about it in a second, but first let me make some introductions.

Hello, dear reader! It's your old friend, Dr. Cecil H.H. Mills: accomplished and sometimes controversial wordsmith and author of many intellectual adult novels that you might not have heard of, considering that you're reading this book.

You see, I used to be an author of serious novels. Adult novels. Novels meant to challenge the reader to look deep within their soul and examine their deepest, darkest thoughts. They required of a reader the reading comprehension skills necessary to parse the art that I created. For instance, *My Travels Abroad and Within* was a book that featured me traveling the American Heartland, interviewing the people who form the soul of this great nation, and then challenging each and every one of them to a fistfight.

But as Fortuna would have it, I was sent on a very downward spiral. It started with every known copy of my last adult novel, *Cerberus, From On High*, being destroyed in a mysterious warehouse fire that I'm legally bound to not discuss any further.¹

From there I was unjustly exiled from the literary world, lost what wealth I had left in a dice game/challenge of physical strength gone awry, and soon realized that I had some pretty hefty financial arrears coming due.

¹ Other than to say that my former publishing company Bradford & Bradford can eat dirt, as is my court-appointed right.

So, faced with a crowbar-shaped problem and trying to avoid a knee-cap-shaped solution, I did what any reasonable person would do: I wrote a Young Adult mystery novel.

And then all this happened, I say, gesturing to the train station around us. Right now, you and I are standing on a platform in Harborville Union Station, a bustling transport hub located in the hometown of the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club. Footsteps echo over the crowd's chatter in the concrete tunnels leading to platforms. The train we're waiting for is right behind us. I'll address that in a bit.

Now, I figure you must be confused. Never mind the setting, that's artistic fluff. Why, you ask, standing on a platform with me, would a man of my repute compromise his artistic integrity and, on purpose, write a story for people who have not yet formed their prefrontal cortex?

Because that's the only thing the publishers would buy from me. Listen, I don't have the time or patience to explain to you the intricacies of the literary publishing world, but rest assured that it is completely devoid of any artistic merit whatsoever and any person thinking of delving into such an industry deserves to be hunted.

The long and short of it was that I wrote *Ghost Hunters Adventure Club and the Secret of the Grande Chateau*, a completely serviceable story in which two detective brothers, J.J. and Valentine Watts, traveled up to a snowy chateau in the mountains to solve a mystery with their new friend, Trudi de la Rosa. They overcame some obstacles or whatever, and at the end of the book they decided to stick together. This was for the specific purpose of me being able to write a sequel, if the first book was a hit and on the off chance any debt collectors figured out that I was no longer residing in international waters.

* * *

KID, THE REASON WE'RE HERE is because the last book *was* a hit and I *did* get a sequel. You're inside of it right now. Smell that diesel exhaust in the

air? That's the smell of a seven-book franchise in the making. Who knows; if we play our cards right, maybe we can squeeze a feature film out of it!

Now, I don't personally doubt that the public at large would fall for such meaningless mass-market slop, turning what is, I wholeheartedly assure you, a derisive commentary on the frivolities of youth into my most popular book to date. Which I'm fine with, I guess.

Maybe I should have less faith in humanity, I don't know. But audience analysis and existential crises aside, I see something here. And I hope you see it too. What is it?

Opportunity.

As you know, I've never done or plan to do any research on what exactly constitutes a "Young Adult" reader. I can only make the inference that they lack the mental fortitude to understand my much more intellectual adult novels, and thus are susceptible to confidence scams. But here's where you come in and here's how you and I can get rich quick before we all disappear without leaving a paper trail: I'll keep punching out these schlocky Young Adult mystery novels if you keep upholding the cottage industry of bootleg *Ghost Hunters Adventure Club* merchandise that seemingly sprung up overnight.

It's that easy! Look at it this way: there exists a market yearning to drop coin on the things we create, heretofore known as Content, and we both have the ability to feed into the same burgeoning market. The more people who know about Ghost Hunters Adventure Club, the more people buy the book. The more people buy the book, the more they become fans. The more they become fans, the more they flood secondary markets looking for Content to the degree of fan art, trinkets, posters, and T-shirts. All things that you, yourself, can produce and sell at a profitable markup.

I know what you must be thinking right now: "But Dr. Cecil, why would you just go out and tell everyone your plan? Isn't that counterproductive to the plan's success?" To which I counter with this: Who do you think actually reads these introductions?

Let's face it, dear reader, you've cleared the admittedly very low bar of a Young Adult readership. In fact, I'd argue that if you're still reading then you're smart enough to know a cushy deal when you see one. I don't know why you're reading this filth, which is a cruel showcase of teenage bravado and wish fulfillment *at best*. Maybe you fished it out of a river that this book was thrown into out of disgust. Maybe your idiot nephew asked you to read it and you're just being polite. Maybe a copy of this book has existed into the near future and you've found the clues hidden within these pages to help you lead a rebellion against your robot overlords.² But whatever the case, good on you. Glad to have you here, glad to have you on my side. Welcome to the grift.

* * *

SO WHAT'S THE DEAL with the train? That diesel electric behemoth you see looming over us is the Harborville Express. Don't let its brand-new paint job fool you; it's been around for a while. This right here is the setting of *Ghost Hunters Adventure Club and the Express Train to Nowhere*. It'll be leaving the station soon.

But where's the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club, you ask? As per usual, J.J., Valentine, and Trudi are running late. This is probably through some fault of J.J.'s, but more honestly it's because I wanted the chapter to be snappier and feel a little more kinetic.

They'll come running around the corner and down the steps to the platform soon, huffing and puffing as they make it onto the train at the last possible moment before it pulls out of the station. However, with this brief moment before our titular heroes arrive, let's discuss something important.

Kid, I firmly believe with my whole heart that each and every person on earth—no matter how young or old—should have a plan that will one day lead to them owning and piloting their own yacht. My dear reader, this novel you hold in your hands is my Yacht Plan, and I hope you will

² z dvooc grnvw vnk yozhg rm z wzgz xvmgvi dlfow trev blfi ivhrhgzmxv grnv gl nzmvefi

make it yours. If we keep this transactional relationship going for long enough, you and me are gonna be racing luxury boats off the coast of some undisclosed equatorial nation very soon.

To that end, I say, leaning in close to inspire confidence, I promise you that I will do anything, absolutely anything, to make as much profit off of this intellectual property as possible.

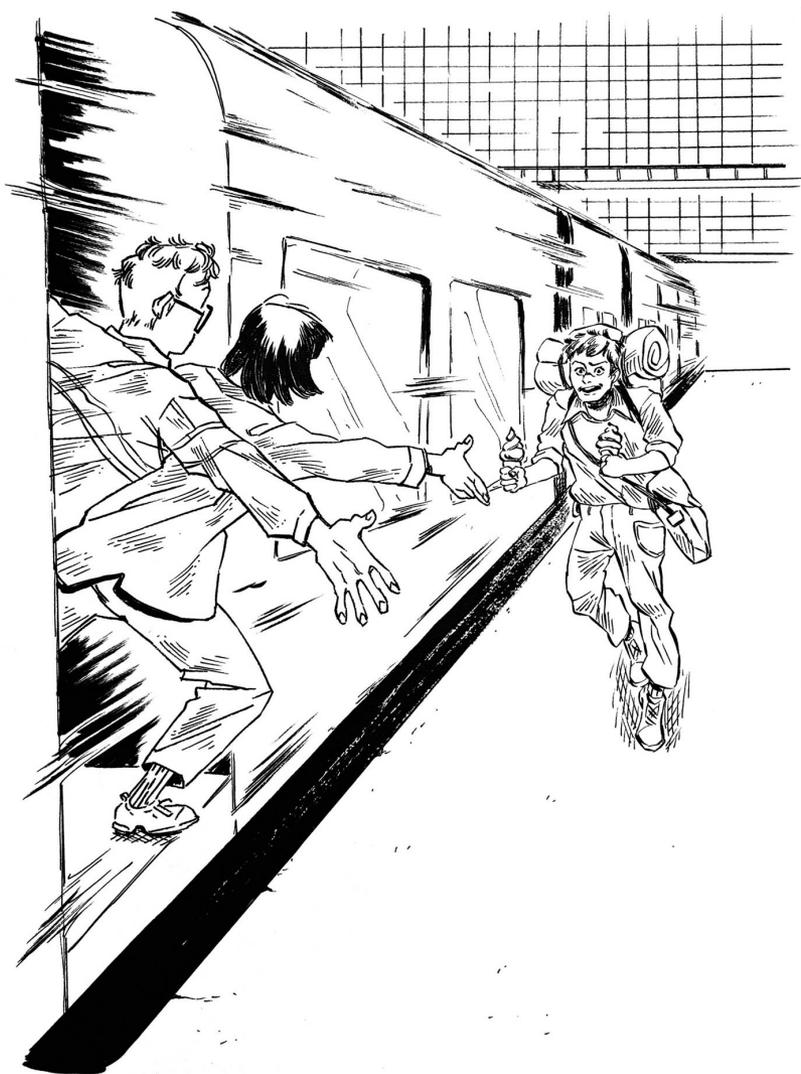
These protagonists, the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club, they mean nothing to me. Their actions are abhorrent, ill-advised, half-baked, and above all, illegal in most jurisdictions of law. If this story were to happen in real life, I can guarantee you that not only would J.J., Valentine, and Trudi be arrested for their reckless vigilantism, but they would also be held up by many as a portent of doom for the upcoming generation of morally bankrupt youths.

And, obviously, these dumb idiot mystery-solving children do not exist. They are a figment of my imagination. And while I will concede that of all the imaginations that Ghost Hunters Adventure Club could have come from, they're coming from the best; I will also freely admit that even I can't make them real. There is nothing I can do to turn these characters made of paper and ink into actual flesh and blood, so I urge you to treat them as such. I will put these characters into whatever dangerous situation that I deem will make the most profit. And that's fine, because they are not real.

So, with all that said and done, I think it's finally time to switch over to past tense and start the tale of the Watts brothers, their friend Trudi de la Rosa, the business entity known as Ghost Hunters Adventure Club, and the Express Train to Nowhere.

The train's whistle blows, indicating last call for passengers. This means I can leave you with my one last surprise.

Just before the train departs, I step on board.



CHAPTER 1

The Harborville Express

“We’re late!” Valentine Watts yelled as he zipped past a marble pillar just inside of Harborville Union Station. He slid to a stop on the concrete floor in front of a set of stairs leading down to the train platform below. Readjusting his rucksack and pushing up the sleeves of his baby blue sweater, he looked behind him.

J.J. Watts and Trudi de la Rosa were trailing close behind. In addition to the rucksacks the two were carrying, J.J. had the added weight of his leather satchel slung around his neck. He also had a large soft-serve ice cream cone in each hand.

“I don’t know how many different ways I can say sorry for that!” J.J. yelled back.

“How late?” asked Trudi as she arrived at the top of the stairs.

Valentine looked down toward the platform and spotted their train: the Harborville Express. It had already begun moving.

“We should run,” he said.

The three of them bolted down the stairs at an all-out dash toward the train. Now on the platform, Trudi could see an open door near one of the cars toward the front.

“I think we can make it!” she shouted, as she led the charge forward. Beating the pace of the slow-moving Harborville Express, she removed her rucksack and tossed it through the door of the train car before jumping on herself. “Come on!” she yelled at Valentine just behind her.

Valentine didn’t bother removing his own baggage before he made his entry attempt. He snagged a hand onto the steel railing alongside the door before using it to swing himself up into the car, catching his horn-rimmed glasses before they fell off of his face. He and Trudi stuck their heads out of the door to lend their support to J.J. By now the speed of the train was picking up.

J.J. bounced along the edge of the platform, barely holding on with the acceleration of the Harborville Express. He ran carefully, so as not to further disturb the two ice cream cones dripping down the sleeves of his red sweater.

“You gotta drop the soft serve!” Valentine shouted at his brother.

“No!” J.J. yelled back. “I’ve grown emotionally attached to them!”

Trudi looked to the other end of the train. Her eyes widened. “You’re running out of platform!” she called out.

J.J., by now losing pace with the train, looked down at his ice cream cones. He remembered haggling with the clerk at the ice cream parlor. He remembered being offered a 20 percent discount if he stopped trying to haggle. He remembered being just about to enjoy the two ice cream cones he had legally purchased at a discount before Valentine pointed at a clock.

And then he saw the edge of the platform fast approaching.

“I’m sorry, fellas,” he said with great sorrow to his ice creams as he cast them aside on the Harborville Union Station platform. Now unencumbered, J.J. turned up the heat and made his way within striking distance of Valentine and Trudi’s outstretched arms.

J.J. yelled mightily as he hurled himself onto the train, bowling over both Valentine and Trudi in the process. The three crashed to the floor of the train compartment they were now safely aboard.

"I'm gonna miss those guys," J.J. said. He stood up, offering an elbow of support to both Valentine and Trudi in turn. He then reached into his satchel and pulled out a moist towelette from its Ghost Hunters Adventure Club-branded packaging. "And you guys said this would be a useless mechanism for advertising," he said, wiping ice cream from his hands.

Trudi found her glasses that had been knocked off in the initial jump attempt. She reattached them to her face and smoothed out the ruffles of her business casual blazer. The three of them cased the joint.

"Would you look at this opulence?" asked J.J. as he marveled at the tasteful art deco interior design aesthetic surrounding them. The mahogany hallway ran along the side of the train, with several doors leading to several travel quarters unknown.

"This must be the passenger compartment," said Valentine. "Where's ours?"

"Just hold on a second," J.J. held up a friendly hand to interrupt him. "I had a speech prepared and I've been waiting all morning to deliver it."

He took a step forward and turned in a practiced way to face his two friends. Clapping his hands together, he spoke as if he were lecturing in an auditorium. "Good morning, everyone. As you all know, Ghost Hunters Adventure Club has seen a fifty percent increase in hiring in the past few months." He nodded at Trudi. "We're growing as a company, and now more than ever it's important that we truly learn the meaning of teamwork. So with that I would like to say the following."

He swept his hands open in a grand gesture. "Welcome to the First Inaugural Ghost Hunters Adventure Club L—"

"Tickets, please," came a voice from behind them. J.J. paused his speech and the three turned to see a man in an ill-fitting, dark blue uniform with a matching cap. A badge on his coat pocket read, "Conductor."

"Just a moment," J.J. said to the man. "I was in the middle of a speech."

"Tickets, please," the conductor repeated in a firmer tone. He scratched at the five o'clock shadow on his face, looking as if he hadn't slept in days.

“Fine, fine,” J.J. grumbled. He reached into his satchel and produced three tickets. “Which one of these are ours?”

“None of them,” the conductor said after a cursory glance. He shot his thumb toward the back of the train. “Second class is just past the lounge.”

“Second class?” J.J. demanded. “That isn’t right.” He grabbed the tickets back from the conductor and reexamined them.

“Whoa!” yelled the conductor. Where once there was an aloof gaze, he now looked as if someone had lit a fire under him. “The snatching of tickets out of my hands is in direct violation of train law. Don’t do that again.”

A phrase got caught in Trudi’s ear. “Train law?” she asked.

The conductor sighed impatiently. “See that out there?” he said, pointing out of the window to the view of the rolling hills and sporadic commercial buildings passing lazily by. “Not train law. This here?” he gestured broadly within the confines of the train. “Train law.”

“Well that makes sense, I suppose,” said Valentine.

“They’re laws as old as trains themselves. Sometimes cryptic, but always resolute; they were created and are now followed to make sure you arrive to your destination safely and on time. I’m duty-bound to throw you off of this train in as comical of a fashion as possible if you try something like that again.”

The conductor pulled out a hole punch from his coat pocket and clicked it on the three tickets in J.J.’s hand. “Second class is back behind the lounge,” he repeated. He then stalked past them and continued his duties, knocking on doors and checking tickets.

The three of them looked at each other. J.J. took another look at the tickets in his hand.

“Whoops! I guess we *are* in coach.”

Valentine and Trudi groaned. The three walked to the end of the hallway and through an adjoining corridor. Opening the next set of doors, they found themselves in a dining room with finely upholstered chairs

and booths. Clinking silverware and soft conversation accentuated the soft rumbblings of the train's movement.

"I don't mean to be the guy asking the hardball questions so early in the morning," started Valentine, as the three sidled past a waiter taking breakfast orders, "but how much planning did you do for this trip?"

"Plenty!" replied J.J. "Despite the admittedly rough beginning, I promise you guys that we're all in for a treat this weekend."

They walked through to the end of the dining car and into another adjoining corridor. Standing in the space between train cars, J.J. turned to the team again. "Let's start over."

He spoke faster this time. Clapsed hands, proper posture, auditorium voice. "Good morning, everyone. As you all know, Ghost Hunters Adventure Club has seen a fifty percent increase in hiring in the past few months." Nod to Trudi. "We're growing as a company, and now more than ever it's important that we truly learn the meaning of teamwork. So with that I would like to say the following."

Big sweeping gesture.

"Welcome to the First Inaugural Ghost Hunters Adventure Club Leadership—"

The door to the other end of the adjoining corridor burst open and a small person wearing a red baseball uniform and cap marched through, seemingly steamed about something. Across his chest read the word "Elks."

He collided with J.J.'s shoulder, checking him into the walls of the gangway.

"Watch where you're going!" J.J. shouted. "I've got a speech going on!"

"Die alone, boner," the baseball player replied, before marching in the opposite direction as the team, pushing past Valentine and Trudi.

"I get weird vibes from this train," said J.J. as he opened the door to the next carriage. They were immediately met by a cacophony of hooting and hollering. Before them was an entire baseball team dressed in the same uniform as the person who knocked into J.J.

Trudi noted the plush carpeting and variety of comfortable-looking chairs. While it felt like she was entering a speakeasy, this, apparently, was the lounge car. The sun shone through a copse of trees into the window, making shadows flicker across the small cocktail bar up against the wall in the middle of the room. Baseball players happily chatted with each other in dotted groups around the train car. There was a baby grand piano at the far end of the lounge. A baseball player sat on it.

“Howdy,” the three members of the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club heard. A man sitting at the bar next to them swiveled in his chair to face them. Chewing a stick of gum, he wore a blue polo shirt, cowboy hat, and the highest-up pair of gym shorts any of them had ever seen.

“Sorry about Smalls,” he said. “Heard his catchphrase all the way back here. Kid’s got a fire in his belly but he never made it through all those etiquette classes. Great left-handed shortstop.”

He extended a friendly hand out toward them. “Coach Hank.”

Always being one to seek new avenues of business, J.J. stepped into center stage. He produced a business card, offering it to the man.

“How do you do,” he started. “My name is J.J. Watts and these are my two compatriots: Valentine Watts, brother; and Trudi de la Rosa, newest inductee. Together we make up the business entity of the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club. Harborville’s foremost crime-fighting and mystery-solving team.”

Coach Hank paused for a moment, looking back and forth between the blonde hair and blue eyes of Valentine and the dark hair and brown eyes of J.J.

“Wait, are you two actually brothers?”

J.J. ignored the question. “Feel free to contact us if you ever need anything. Ghost hunting or otherwise.”

The three members of the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club each took turns shaking the man’s hand.

“Pleased to have y’all on board,” he said. “Hope you don’t mind sharing a ride with the team.”

“You guys play baseball, right?” asked Valentine.

“Minor League American Baseball,” Coach Hank replied. “We’re the Harborville Elks. Got a game with the New Troutstead Skipjacks this evening.”

“Oh!” Trudi’s eyes brightened. “I don’t follow the minor league, I’m sorry to say. How’s the season going so far?”

“Best OBP in the league,” Coach Hank replied. “We got a tight team this year due to budget cuts, but they’re all playing like their lives depend on it.”

Valentine looked at the coach quizzically. “Oh-bee-pee?”

“On base percentage,” Trudi replied. “It’s a stats measurement of the amount of times a batter reaches base. It’s like a batting average, but it also takes into account the batter getting walked.”

J.J. and Valentine shot each other a glance. Neither of them had ever heard Trudi speak like this before.

“That’s the one,” the coach said. He tipped his cowboy hat to the three members of the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club, who took that as a social cue to formally disengage from that conversation and continue on their journey.

“That was an interesting bit of Trudi lore,” Valentine remarked at the other end of the train car.

“Yeah,” said J.J. “I remember you telling us multiple times that you were the least athletic person you knew.”

“There’s a big difference between *playing* baseball and *knowing* baseball,” Trudi replied. “But you can thank my Uncle Berting for getting me into a sport so obsessed with numbers and statistics.”

Exiting the lounge, the three finally found themselves in the second-class passenger car. It was a far cry away from first class. The mahogany walls were, instead, aluminum. The carpeting gave a distinct aura of municipal transit.

What they saw in this train car, strangely, was nerds. Many of them. Groups of nerds—dressed in a variety of button-down dress shirts,

slacks, and pocket protectors—hung around and chatted in the hallway and among the economy-class train compartments.

“I’m doing my speech in our room,” J.J. said. The three of them quietly slipped past the intellectual conversations occurring around them and found their compartment at the back of the car. They opened the door and walked inside.

“This is...cozy,” Valentine said.

Before them was a very small train compartment without much room to move around. Most of the space was taken up by two upholstered benches that faced each other. They looked as if they could be converted into sleeper beds—with the right knowledge. There was another door near the seats that appeared to lead to the next berth. Against the wall was a window, out of which they could see Harborville disappearing slowly into the distance.

The three stowed their baggage away in a compartment above their seats. Not to be outdone by a small stage, J.J. hopped up on one of the seats and readdressed his compatriots. “Here we go.”

He spoke even faster this time. Clasped hands authoritative voice, “Good morning, everyone. As you all know, Ghost Hunters Adventure Club has seen a fifty percent increase in hiring in the past few months.” Sidelong glance at Trudi. “We’re growing as a company, and now more than ever it’s important that we truly learn the meaning of teamwork. So with that I would like to say the following...”

Sweeping gesture, “Welcome to the First Inaugural Ghost Hunters Adventure Club Leadership S—”

The door that seemed to lead to the next compartment burst open to reveal a man with a pristine, tucked-in, white dress shirt. His slacks were neatly pressed. If Trudi had to guess, she would have easily placed him with that crew of nerds outside.

“Hiya!” he said, waving enthusiastically.

“Oh, come on!” J.J. yelled in frustration.

The young man walked into their compartment without their inviting him to do so, shaking each of their hands vigorously.

“Oliver Path,” he exclaimed. “Co-founder and current standing president of the Harborville Train Appreciation Society?”

“Do they have boundaries in your appreciation society?” Valentine asked.

“You may have seen some of my colleagues out in the hallway. You see, we’re here to take the famous Harborville Express to learn about its storied history and marvel at its wondrous engineering.”

He shook everyone’s hand once again. “Anyway, I just wanted to make a friendly introduction to the neighbors. I’ll have to run now. Got official Train Appreciation Society business to take care of.”

And with that, the train nerd disappeared through the door as quickly as he had appeared through it.

“Why’d he smell like rubbing alcohol?” Valentine asked.

J.J. massaged the scar running horizontally across his nose that he continued to not like talking about. “Weird train.”

“Weird train,” echoed Trudi. She turned the lock on both of the doors inside their compartment.

J.J. paused for a moment, wary of whatever unexpected interruption might come his way. Then he addressed Valentine and Trudi.

“Welcome...” he looked around, confirmed it was safe, then continued.

“To the First Inaugural...” another pause; everything was still in order.

“Ghost Hunters Adventure Club Leadership Summit!” he exclaimed. The words came out like a waterfall. He exhaled in equal parts relief and triumph for having finished a sentence.

Then he went on, more confident now.

“After a short and delightful trip on this beauty of a luxury liner, we’ll be checking in at the New Troutstead Inn and Suites and utilizing their conference ballroom for an extended weekend of seminars, trust-building

exercises, and, most important of all, the development of our mission statement.”

Valentine and Trudi nodded in support.

“Now, if you’ll all open your binders to page one.”

“Binders?” Valentine asked.

“I’m getting ahead of myself,” J.J. replied. He reached into his stowed-away satchel and pulled out three identical white binders, handing one to each member of the team and keeping one for himself. Across the three of them and along the spines were the names of each binder’s owner: J.J., Valentine, and Trudi.

They all opened their folders to reveal the logo of the First Inaugural Ghost Hunters Adventure Club Leadership Summit.

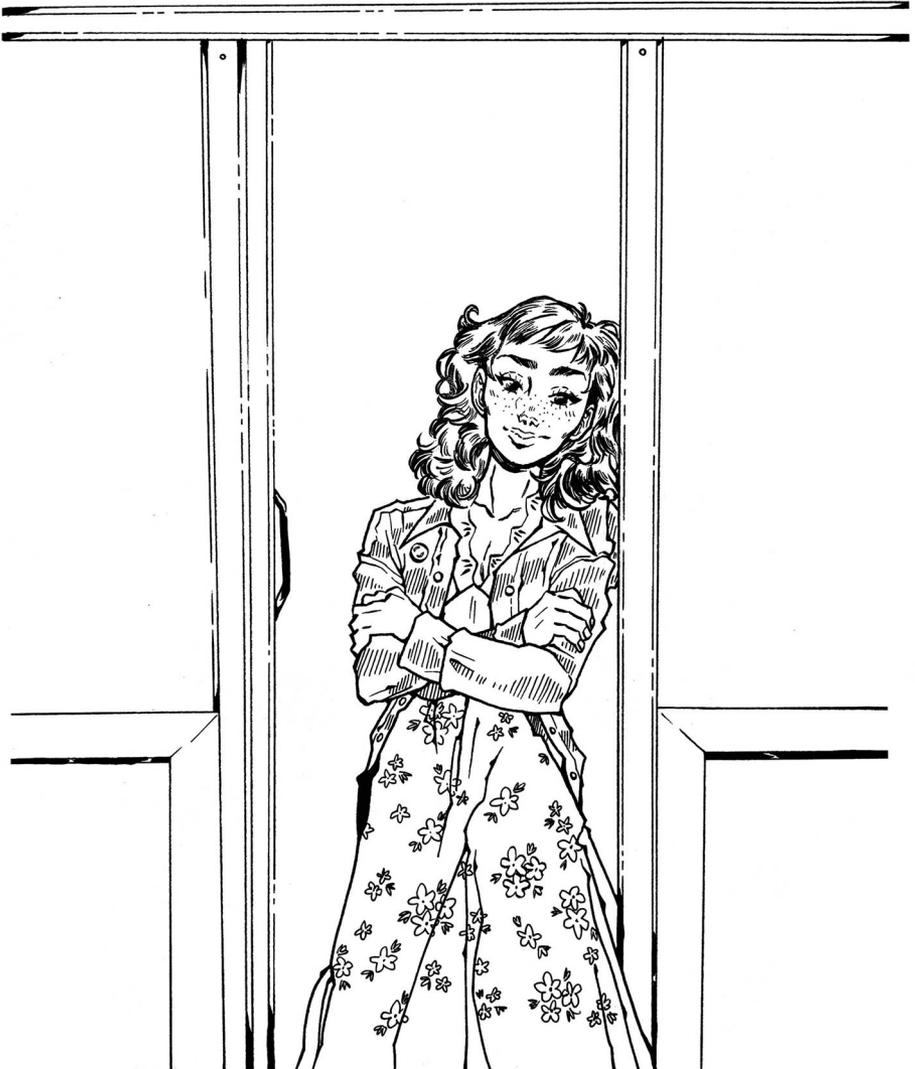
“All right everyone, shall we get started?” asked J.J.

Then there was a knock on the door to the hallway.

“At least they let you finish your sentence this time,” Valentine said. He turned to the hallway door, opened it, then immediately slammed the door shut before throwing his back against it. On his face was an expression of unbridled terror.

He looked helplessly to Trudi and J.J. “Guys, we’ve got trouble.”





CHAPTER 2

Old Friends

“What is it?” asked J.J.

Valentine remained glued to the door. “Not what, who.”

He looked to J.J. and Trudi. Each of them was standing with a perplexed look on their face in their compartment on the Harborville Express. The soft, rhythmic thunking of train travel filled in the silence.

“It’s Siobhan,” he said.

“Siobhan?” asked Trudi.

“Siobhan,” J.J. replied, grimly.

“Still don’t know who Siobhan is,” said Trudi.

Valentine took a deep gulp. “Remember back at the Grande Chateau how I had to pitch a book idea to Thad to keep him occupied? *Boob Quest?*”

“Didn’t you secure an advance on that?” J.J. asked.

“I’m halfway through the first draft. But that’s not important right now. You see, when I pitched the story, I sort of did that thing where you draw upon your own world and life experiences.”

“Did you write this Siobhan into your tit novel?” asked Trudi.

Valentine was visibly sweating by this point. “A woman who’s chasing after our protagonists so that she can drag them back into a life of

lying, cheating, and stealing? Yes. She doesn't have three boobs in real life, though."

"So what's the big deal?" asked Trudi. "This is just someone from your past you don't want to deal with."

"I suppose I should jump in here," J.J. said in a grave tone. "I'm very aware that I talk a big game about my leadership abilities, my good looks, and my natural talent for solving mysteries. And while I like to think I can back up many of those claims, I'll readily admit that I'm still a work in progress. Siobhan, though? Siobhan is something else. She's got me beat in all categories. She's smarter, she's more charming, deadly with a knife at a distance, and, most importantly, she's more nefarious than I could ever be."

He hopped down from his standing position on the seat and began pacing with what little floor space he had. He seemed lost in thought. Pausing momentarily, he gazed out the window at the landscape gently parallaxing by. The fields surrounding Harborville were slowly transitioning into woodland.

"Except for movie trivia," he finally said. "I got her beat on that. She thinks they're too long."

"What are?" asked Trudi.

"Movies. But listen, my point is that Siobhan could convince the devil himself that he should give up on the fiddle. She is evil incarnate, a malevolent harvester of sorrow. Don't fall for whatever she's slinging."

He looked over to Valentine, who by this point was drenched in sweat. "All right gumshoe, we might as well get it over with."

Valentine shook his head. "Even if I were to agree with you, which I don't, I need you to know that my knees have locked into place as a form of subconscious protest. I cannot be moved. So I'm gonna use my once daily veto to cut that order and suggest that we just pretend like we're not here."

"You know I can hear you, right?" came a voice from the other side of the door.

Valentine crumpled with a fear-induced slump to the floor, knees in proper working order after all. “I don’t wanna,” he whispered weakly.

J.J. sighed. He sat down on the floor with his brother and spoke in an encouraging tone. “Valentine, ordinarily I’d say that it’s your god-given right as a human being to have a mental breakdown wherever and whenever you want. That’s inalienable. But buddy, we’re at the First Inaugural Ghost Hunters Adventure Club Leadership Summit. We’re here to tackle our problems. What I see right now is a challenge. A challenge that can be overcome.”

“I can still hear you,” came the voice again. “These compartment walls are pretty thin.”

Valentine felt another wave of anxiety wash over him, but fought against it. He shot up to his original position with his back against the train compartment door.

“Okay,” he said, appearing to psych himself up. “Okay, okay, okay, okay...”

J.J. stood up as well. “This is for your own good, buddy. By the end of the summit you’ll be amazed at how much you’ve grown.”

Valentine nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

J.J. placed his hand on the entryway handle.

“I changed my mind!” Valentine shrieked, batting J.J.’s hand away.

“Sorry pal.” J.J. went for the door again. “You’ll thank me later.”

Valentine grabbed his brother’s arm and the two fought for custody of the door handle. J.J. managed to secure a pretty ironclad half nelson on his brother, who responded tactically by flailing around like a recently caught fish. It was a brief scuffle that ended with the door open and the two fighting on the floor of their compartment.

J.J. tapped out when they saw that there was a figure standing in the center of the now-open door.

“Hey Siobhan,” he said, looking up from the floor. “Long time, no see!”

It was then that Trudi saw who the boys were talking about.

Standing in the doorway was a woman about their age, maybe a little older. She was tiny, her face dotted with freckles around her nose. Her dark, curly hair fell down to her shoulders. She wore a jean jacket over a floral print dress.

That was not what Trudi had expected.

“J.J., Valentine, I’m so glad you’re here!” she said in her soft voice.

The two scrambled to their feet. Siobhan crossed over to them as if she were gliding on air. She embraced a flabbergasted J.J., sighing deeply as she hugged him. She did the same for a shell-shocked Valentine.

Taking a small step back, she held Valentine’s face in her hands as if he were a prized work of art. A warm smile crossed her face.

“Look at you, Valentine. As handsome as ever.”

Valentine attempted a cordial smile. He did not succeed.

J.J. began to talk. “Hey, so, um...”

“And who’s this?” Siobhan interrupted, looking over toward Trudi.

“Trudi de la Rosa,” Trudi responded with an air of suspicion.

Siobhan extended a delicate hand toward Trudi. “Siobhan Sweeney, pleased to meet you.”

Trudi cautiously accepted her hand.

“You know, I used to work with the boys back in the day. Is J.J. as irascible as ever?”

“What’d you call me?” J.J. demanded.

“Irascible means to have a hot temper and be easily provoked into anger,” Trudi said.

“Ah, it would seem that you’re filling the role I used to play,” Siobhan smiled. “I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.”

“So you’re not mad at us?” Valentine blurted out. This was the most that he could manage to say. It came out at a high pitch and fast velocity, but at the very least it was a complete sentence.

Siobhan let out a light laugh. “Valentine, I had hoped you’d grown up a little more since I last saw you. But oh, darling.” She put a hand on his shoulder. He flinched. “Of course I’m not mad at you. Any anger or resentment has been long lost to the sands of time. What could I hold against you two for some of the most fun years of my life?”

“Were you in the mystery business as well?” Trudi asked.

“Not quite, but close. It’s a long story. I’d love to tell you all about it sometime.”

“So what are you doing on this train, Siobhan?” J.J. asked.

“Isn’t it such a coincidence?” Siobhan replied. “I’m out here on some new work and someone mentioned that there was a mystery-solving team aboard the train. I had read about your success at the Grande Chateau, so I figured it must be you. It’s so amazing to see you two again.”

“And who’s your friend?” Trudi asked, motioning to the end of their compartment. Leaning in the doorway was a man who nobody on the Ghost Hunters Adventure Club team had seen before. He was dressed smartly in a dark blazer, a turtleneck sweater, and tailored pants. His face, while stern, made no expression toward the positive or the negative.

“This is my new business partner, Luther Adedeji.”

Luther nodded toward everyone. There was a moment of silence while everyone waited for him to elaborate.

“Not a very talkative fellow, is he?” remarked J.J.

“I try not to speak unless I have something to say,” Luther said.

“He tries not to speak unless he has something to say,” Siobhan repeated.

“That’s strange,” said J.J., who couldn’t imagine a fresher hell.

“It’s such a departure from the usual company I keep, but we work well together. Don’t we, Luther?”

Luther did not respond. He gave another respectful nod.

Siobhan sighed contentedly. “Well, I’d hate to take up any more of your time. I’m just so glad to see you both. Like an old Dr. Cecil H.H. Mills paperback, you two haven’t lost your charm.”

Siobhan joined Luther in the doorway, then turned back to the team. “They’ll be serving brunch in the dining car in a small while. I do hope you’ll all join us. There’s so much we have to catch up on and I’d love to tell you more about what I’m working on next. Until next time, friends.”

And with that, Siobhan left the three with an impressive final display of grace and poise. Luther followed closely behind.

As soon as they were gone, Valentine rushed to the door and slammed it shut, throwing his entire body against it in a vain attempt to barricade the team safely within their compartment.

“There is absolutely no way I’m going to willingly see that woman for the rest of my life, let alone the remainder of this train trip.”

“I don’t get it,” said Trudi. “She seemed perfectly nice.”

“That’s what she wants you to think!” Valentine cried. He scrambled from the door to the train window, clawing at it. “Why is it so warm in here? Are you guys warm?”

J.J. thought the situation over for a second, which was usually all the time he needed to form a plan. He spoke as if a light bulb went off in his head. “This is a great thing!”

Valentine paused his clawing at the window for a small moment. “What?”

J.J. popped up to make another speech, squeezing between Valentine and Trudi to make as much of a dramatic effect as possible. “Of all the times we could’ve run into Siobhan, we ran into her during the First Inaugural Ghost Hunters Adventure Club Leadership Summit!”

Every word that J.J. said seemed to drive a stake further into Valentine’s heart.

“What better time to learn about leadership and teamwork than in a moment where we’re placed outside of our comfort zone? These are optimal conditions for cementing our working relationships and becoming the best team we possibly can.”

Valentine thought over what J.J. was saying. He made sure to take the proper time to chew on the words and weigh the pros and cons of what his brother was trying to say. Then, he looked over to J.J.

“Absolutely not.” He went back to trying to open the window of their train compartment. “If I can get this thing open I can hurl myself out into this lush woodland area and be back in Harborville by lunch.”

J.J. and Trudi allowed Valentine to tire himself out. Eventually, he gave up.

“This thing is sealed, isn’t it?” he said.

“Valentine,” said Trudi. “Take a couple deep breaths. You’re hyperventilating.”

Valentine sat back down in his seat. He buried his head in his hands, feeling a great sense of despair. “Of all the trains in all of Harborville, we had to get stuck on the one with Siobhan Sweeney.”

“Hey now,” said J.J. “We don’t *have* to do this...”

Valentine looked up. “Really?”

“...is something I would say if we weren’t trying to help you become the absolute best version of yourself. Valentine, you can’t be afraid of someone like this for the rest of your life. You’re gonna have to grow up.”

Valentine groaned. “I am convinced that that woman is going to kill me.”

“Look at it this way,” started J.J., “this is a short day trip to New Troutstead. We’ve got a packed schedule of seminars and team building exercises that I’ve planned out for us even while we’re on our way to the retreat, and once we leave the train you’re not gonna have to deal with her again. You’ll be so busy that you’ll barely even notice her.”

“Plus you’ve got us here with you,” Trudi added. “You’re not going through this alone.”

Valentine took a few more deep breaths, his heart rate slowly returning to somewhere around the realm of normal. “Okay,” he said. “Okay. I see what you’re saying. As long as we don’t have to deal with her and

especially if we stay away from this brunch thing she wants us to come to, I think I can do it.”

“That’s great!” J.J. said enthusiastically.

“So what’s next on the schedule?”

J.J. opened his binder to the tabbed section labeled “Itinerary.” He looked up at Trudi and Valentine.

“Brunch.”

