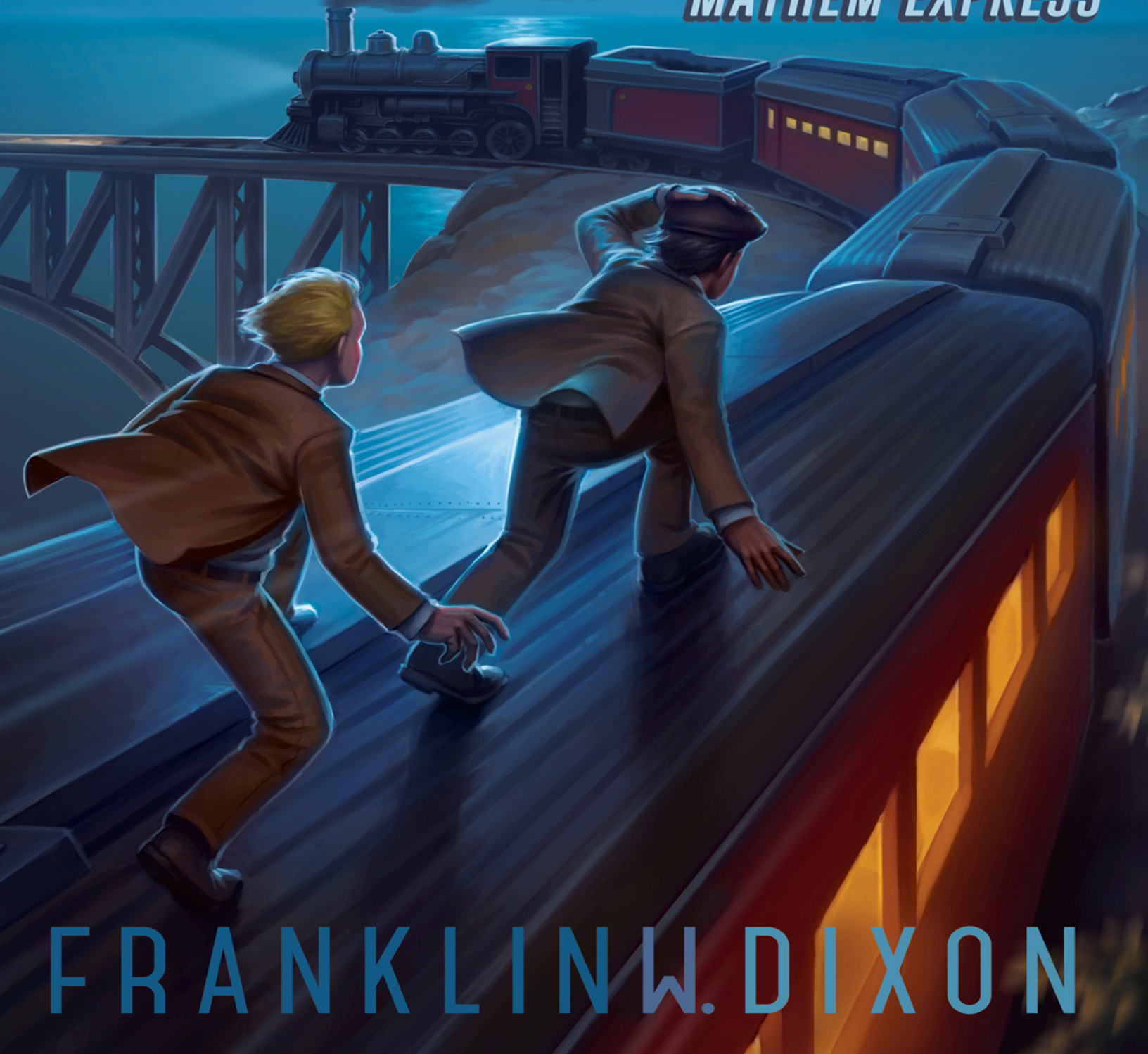


HARDY BOYS

ADVENTURES™

*MYSTERY ON THE
MAYHEM EXPRESS*



FRANKLIN W. DIXON

HARDY BOYS ADVENTURES™

#23 *MYSTERY ON THE MAYHEM EXPRESS*

FRANKLIN W. DIXON

ALADDIN New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

MURDER MYSTERY CAST

Detective Parrot – *Trent Couture*

Gangster Eddie Garafalo – *Alan “Biff” Hooper*

Mafia “Mama” Garafalo – *Nadine Shaikh*

Aristocrat Debonair – *Marie Fico*

Bootlegger McKing – *Sebastian Rosé*

Flapper Schmidt – *Alyssa Moore*

Reporter Archibald – *Evie Wong*

Milkman Frothett – *Rico Green*

MAYHEM EXPRESS LAYOUT

Front

Engineer's Cab

Coal Tender

Writing Car

Observation Car

Deluxe Suite Car

Parlor Car

Second-Class Sleeping Car

Dressing Room Car

Library Car

Performance Car

Dining Car

Back

1

ALL A-BORED!

FRANK

THERE'S FOUL PLAY AFOOT!" EXCLAIMED the detective in the fedora, one hand in his trench coat pocket, the other gripping a pad and pen. It felt like his bright green eyes looked straight through me. Then he scanned the rest of the train car, full of other passengers seated and sipping drinks at little tables along the walls.

"Didja hear that?" shouted a girl clomping by in a short, beaded evening dress. I choked on the overpowering smell of cheap perfume left in her wake. She paused mid-car and pressed a gloved hand to her chest. "The keen gumshoe over there says something don't seem quite right!"

"This is painful," I whispered to my brother, Joe, and our best friend, Chet Morton.

Chet flashed a playful smile. "The Roaring Twenties? More like the *Snoring* Twenties!"

"Good one, Morton." Joe fist-bumped him.

The website for the Mayhem Express had promised a three-hour ride on a newly restored vintage train, during which guests could enjoy extravagant desserts and solve a 1920s-themed murder mystery.

Since all the *real* mysteries in Bayport had dried up, Joe and I had been itching to find a way to put our mystery-solving skills to use. Checking out the show had seemed like a good idea when I signed us up in June. A new murder mystery train ride beat out running errands (Mom, Dad, and Aunt Trudy never failed to find tasks for us) and rewatching every single Marvel film on Disney+ with Joe.

Right after I signed us up, Joe and I decided to bet on who could solve the fake mystery first. If I won, Joe would be on dish duty for the rest of the summer, and vice versa.

All Chet had needed to hear was “fancy desserts” and he was in.

And sure enough, before the actors had ushered us into the performance car for the show, they had served us platters in the dining car—lifting silver lids to reveal everything from macarons and precut slices of cake to china bowls of chocolate mousse.

But it wasn’t only the desserts that had delivered. Every inch of the train looked like it’d come right out of an old black-and-white movie: wood paneling, softly glowing lights, and lace curtains pulled back to reveal—what was it the website had said?—*a breathtaking view of the coastline overlooking Barmet Bay*. The photo on the website had shown a midnight-blue train chugging along the curving cliffside, the little waves of the Inner Harbor tinged orange by a glorious summer sunset. Apparently, the old train no longer ran on steam, but the show’s production company had managed to figure out a way to make it look like smoke still streamed from its tall stack (my guess was dry ice), and had even kept the tender that had once housed coal.

At first glance, if someone had told me we had been mystically transported back in time, I would have believed it. Every passenger,

including Joe, Chet, and me, was dressed up in snazzy 1920s garb, as the website had encouraged. The three of us were even wearing newsboy hats Chet had scrounged up from his folks' attic, which matched our good suits and shined-up dress shoes. Around us, fellow audience members sported everything from panama hats and tweed three-piece suits with wingtips and oxfords to feather headbands and fans.

But the costumes, setting, and grub were where the magic ended.

The train, which wasn't completely restored yet, *stank* of paint fumes. And instead of a breathtaking sunset, the view outside my window was shrubbery, trash-filled alleys, and chain-link fences. That, combined with the bad acting, and our fun night out was quickly sliding into the stuff of nightmares. We were still in Act One, and I was starting to suspect that not even the actors knew what was going on in their own script and the #keepthesecrets hashtag on the website had more to do with burying bad reviews than preventing spoilers.

After all, the performance playing out before us was amateurish, overdramatic, and nonsensical. The actors—mostly teenagers playing adults—spelled out clues and stumbled over their lines. Surveying the performance car, we weren't the only ones who wanted the ride to come to a swift end. Most passengers looked either bored or confused, especially the group of teenage girls sitting at the other end of the coach.

The one bright note was that Charlene Vale, my friend from school, along with our mutual friend Murph Murphy, had bought tickets too. It had been a great surprise to find them aboard, and we'd made sure to sit across from them in the performance car.

“This is so stupid!” whispered a passenger to his date. Both were dressed in sharp black suits.

His date raised a finger to his lips. “Shh! Don’t break the illusion!”

Charlene smiled, leaning forward to address the couple. “I think it’s a little late for that, gentlemen.”

Part of me wished Charlene and I were on a date. If I was being honest, I’d had a crush on her since forever. Charlene looked extra pretty tonight. Even though she was all gussied up in a silver dress, her silk-gloved hands still held a notepad and pen. She was rarely without them. Who knew when she’d get a scoop for the *Bayport High News*?

Murph gave a sly grin. “Hey, this show is priceless!”

“I’d say it’s a train wreck,” Chet chimed in. “Get it? *Train wreck*?”

I shot him a deadpan stare but couldn’t help chuckling along with Joe.

“Is anyone still trying to figure out the mystery?” Charlene asked.

“Maybe we can solve the mystery of how to turn this train around,” Joe quipped.

“When you do, can you let me know?” asked a college-aged passenger seated across the aisle from us. She was wearing a black cloche hat and a flowy black dress with a sequined purse.

Joe, Chet, and I laughed as the detective cleared his throat.

“I suspect one of you has a dark and terrible secret!” he announced, pressing on the little black mustache that’d been glued to his upper lip. It was already curling off. “Can you all hear me back there?” he shouted loudly. “*I said*, somebody here has a dark secret!”

“It’s *them* you want!” the actor playing the bootlegger shouted, pointing at the gangster and a girl standing next to him.

The gangster was being played by Biff, our football-loving friend from school. Somehow, he'd nabbed a role in the production. He tipped his fedora, then folded his muscular arms over the front of his black pinstripe suit.

"Who? Us?" The girl had shoulder-length brown hair, a fuzzy cardigan, and a hawkish expression. She glared at the detective.

"Mama Garafalo!" Over the top of his notepad, the detective fixed his green eyes on her. "I got questions for you and your boy. What brings you aboard this swell and swanky rattler?"

The mafia mama shook her fist at him. "Why don't you scram, Detective Parrot?"

Biff snapped his suspenders. "Yeah! You're tootin' the wrong ringers!"

"Boooring." Chet sighed. "This makes me want to watch *Snowpiercer* again."

"I'm so confused. What's happening?" said the college-aged passenger dressed in all black. She was speaking to herself, but loud enough for us to hear. "I need some air." Huffing, she stood up and strolled to the car ahead.

"Yeah, I don't blame her," Chet said.

"Frank, we have *you* to blame." Joe nudged my shoulder. "I can't believe I spent my hard-earned fun money on *this*. Not to mention the ticket prices were highway robbery!"

"Or rather, *railroad* robbery...", Chet cut in, waggling his eyebrows.

"Even worse!" Joe continued. "I'm calling off our bet, bro. Instead, for tricking me into joining you on this miserable train ride, dish duty is all yours for the rest of the summer. Ha!"

“Hey, I’m regretting paying for my ticket too, you know,” I confessed.

“At least the money from ticket sales goes to a sweet cause,” Chet said. “Trainsville needs all the money it can get!” It was true. Trainsville was Bayport’s beloved, but near-broke, railway museum, dedicated to preserving and showcasing historic old trains like the Mayhem Express.

“It’s the milkman you wanna grill!” Biff insisted in a hybrid Boston-Brooklyn accent. “He’s a wrong number, ya see”—he turned to speak to the audience—“and heeled to boot!”

“Didja hear that?” the flapper exclaimed to the passengers, clasping her hands together. “It seems the milkman’s got a bean-shooter! We think maybe the fella’s off the track!”

“My goodness!” cried an actress playing the aristocrat, bedecked in sparkling jewels. “Have you all heard? The milkman’s got a gat!”

“What’s with the game of telephone?” Joe whispered. “We could hear Biff fine.”

I sighed. Another unfortunate part of the production, it seemed.

An older passenger in a brown three-piece suit with a comb-over and an orange spray tan stood up, exiting the corner booth beside us. “I need to iron the old shoelaces, as they say,” he whispered to his boothmates—a little boy seated beside a woman with stringy white hair. “Dessert may have been a bit *too* decadent for me.” He pressed a hand to his belly and stepped into the aisle, moving swiftly toward one of the bathrooms. His face had a sickly sheen. The only thing worse than being stuck on this train was being stuck on this train with an upset stomach.

“I wish we had our phones,” Joe whispered to Chet and me. “Anything to keep me from nodding off.”

“It’s too bad they collected them at the Trainsville station to ‘keep up with the 1920s realism,’” I said.

“Are you packing heat?” the detective asked the milkman.

I forced my attention back to the action onstage.

A tall, skinny actor wearing owlish eyeglasses, a red tie, and a white collared shirt peeping out from an ill-fitting overcoat held a tray of chattering milk bottles. “I—I’m an innocent milkman!” He pointed a finger at the bootlegger and the flapper, who both stood at the other end of the coach. “It’s—it’s them you want! He’s no dewdropper—he’s a fakeloo artist and bootlegger! And she’s his squeeze!”

After a deep breath, I took a long sip from my soda. It was as flat as the milkman’s delivery.

The bootlegger turned to the flapper. “Snitch doesn’t know when to shut his trap!” he snapped, shoving the detective away. “We got nothing to hide, snooper!” Just then, a faux pistol fell from his vest.

The detective and the aristocrat let out exaggerated gasps, while the milkman fled the dining car.

“Uh-oh! Let’s dangle!” the flapper insisted, tugging on the bootlegger’s sleeve.

I glanced down at the list of eight characters in the notebook I brought everywhere: *detective*, *flapper*, *bootlegger*, *milkman*, *aristocrat*, *gangster*, *gangster’s mom*, and *reporter*. “My bet’s on the bootlegger and the flapper,” I whispered. “I don’t know what they did, but they seem guilty.”

Joe laughed. “You think?”

“The way this is going, they’re all guilty of overacting,” Chet said.

My bro grinned at me. “Frank, we said we weren’t gonna share who we thought did it until the crime happens. Right now, I don’t think anyone’s committed... anything yet.”

It was safe to say Joe was correct in his assumption. Maybe our bet was still on.

The Hardy boys had always been a renowned detective duo, sleuthing and solving mysteries together to uphold our shiny reputation as Bayport’s number one teenage sleuths. But not when make-believe mysteries needing cracking. Tonight, it was every Hardy for himself.

Biff whistled as the flapper vanished into the train car ahead, followed by the bootlegger. “Wouldja look at the getaway sticks on that spiffy kitten?”

Charlene arched an eyebrow at me, sending my stomach into somersaults. I gave her a silly shrug and nervously averted my eyes, tucking my notebook into my suit jacket.

I watched as Biff and the mafia mama made a show of plucking the necklaces and bracelets off the aristocrat, who was too preoccupied with Detective Parrot’s theatrics to notice.

“I’d better tail those two before they lam off!” the detective announced. “There’ll be no foul play! Not on my watch!” And with that, he chased after the flapper and the bootlegger.

As the detective followed them into the train car ahead, a new actress entered through the same door, decked out in a crisp bow blouse paired with a sweater and pleated skirt. She shook out her short black bob and observed the carriage, holding the doorframe

with a hand to keep from falling over. From the looks of her wire-bound notepad in her other hand, my guess was she was the reporter.

As the aristocrat droned on about how her jewels had been stolen (and as Biff and the mafia mama crammed the necklaces and bracelets into their pockets behind her back), a very pretty passenger around my age in a purple lace dress, pastel fur collar, and chic blond wig stood up and headed into the coach ahead. It was as good a time as any to step out.

“Oh, my dear lady! What are glad rags without ice and oyster fruit?” the reporter asked.

“What? Did they google every bit of 1920s slang?” Joe whispered.

“I’m sure crabbing whoever stole your jewels will be duck soup,” the reporter continued.

“Duck soup? Where? I thought they were only serving dessert,” Chet said, scanning the tables around us.

Biff looked at the door leading into the car ahead. “What was that noise?”

Everything went silent except for the clack of the train on the tracks.

I could tell Joe was trying hard not to burst out laughing.

“I said, *what was that noise?*” Biff hollered. When nothing happened, he sputtered, “I—I thought I heard screamin’ from somewhere onboard. Ya know, from a train car or two ahead.”

“I—I did too! I—I think it was that private eye fella!” the mafia mama piped in.

“The detective’s been snatched!” Biff proclaimed to the car. “But whodunit?”

No luck. As Joe laughed, a chuckle escaped my own lips. My eyes slid back to the production. Four actors were huddled up mid-car, whispering animatedly back and forth, their expressions rapidly shifting from somber to perplexed. Next thing I knew, Biff was sprinting into the car ahead. He returned seconds later with the flapper and the bootlegger, while the reporter scampered back into the dining car and reemerged with the milkman. Then the seven resumed their meeting.

“How come everyone’s being weird?” Charlene whispered.

“The show’s actually getting good,” Murph murmured.

“Seriously!” Chet said. “But fancy desserts aside, I still wouldn’t recommend it to my subscribers.”

“Your subscribers? All five of them?” Joe teased.

Chet was always finding new hobbies, his latest being uploading videos to YouTube reviewing shows and eating, mukbang-style.

Biff broke from the huddle, sprinted over to us, and knelt down. “Frank. Joe. We have a problem,” he whispered. “I told my castmates maybe you could help.”

“Sure,” I said. “What’s up?”

Biff leaned in closer. “So, the actor playing our detective—Trent—well, he’s gone.”

“Gone?” Joe asked skeptically.

“This *is* part of the show, right?” I asked.

Biff shook his head. “It looks like Trent’s... no longer on the train.”

“What do you mean?” Joe’s eyes were wide. “Like he jumped out?”

“No one can find him,” Biff replied with a shrug. “Could you guys come check it out?”

I nodded. Even if it was all part of the act, humoring him would be more fun than whatever we'd been doing for the past half hour. "You got it."

"Yeah, I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. We'll get to the bottom of this," Joe told Biff, his eyes flicking to me. But I knew Joe. What he meant was *he* was going to get to the bottom of this. Dish duty would be mine until I was up to my ears in dirty soapsuds.

Ha! Not if I can help it, little brother of mine.

Chet cleared his throat. "We're on the case! Consider me a detective in *train-ing*."

"Awesome." Biff stood and tipped his fedora at us. "Follow me."

Joe, Chet, and I got up, ignoring the other passengers' curious glances. We trailed after Biff into the library car ahead, which was now a bona fide gift shop. Books about trains filled the walls of shelves zigzagging throughout the room, old railroad lanterns were arranged in a decorative lineup, and a spiraling clock motif was carved into a wood panel between the windows. A clerk our age wearing a conductor's hat and a plum-colored bow tie sat reading a book behind the cash register.

Oof! Someone stepped out from behind one of the bookshelves, and I ran smack into them. "Sorry!"

It was the girl in the purple lace dress I'd seen earlier. "It's cool," she said. Up close, she was supercute in her art deco headband. I got lost in her green eyes and felt heat growing in my cheeks.

"My brother, the romantic!" Joe teased from up ahead. "Come on! Keep up!"

Blushing even deeper, I passed by the girl, nearly running into the college-aged student in the black cloche, who looked over at me from

the bookshelf she'd been perusing.

The next car was a first-class sleeping-car-turned-dressing-room for the actors. A glossy wooden stretch of wall to the left contained doors opening into eight separate compartments.

Biff turned to us. "This is where Trent always goes during this scene." He gestured into a compartment. Trent's name was written on a strip of tape on the door.

Inside were two cushioned benches cluttered with clothes. A satchel was slouched on the floor beside them. There was no Trent in sight.

Joe, Chet, and I popped our heads into the two bathrooms and the other seven compartments. There were mounds of props and tangles of costumes, but still no play-detective.

Biff stopped before the door leading to the next coach. It was solid wood with a window like the rest. "And look." He jostled the brass handle. "It's locked. From the inside."

"Maybe he went through, and someone locked him out," Joe suggested.

Biff shook his head. "The other actors insist that they didn't touch it. Trent would never go missing during a show. I mean, yes, he gets kidnapped in this scene, and we don't see him again until curtain call, but something about this seems off."

"Well, where's the key?" I asked.

Biff shrugged. "Not sure."

"What do you mean? Doesn't somebody typically have a key?" Joe asked.

"I guess." He gave us a sheepish grin. "I usually show up a little late."

Chet pointed his finger skyward. "Looks like something foul may be afoot after all!"

I wasn't convinced. "We'll help you find him." *Meaning I'll help you find him.*

Joe nodded. "Right. We'll find out where Trent went." He leaned in, so only I could hear him. "And when *I* do, dish duty *and* garbage duty are all yours until September."

I *knew* it was still game on. "Yeah, right," I whispered back.

"Hey, what's in there, anyway?" Chet peered into the window of the locked door. When he was done, I looked through the glass pane but saw only darkness.

"Just a sleeping car," Biff said. "None of the other cars beyond this point are in use, since it's a short trip. Dining car at the back, then performance car, then library car, then here. There's no reason Trent would venture off to the empty cars, not during the show. And even if he did, there's no reason the door would magically lock itself behind him."

Chet had been poking around a heap of items on the floor. He snapped open a fan with the words STAY BACK! scrawled across it. "Is this a clue?" he asked, eager to help as always.

Biff scrunched up his mouth. "*That...* would be a stage prop."

"Great." I took the fan. "So how are we supposed to tell a real clue from a phony one?"

2

STAGE FREIGHT

JOE

MAYBE TRENT GOT STAGE FRIGHT,” Frank suggested, handing me the fan.

I turned it over in my hands. Leave it to my brother to always look on the bright side. I couldn’t resist teasing him a little. “Are you only saying that to get back to Charlene for the rest of the show?”

He went red and batted the fan aside. “Of course not.”

Biff shook his head. “Trent isn’t the type to step out. He is dedicated. Beat out a bunch of local hopefuls.” Given what we’d seen, I was surprised to hear people had to audition for the show. “Whatever happened, I know you can find it out. You’re the Hardy boys!”

“Exactly.” I exchanged the fan for a magnifying glass, raising it up against my eye. “Time for the real detectives to find the pretend one.” I was sure Trent was fine—that there was a perfectly reasonable explanation. Besides, I’d get to take this competition with Frank to the next level *and* make this train ride disaster more bearable.

Frank rattled the door handle again. “It’s locked tight, all right.”

I bent down to examine the keyhole.

“The game’s afoot!” exclaimed Chet. “Time to phone our comrades at the precinct!”

I laughed. “There’s no need for all that, Morton. We’re simply going to look around and ask some questions. Besides, they collected our phones at the station, remember?”

Biff’s face lit up. “Not everybody’s.” He turned into one of the dressing room compartments and rummaged through a messenger bag. “The staff get to keep their phones as long as we put them on silent and they stay in here. Funny enough, Trent always carries his with him during the show. He’s addicted to that thing. I have mine right in here. Just one sec.”

“Nifty! Maybe we can use yours to call Trent and see if he picks up,” Chet suggested.

Frank bit his lip. “I’m not seeing a phone...,” he said as Biff upended his bag, then began shaking it.

“Astute observation,” I muttered.

“That’s weird. I could have sworn it was in here.” Biff sifted through his belongings once more before glancing up with a dejected sigh. “This is the third phone I’ve lost this summer. My dad’s gonna kill me....”

Frank shot me a glance. “Let’s go talk to the rest of the cast.”

“Yeah! And maybe we can find out who has the key, too!” Chet added.

We followed Biff back into the library car and bunched up in the narrow doorway of the performance car, trying not to draw attention away from the show. The actors had gone back to playing out their scene. None of the other passengers seemed to realize that anything was wrong.

“The milkman’s milk isn’t the only thing that’s soured!” the aristocrat sneered.

The milkman hesitated as he noticed us in the doorway. His eyebrows rose in a question.

I turned to Biff. “Can you get the cast out of there so we can talk to them?” I whispered.

Biff beckoned to the actors, leaning into his gangster persona. “All of you lot! I’ve got something swanky to show ya, and... uh, you’ll follow me if ya know what’s good for ya!” He managed to wink without the passengers seeing.

The aristocrat loudly cleared her throat, then improvised a line in a put-on British accent. “A clue in the case awaits us! We’ll all return in but a moment.” She strode forward, skirts swishing. The rest of the actors filed behind her.

“Where are *you* going, Hardys?” Charlene asked.

Frank gulped. “Just, uh, to the next car to talk. No reason,” he whispered.

Smooth.

The actors followed us through the library car and crammed into the tight corridor of the dressing room car, where Frank and I explained why we needed to pull them from the show.

“Now,” I said, clapping my hands, “who’s in charge of the keys to the cars?” Our first order of business was seeing if we could search the remainder of the train for Trent.

Everybody’s attention shifted to the flapper. She lifted a tentative gloved hand. “I am.”

“Great! Can you unlock this door?” Frank asked, motioning behind us.

She nodded and moved toward a hook on the wall, but her brow furrowed as she came to an abrupt stop before it. “They’re—they’re gone! I hung them up, I swear.” She shook her head, eyes sweeping the cluttered mess of costumes and props on the floor at her feet. “I’m always the first one here to let the rest of the cast in, and then I hang the keys up on this peg. I *swear* I did.”

Curious. “Do you remember the last time you saw them?” I asked.

She sighed. “It was right before we left the car to start the performance. Maybe half an hour ago?” Her eyes kept combing the messy floor. “We keep all the keys on a silver key ring.” So much for finding a way to unlock the door.

“What about your phones?” Frank asked. “Can anyone spare theirs for us to call Trent?”

Without missing a beat, the actors stepped into their dressing rooms, as if choreographed.

“Hey! My phone’s not here!”

“Yeah, neither’s mine.”

Like Trent and the keys, the phones had vanished. Vanished without a trace.

3

CHUGGING ALONG

FRANK

| **ISN'T THIS DRESSING ROOM CAR** normally off-limits?" I asked.

"Yeah, which means one of *us* must be the thief." The bootlegger eyed the other actors.

"But who would do such a thing?" the aristocrat asked. "And why?"

"Uh, hmm," I said. "Good question."

"Wait!" the flapper called out. "The engineer! I bet he has his phone. Let's go find him!" In a swish of beads, she pushed past us and yanked down on the door handle leading into the car ahead. It was still locked. "Oh. Right. We can't reach the front of the train."

"Is there anyone else up front?" Joe asked.

"Yeah, isn't there usually a fireman up front on old trains too?" Chet chimed in.

"Not on *this* old train," Biff said. "It runs on electricity now."

"So, it looks like our next step is to check the other three unlocked cars for clues," I remarked.

I hadn't noticed that the clerk from the library car had entered the car until he waved. "Did you guys check all the bathrooms?" he

asked.

“We checked the two in here.” Joe gestured to the doors at the far end of the car. “Where are the other ones?”

“There are the two in the performance car,” Biff said, wringing his fedora. “That’s it.”

Joe smirked at me. “Why don’t you go check those ones?”

“Sure,” I said. Who *wouldn’t* want to check out two nasty bathrooms? “Hey, how about you search the dining car while I’m in the performance car, and we meet back in here?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Joe replied.

“Hey!” the bootlegger called, startling us. “What about our phones?”

“And the keys?” the flapper added.

“We’ll look for them, too,” Joe reassured them. “Maybe if we find Trent, we’ll find everything else.” I had to give it to him: Joe also always knew what to say to get an angry mob to cool their jets.

“We’ll stay here until you guys get back,” Biff said. “Promise us one thing, though. Can you try to keep this hush-hush? If word gets out, it could ruin our production.”

The other actors murmured their agreement.

“You got it,” I assured them, shooting Joe a look. He gave a resolute nod.

As we made our way through the troupe, Chet fell into step beside me. “I’m coming with you.” We moved from car to car, nearly crashing into a wall as the train hit a sudden bend.

Joe continued into the dining car, while back in the performance car, the passengers were quietly talking among themselves.

“You check that one,” I whispered to Chet, pointing at one of the bathroom doors. “I’ve got this one.” Inside, I was met with a pungent odor. Considering how grimy the toilet was, it was hard to believe that it had recently been installed. I quickly shut it and turned back to see if Chet was having any more luck than I was.

He gagged as he fanned the air in front of him, letting the door clang shut. “This bathroom reeks!”

“What’s going on, Hardy?” Charlene asked, making me jump.

“Just, uh...” I looked up at the ceiling, which had been carved with an ornate daisy, before settling my focus back on her. “We were looking for someone.” I maneuvered carefully around her.

Chet held his breath beside me and nudged the door back open with his toe. Inside was more or less the same scene I’d witnessed in the bathroom I’d just checked.

“Who are you looking for?” Charlene asked behind us. She was inquisitive, even when she wasn’t reporting on a story for the school paper. It was one of the many things I liked about her. “Listen,” she continued, tapping her pen to her notepad. “I’m writing an article to submit to the *Bayport Bugle* about the town’s newest attraction in hopes it’ll get picked up. I need to know, is this part of the show? We’re in the dark as it is, but it seems like something’s gone off the rails.”

Chet snickered. “‘Off the rails.’ See what you did there, Vale.”

I motioned for Chet to follow me back into the dining car.

“Where are you going now?” Charlene called after us.

“We’ll be right back.”

Inside the dining car, we found Joe lifting the edge of the floor-length tablecloth draped across one of the tables lining either side of

the aisle.

“Whatcha up to, Joe?” Chet asked.

“It seems unlikely Trent would be hiding underneath one of these, but we have to check. Who knows what we might find?”

“Hey, what are you looking for? Can I help?” Charlene had appeared in the doorway, and Murph was standing stalwartly at her side. Luckily, I didn’t think they’d caught Joe’s last remark.

“We’re good, but thanks,” I said, moving from table to table. At the end of the plush red carpet stood a door with a sheaf of wheat carved into its dark wood. Locked. Through its window, we stared out the rear of the train car at the strip of track disappearing into darkness. Chet came up beside us.

“Where could he be?” I whispered. “And where is everybody’s stuff?”

“Maybe the vanishing act is part of the show,” Chet mused. “If so, it’s pretty clever. They’ve found a way to stump the Hardys!”

“Hey, we’ve got two hours to go,” Joe said smugly, turning back. “Let’s come up with a game plan with the actors to keep the passengers calm while we continue the search.”

But when we reached the doorway at the other end of the dining car, Charlene blocked our way, her arms folded over her chest. “Frank and Joe Hardy, I’m not moving until you tell Murph and me what’s going on.”

“Yeah, if something’s gone south, we deserve to know,” Murph added.

Chet scowled. “You’re impeding an active investigation, guys.”

“Um, Chet,” I said, patting him on the arm, “you’re really taking this detective-in-training thing and running with it, huh?”

“Don’t you mean ‘chugging along’ with it?” he offered with a wink.

Joe groaned, but couldn’t help breaking into a grin.

As expected, Charlene rolled her eyes. “Oh please. This is amateur hour if I’ve ever seen it.” Still, she pivoted out of the way.

“Sorry,” I whispered to her as I squeezed past. “It’s all kind of hush-hush right now.”

Back in the performance car, it looked like passengers had grown curious and concerned.

“Where’s everyone gone?”

“Is the show over?”

“My grandson’s not feeling well,” the old lady told me, her arm wrapped around a little boy, who was groaning as he cradled his stomach. I wondered if it was one of the fancy desserts he’d eaten earlier.

One of the men in black suits rolled his eyes. “This is the worst wedding anniversary ever.”

His husband glared. “Last time I plan a surprise for you.”

Keeping our heads down, we continued forward to get back to the cast.

“Wait!” Charlene said. “Just... listen. Murph and I are bored out of our minds. We won’t get in your way, Hardys. Let us help.”

I felt myself caving. We were getting nowhere. Maybe they could be useful. “Okay,” I relented. “Could you please keep the passengers calm?”

“No offense, but I didn’t mean babysitting,” replied Charlene.

Murph crossed his arms. “At least tell us what’s going on.”

I leaned in, eyeing Charlene's notepad. "Fine, but it's off the record, okay?"

She nodded eagerly, and Murph gave a thumbs-up.

"Between us five, an actor's gone missing."

"I knew it!" Charlene pumped her fist. "The detective, right?"

"So much for keeping things hush-hush," Joe whispered in my ear.

Ignoring him, I glanced over my shoulder. "The keys to the train cars and all the actors' phones have vanished too. Now, the longer we keep the passengers out of this, the better. Can you make sure they're in the dark and keep your eyes peeled for anything odd?"

Charlene flashed a smile. "That much we can do."

Well?" Biff asked once we returned to the dressing room car.

"No Trent. No phones. No keys," I announced.

"Also," added Chet, "who knew train bathrooms were just as gross as airplane ones?"

Nobody laughed.

"We'll keep searching," Joe reassured the cast. "In the meantime, you should keep on going with the play. Keep the masses settled, you know? Let them think this is all part of the show."

By now, Joe and I were pretty sure that whatever was happening *wasn't* at all part of the show.

"I think that's a great idea," Biff said with his signature charming smile.

The rest of the cast seemed to soften at his words.

"As they say, the show must go on," the aristocrat said meekly. "Shall we?"

The mafia mama put her hands on her hips. “I’m not moving until I have my phone back.”

“These nice young men are on the case,” the milkman replied with a genial smile.

“He’s right,” Biff said. “If anyone can find our phones—and Trent—it’s these guys.”

“Fine,” the mafia mama huffed, though she didn’t look convinced.

Biff flicked his fedora up onto his head. “Let us know if there’s any way we can help.”

“Will do,” Joe and I said in unison.

“Let’s go over what we know,” I said as I led Joe and Chet into the library car and the actors retreated back to what I hoped would be a more convincing performance than we’d seen so far. The gift shop was empty apart from the clerk, who’d resumed his place behind the antique cash register. I caught a name tag pinned to his vest: RAVI PATEL.

I rested a hand on the countertop. “Is it okay we’re in here?”

“Sure. Go for it.”

“Great. Thanks.” I drew out my notebook from my suit jacket pocket, flipped it open, and laid it on the counter. Joe and Chet peered at it over my shoulders. “First things first. Trent. So, who *wasn’t* around when he went missing?” I clicked my pen and hovered it over the page where I’d listed the eight characters.

“Are we making a *suspect list*?” Chet asked, wide-eyed. “This is so cool!”

“Something like that. We need a place to start. Maybe we can figure out who saw him last,” I suggested.

Joe planted his finger on gangster. “Well, we know Biff was in the performance car—”

“With the mafia mama, the reporter, and the aristocrat,” I interjected.

He shot me an irritated look. “I was getting there. Let’s rule them out.”

“Done.” I drew Xs next to each of their names.

“Oh! The milkman was in the dining car!” Chet said, jumping up and down.

“Since the dining car’s behind the performance car, it’s safe to assume he didn’t see anything from way back there,” I said.

“Sounds about right to me,” Joe replied.

I placed an X next to the milkman. “Now what about the flapper and the bootlegger? They left the performance car first, then Trent followed them out.”

“They might know something we don’t,” Joe said, nodding thoughtfully.

“Hey, what about—” Chet smile-wincing as his eyes locked with the clerk’s.

“Ravi.” He chuckled. “It’s cool. I was in here the whole time.”

“And you didn’t see anything out of the norm?” Joe asked.

“Assuming you’re innocent.” Chet narrowed his eyes. “And honest.”

Joe and I both elbowed him.

“Ouch!” Chet yelled, rubbing his ribs. Served him right.

Ravi leaned against the counter. “Everything was fine. Dudes, no, seriously,” he added when we didn’t look convinced. “I was doing mad reading.” He tapped a thick volume on the counter, open to a

black-and-white photo of people hauling wood and pushing heaps of stones in wheelbarrows.

“A bit of light reading?” Chet asked, reaching out to flip through the book’s pages.

Ravi folded his arms. “Yeah. I read. Is that a crime?”

“Was anyone else in here with you?” I asked.

Ravi strummed his thumbs against the countertop, staring off into space.

“What about that lady in all black and Frank’s crush in purple lace?” Joe asked. “They both got up during the show and came in here.”

I blushed while shooting daggers at Joe. He couldn’t resist making me squirm.

Ravi nodded. “Oh yeah. Them.” I was starting to think he might not be the most reliable source.

“Write that down,” Joe said.

I wrote *Two passengers* in my notebook, then looked back up at Joe and Chet. “Was there anyone else up and about when Trent went missing?”

“Hey, what about that old guy who got up to use the bathroom?” Chet said.

“Bathroom Man,” I murmured, amending my note.

“Nice going, Morton.” Joe clapped Chet on the back.

“Thanks!” He brightened. “Oh, guys! The engineer! I mean, what if he’s behind it?”

I shrugged. “Unlikely. Who’d be keeping the train running?”

“Fine. Never mind!” Chet said sulkily. “So much for ‘Nice going, Morton.’”

“It’s all good!” Joe gave him another pat on the back and the pleased smile once again appeared on Chet’s face. Joe leaned over to give the list another glance. “I think that’s everyone.”

“Okay. Let’s go talk to these folks to find out if they saw anything.”

Chet lifted a finger. “Or to see if they’re possible suspects.” It appeared he was getting the hang of investigating.

Joe checked his watch. “We don’t have much time. Maybe a little under two hours before we’re back at Trainsville. Why don’t we split up? I’ll grab the three passengers and bring them back here for questioning. You go get the two actors—the flapper and the bootlegger.”

“I can get the passengers,” I said quickly, thinking of the girl in the purple lace dress and her sparkling green eyes.

“All right, Frank. Meet you back in”—Joe checked his watch again—“five minutes?”

“Five minutes?” I laughed. “I can have them back here in four.”

“Fine. Four it is,” Joe said. “I’ll time you.”

“I’ll stay here to avoid making too much of a scene,” Chet said before turning to Ravi. “Hey, do you like YouTube? I just rated every pie from Sal’s Diner on my channel. You should subscribe!”

“Ready, Frank?” Joe said. “See you back here in three.”

“Two,” I said, slipping my notebook back into my suit jacket.

“After you. I insist,” Joe said, gesturing ahead. “Besides, you’ll need the head start.”

4

WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS

JOE

HARDY BROTHERS? OH, I REMEMBER reading about you online,” said Frank’s latest crush as she tucked a strand of her blond wig behind her ear. “How can we help? I mean, besides keeping things under wraps.” She was standing between the old man with the spray tan and the college student who’d been seated across from us during the show. The flapper filled out the suspect lineup.

“You were the only ones out of your seats at the time Trent went missing,” I explained.

“Besides the bootlegger, who we’ll speak with later,” Frank interjected.

When I’d gone to retrieve the bootlegger, he’d been onstage. The flapper was clearing away cups and refilling mugs, and could afford to step away without causing a ruckus. Apparently, besides serving refreshments, the actors were also responsible for cleanup when they weren’t dishing out dialogue.

“For now,” I announced, “we’d love to pick your brains. You might’ve seen or heard something that helps us figure out this mess.”

The flapper glanced at the elderly passenger and fussed with a strand of her hair.

“I’m not exactly sure I can be of much help,” he admitted, his red cheeks showing through the orange tan caked over his wrinkly face.

“We know where *you* were,” Chet said with a nod and a wink.

“Chet, don’t be creepy,” I whispered.

He winced. “Sorry!”

“That’s right. The restroom.” The man cleared his throat and cracked a smile, revealing perfect porcelain veneers. “I was in there for a while. I reckon you would be too if you’d devoured your dessert as quickly as I did.” He let out a nervous chuckle, dabbing at his forehead with an embroidered handkerchief. “I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.” Between his three-piece wool suit and having to admit he’d been sick in front of complete strangers, it was no wonder the man was sweating bullets.

Frank sighed. “What’s your name, sir?”

The old man unbuttoned the top of his shirt and fanned his blotchy neck. “Heath Crowley. I came with my sister and her grandson. He’s not feeling all that well himself.”

Frank jotted down a note. “We hope you feel better. You can head back. And again, we’d really appreciate it if you could keep this all confidential.”

The flapper forced a smile. “So sorry for the trouble, Mr. Crowley.”

Mr. Crowley gave her a pained smile. “It’s no problem.” He gulped. “Secret’s safe with me, gentlemen. Good luck in your search.” He ran his hand through the little wisps of what looked like wiry hair plugs, then hurried out of the car.

“What about the rest of you?” I asked. “Anyone see or hear anything odd?”

They exchanged glances, clearly waiting for the others to start.

“I can go first,” the flapper finally said. “I was in here. Me and Sebastian—the bootlegger—usually hang out in the library car while Trent follows us out and then goes on ahead to scream. Today was no different. We watched Trent pass through to the dressing rooms like always.”

Interesting. I made a mental note to check if the bootlegger could corroborate her story.

“But then Trent didn’t scream like he was supposed to.”

“You don’t say.” I gave her a look, encouraging her to keep going, but she clammed up.

“How about you?” Frank asked the girl in the purple lace dress. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name. Did you notice anything strange around the time Trent left the car?”

“I’m Marigold.” She grinned at him. “I was in here. I needed to stretch my legs.” She flashed the flapper a sympathetic smile. “It wasn’t that the show was *bad*...”

The flapper chewed her bloodred bottom lip and looked down at her heels.

“Please!” cut in the college student. “We *all* needed a break.”

“And what’s your name?” I asked, giving her my full attention.

She wore a cheery put-on smile. “Karen,” she replied, wringing her black-leather-gloved hands. “Can I go now? I’d rather be back in there watching the show than in here being grilled by two... what did you two say you were... ‘sleuths’?” She snorted.

“Anyway, it wasn’t that the show was bad,” Marigold continued, “but I wanted to check out the gift shop. I was in here for a while, I guess. It’s a maze in here. But I didn’t see anything out of the norm.”

The flapper studied the segments of bookcase walls, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

Karen looked from the flapper to us and shook her head. “We didn’t see anything unusual, okay?” She placed a protective hand on her sequined purse. “And if I had my phone on me, I’d call an Uber to pull up alongside this moving train.”

Marigold gave an uncomfortable little chuckle.

“Gents.” The flapper looked at the others, then back at us. “Can we talk? Privately?”

“All right. This was fun,” Karen said. “Come on, Marigold.” She spun to leave.

“Actually, can you two please wait here? This will only take a second.” Before they could object, I waved the flapper to follow me, and navigated around a bookshelf, with Frank and Chet on our heels. I was pretty sure nobody could overhear us there. I glanced back to see Karen and Marigold chatting with Ravi.

As I reached the wall, I pulled up short. The shelves on either side were filled with antique baby dolls and leering ventriloquist dummies staring down at us with glossy eyes. I shivered. The library car could give our local haunted bookstore a run for its money. On the wall was a framed map of the train’s trek winding up and down the coast of the bay.

The flapper spoke so quietly, I had to rely on my lipreading skills. “I didn’t think to mention it earlier, but I saw Ravi poking around this afternoon. He was one of the first people aboard, which is odd

because he's usually one of the last on. Well, apart from Biff, who's always late. I thought it was strange. And there was something else."

Karen poked her head around the bookshelf. "Seriously, I'm heading to my seat now."

"One second." I turned back to the flapper. "You were saying?"

She looked nervously from Karen to me, and bit down on her lip. She clearly didn't want an audience, at least not now. "Sorry, I...?"

"There was something else?" Frank prompted.

"Oh. Just that I was aboard early to pay respects to Mr. Mayhem."

"What do you mean? Who's Mr. Mayhem?" The name sounded vaguely familiar.

"Mr. Mayhem." She blinked her glue-on lashes at me. "You don't know?"

"Know *what*?" Frank and I asked at the same time.

Chet looked at us incredulously. "Seriously, guys?"

Suddenly, Marigold appeared beside us. So much for privacy. "Mr. Mayhem was the original owner of this train. Back in the 1920s." She pointed at the framed map on the wall, where a track branched off from the main line and continued to snake along the coastline, before ending at an unfinished bridge. "That's the bridge the train almost plummeted off. Legend has it that Mr. Mayhem jumped from the train and rerouted its course... at the terrible cost of his own life. Hit by the train he saved. Today marks the anniversary of his death. It's why I booked my ticket. I'm hoping to see his ghost."

"Talk about unsettling," I said.

"And confusing," Frank added. "How would he have had time to jump off, race ahead of the train, *and* move the switch?"

I shrugged. "Guess that's why it's called a legend."

“Hey, I need to get back to the show,” the flapper announced after an uneasy moment. “My next scene is coming up.”

Frank gulped, his eyes flitting to Marigold as his face flushed. “Thanks for, uh, talking with us.”

We followed the others around the corner and watched as they exited the gift shop.

Marigold hesitated at the door. “For what it’s worth, this is typical of Trent.”

“Trent has a habit of going missing?”

“Oh, he’s famous for making a scene,” she said, a smile playing on her lips.

Frank’s eyes widened. “Wait, you know Trent?”

Marigold fidgeted with a loose thread on her dress. The car was quiet except for the clacking of the train and the occasional shudder of shelves. “I go to school with him,” she finally said.

Something about Marigold seemed familiar. Her oval-shaped face. Her unforgettable green eyes. But I’d never seen either her or Trent at Bayport High. “Here in town?”

“Nope. Summit, New Jersey.”

“So you and Trent are both conveniently in Bayport on the same train?”

“Yeah. He’s kind of a big deal at our school.”

“Why’s he such a big deal?” Frank asked, sounding defensive.

“Well, he’s the star of every play. I guess that comes with experience. He’s also kind of a live wire. Something probably ticked him off during the show and he needed to take a walk, get some fresh air. Maybe the door got locked accidentally. I seriously wouldn’t sweat it.”

“If Trent was locked out, then why isn’t he banging to be let back in?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Maybe he decided to lie down. Who knows? Like I said, he’s kind of a loose cannon.”

“What’s your definition of ‘loose cannon’?” Frank asked.

“One time Trent got so mad at some kid, he put *rats* in his locker.” Marigold shuddered.

“Ahh, *that* kind of loose cannon. Got it.”

“Look, I hope you find him.” Catching Frank’s eye, she broke into a dazzling smile before spinning around and vanishing back into the performance car.

“Even if Trent locked himself out of the dressing room car, that still doesn’t explain where the keys are, and why everyone’s phones have mysteriously disappeared.” I sighed. “It feels like we’re no closer to finding him.”

“I wonder if maybe Marigold’s right and Trent’s a wild card.” Frank was still beet-red. “And what about the flapper? She wanted to tell us something else, and I don’t think it was about Mr. Mayhem.”

“Yeah,” Chet said. “She was acting so nervous. Not *acting*. Ugh. You know what I mean.”

“Not nervous,” I corrected. “*Frightened*.”

“Maybe Mr. Mayhem’s ghost put her on edge,” Chet joked.

“Wait. *Who’s* Mr. Mayhem again?” I asked. “Is it weird I’m not intimately familiar with this story?”

“Easton Mayhem?” Chet shook me. “*Everyone* knows Easton Mayhem.”

Frank grinned. “Apparently not everyone.”

“I learned all about him when I was reading up for tonight,” Chet explained. “Got to have juicy nuggets for the subscribers, right? Anyway, didn’t you see that log statue of the man looming over Trainsville before we left?”

Frank nodded. “Oh yeah. Couldn’t miss it.”

“Enlighten us, Morton.” I was getting impatient.

“Mr. Mayhem is revered as one of the few long-lost heroes of Bayport. Like Marigold mentioned, the story is that he died trying to save his passengers when the train almost veered onto the wrong track and off the unfinished bridge. The route was abandoned and the bridge was never finished. I’m not sure why. But rumor is that there’s an... otherworldly... reason no one’s dared touch that track.”

I grimaced. “Yikes. Spooky.”

“That’s not all,” Chet continued. “Legend has it this very *train* is haunted.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “And how is that gonna help us crack the case?”

“Good point,” I said. “I’m gonna go talk to the bootlegger. His name’s Sebastian, right? He was one of the last people to see Trent before he disappeared. Maybe he knows something we don’t.”

Frank gave me a thumbs-up. “And I’m gonna go find the keys to get us into the rest of the train. We haven’t really given this car a thorough search”—he lowered his voice—“and with any luck, I’ll find out what Ravi was really doing aboard early today.”

“And I’m gonna... try again to convince Ravi to subscribe to my channel,” Chet said.

I ignored my fame-seeking friend and flashed my brother a grin. “Game on. I can’t wait to solve this case.”

“What do you mean *you’re* solving it?”

“Bet’s still on.” I wagged my eyebrows. “If I figure out what’s going on, you have dish duty and garbage duty the rest of the summer—*and* you have to pay me back for my ticket.”

“Fine, but you’ll be eating your words.”

I opened the door, then turned. “Keep telling yourself that, bro.”

Chet slow-clapped. “Not bad!” He looked from me to Frank and back. “Epic! You guys should really consider auditioning for the next murder mystery train production!”

5

PICKING UP STEAM

FRANK

LOOK! YOU CAN GET YOUR name engraved on a rusty rail spike!” Chet tapped the glass display case in the library car’s gift shop before turning back to me. “Anything you wanna check out in here before we head back to the dressing rooms and take another crack at that door?”

“I’m thinking,” I replied. It was true. I needed to find those missing keys, but we’d already scoured every nook and cranny of the labyrinthine library car with no luck. I couldn’t stop thinking about the potential progress Joe was making in the car behind us and how I needed to get Ravi to spill why he’d been aboard the train earlier than the other actors.

While I tried to form a new plan, I idly thumbed through one of the comic books I’d plucked off a nearby shelf. It was a special Bayport Trains edition, something I’d never seen in my days cruising the aisles at Sir Robert’s Comic Kingdom. A few spreads were devoted to Easton Mayhem, with panels showing him hoisting a flag into soil on the front lines of a war, and later hosting glamorous parties at an opulent-looking mansion.

After the war, Easton came into a bit of money, which he put toward his love for the new-to-the-scene railways. He'd come from nothing, a mere shoeshine boy in a small town, yet lived a rich and fulfilling life before leaving behind a lasting legacy—one Bayport shan't soon forget.

A spread showed the Mayhem Express barreling toward a railroad crossing, the switch locked so the train would lurch onto the right-most track headed for the unfinished bridge. Mr. Mayhem clung to the outside of the cab, gritting his teeth, before he leaped from the train and landed on a wild stallion. The horse thundered ahead. Just in time, Mayhem threw himself off, and using all his strength, shifted the switch. The train continued on, all the passengers aboard safe. But Mayhem was not. His foot jammed between a pair of railroad ties, and as the train hurtled past, he was pulled under. The next box was just a sound bubble coming from the train. The engineer called out. Passengers pressed their tear-streaked faces against the train's windows. A final panel showed a closed coffin. It looked like the artist had taken some liberties with *actual* events.

"Are those originals?" Chet was gazing up at the shelf of old railroad lanterns, which clattered with the car's bumpy movement.

"Yeah, they're antiques," Ravi replied. "They burn oil and everything."

"Sick! Do they still work?" Chet asked.

Ravi looked up at the shelf behind him. "They should." He turned back to Chet, who was digging in his pockets for cash. "But they're not for sale. They were lent to us straight from the Bayport History Museum." Ravi reached up, lifted one down, and set it gently on the countertop. "Feel free to check it out, though."

Chet's face fell, but he inspected the lantern anyway, tracing a finger over the tall glass globe. "Wow! It has the railroad stamp on the dome and everything!" he said, awed. "Manufacturer: Barmet and Brey. Railroad: Mayhem Line."

I finished flipping through the comic book, then put it back onto the stack where I'd found it. As I surveyed the lighters, fake gold nuggets, silver pocket watches, and wooden train whistles on display behind glass, the open leather book on the countertop caught my eye: the train's ledger we'd all been asked to sign upon boarding. The page was marked with the date, and signatures ran down the neat column alongside space for phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Twenty passenger names in all, including ours. I didn't know what I was looking for. Perhaps a strange twenty-first name?

Next, my gaze slid to Ravi's book, still resting on the counter. Now that it was shut, I could make out the title on the front cover. "*Bayport Trains: A History?* So, you're a train enthusiast."

"I prefer 'history buff.'" Ravi swiped the book off the countertop and shoved it roughly into a leather satchel, cramming it alongside loose pages showing sketches of diagrams.

"Where'd you get your book?"

"Why?" he asked defensively.

I motioned to the shelves. "I noticed it's not one of the ones on sale here."

"I got it from the main gift shop at Trainsville." He shrugged. "I work there, too."

"So you *are* a train enthusiast," Chet said.

Ravi scowled. "Listen, guys. I seriously didn't see anything weird happen tonight during the show. I was reading my book. People

came in and out, checking out the shop. That's honestly it."

This was my in. "What about *before* the show? Can you tell us what you were doing onboard earlier today before the passengers arrived?"

"So I'm not late for once. And...?"

I crossed my arms, willing him to say more.

After a moment, he took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. "Fine. I was meeting someone."

"Who?" I pressed.

Ravi narrowed his eyes at me. "None of your business, dude."

An ID badge was clipped to the metal ring of his satchel. "What's that for?"

"My summer internship at Trainsville. I get to shadow Professor Woodward and volunteer with the rest of the staff restoring the museum's old trains. It's slow work, but for a 'train enthusiast' like me"—he let out a lighthearted, laid-back laugh—"it's pretty awesome."

"Is this one of the trains you're helping to restore?" I asked.

Ravi's thick eyebrows rose. "Yeah. So? It's a lot of work."

Chet pointed at his satchel. "What are those sheets of paper? They look old!"

They did, indeed. And if my eyes weren't deceiving me, they looked like drawings of train cars. Ravi stooped down and flicked the leather top over his bag, hiding its contents from view. "Again, none of your business. Now are you done investigating me?"

I smiled. "You seem a little on edge. Any reason for that?"

Ravi leaned back against a framed photo on the wall that showed the murder mystery cast, crossed his arms, and sighed. "Isn't it

obvious? The whole show's done for. Trent was supposed to be kidnapped from the dressing room car, not *actually* go missing. If it gets out that Trent vanished in the middle of the show, it could tank the whole production before it even has the chance to pick up steam."

Chet giggled. "Pick up steam."

"Look, I know I'm only an intern, but I like trains." Ravi shrugged. "Sue me."

I was determined not to stray from my line of questioning. "As a train enthusiast, do you think turning historic trains into party events is the best use for them?"

Ravi twisted around on his stool to study the photo of the ensemble hanging on the wall. "I mean, sure, some may not agree with using the Mayhem Express for a murder mystery show. But we don't really have a choice if we want to keep Trainsville up and running."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, without these new murder mystery shows raking in the cash, we wouldn't be able to keep restoring the trains."

If Trent's disappearance was enough to tank the murder mystery company before the production had a chance to get going, that could be a motive. But whose? Biff had wanted to keep the incident quiet for the same reason. I couldn't be sure of anything.

Turning the idea over in my head, I pulled out my notebook and jotted down a note before grabbing a brochure off the counter, featuring the cast of the show on the front. Flipping it open, I saw black-and-white headshots of each actor. "Mind if I hold on to this?"

“They’re free.” Ravi laughed. “Why? Thinking of making a donation to Trainsville?”

“There are a lot of people aboard. It may help us keep track of who’s who.” After skimming the bios of each of the eight actors, focusing a little longer on Trent with his long face, light eyes, and narrow nose, I tucked the brochure into my pocket. Nothing Ravi had disclosed was shady per se, but what he’d said about Trent’s disappearance having the potential to drum up bad reviews was interesting.

“Let’s check out the dressing room car again,” I called to Chet. “It’s so cluttered in there that maybe the keys are buried under a pile of clothing or something.”

“I bet you’re right. See you later, Ravi.”

He gave a half-hearted wave. “Enjoy your ride on the Phantom Express.”

I turned back to face him. “The *what?*”

“After Mayhem’s death, passengers swore they heard ghosts in the walls and ceilings.” Ravi wiggled his fingers. “*Ghosts all around.*”

Chet beamed and socked my shoulder. “*Everyone* knows about the Phantom Express!”

I laughed. “I’m not up-to-date with all of Bayport’s ghost stories, I guess.”

“Well, that’s pretty much the extent of it,” Chet said with a shrug.

“Ghosts in the walls of this train? Not too scary,” I said. “At least they’re contained.” I couldn’t help thinking of Marigold and her eerie fascination with Easton Mayhem’s ghost.

After saluting Ravi, Chet and I ducked into the swaying dressing room car. It was dim and musty-smelling, but we were alone and

could finally talk freely.

“So, are we any closer to figuring out what’s going on?” Chet asked.

“Well, what Ravi told me gives us a new angle to consider. Someone might have wanted to take down the murder mystery company. But that still doesn’t explain where Trent is. Unless it was *Trent* who wanted to make waves.”

“Sounds like a loose cannon thing to do,” Chet mused. “Or maybe Ravi has something to do with it. If he’s a train enthusiast, maybe *he* doesn’t like how they’ve wasted this restoration to build a party train.” It wasn’t a bad theory. His detective skills weren’t as shabby as I’d thought.

“We need to talk to more people, see if we can find any other clues. This could all still be some big misunderstanding. Maybe Trent is curled up somewhere taking a catnap, like Marigold suggested.”

“Ooh! Marigold!” Chet made smooching sounds while shimmying his shoulders. “I think you’re the cat’s pajamas, Marigold! *Mwah! Mwah!*”

I cocked my head. “How was I the one who got stuck with you again?”

Chet nudged me. “I thought you had a thing for Charlene! You ever going to ask her out?”

“I don’t know.” I cleared my throat. “Do you think she’s here on a date with Murph?”

“What! No! You should ask her out already. Forget Marigold. I don’t trust her or her green eyes. Besides, Detective Work 101: Don’t fall for suspects!”

“Suddenly you know all about detecting?” I laughed. “I’ll think about it, okay?” I usually wasn’t so easily smitten. It took me a while to develop my crush on Charlene, and that was only after discovering she was honest, hardworking, and kind. Yet here I was, goo-goo-eyed for Marigold, and I barely knew a thing about her.

I took in the contents of the dressing rooms, which were spilling out into the narrow corridor—everything from Styrofoam busts modeling sparkly feathered headbands to a gaping gramophone. Finding anything in this mess would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s locate that key ring.”

6

BRAKE IN THE CASE

JOE

RHATZ!” THE BOOTLEGGER PROCLAIMED, shaking his fist. “Detective Parrot goes missing, and everyone thinks we did it! It’s a bunch of phonus bolonus, if you ask me.”

“Oh, it’s a bunch of hotsy-totsy!” the flapper replied.

I eyed the bootlegger from my chair. How in the world was I supposed to question him mid-scene? The mafia mama blocked my view, pouring coffee from a silver pot into china cups that sloshed their contents into little saucers, which sloshed their contents onto the tiny tables.

Meanwhile, the flapper ducked behind the kitchenette mid-car and reemerged with a tray of glasses. She handed them out and stopped at the booth right behind me.

“Hi, Mr. Crowley,” I heard her whisper. “Again, we’re terribly sorry for tonight’s inconveniences. Here’s a ginger ale to settle that stomach of yours.” Over my shoulder, I caught her handing him a glass of translucent liquid. It looked as still and as silty as rusty tap water.

“Thank you.” He took a tentative sip, grimaced, and put on a jolly smile. Then he drew out a handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead, which was beaded with sweat.

“Stick ’em up!” Biff hollered from close by, making me start and whip around to face the action. He circled the aristocrat, the faux old-timey clunker pistol in his hand aimed at her.

“It’s the least we can do for Trainsville’s biggest patron,” I heard the flapper whisper, waving him off.

I turned back around and noticed that Mr. Crowley’s sister and grandson were no longer in the booth.

Mr. Crowley chuckled. “Can I have some napkins, too?” he asked. His handkerchief was now crumpled on the table, completely soaked through.

“Of course, Mr. Crowley!” The flapper pinched a handful of gold cocktail napkins from the tray and placed them on his table. “And if there’s anything else you need, please let me know.”

He bobbed his head, dabbing the napkins across his perspiring brow.

So Mr. Crowley was Trainsville’s biggest patron.

The flapper noticed me, and her face flushed. “What are you doing in here?”

“Working,” I whispered, before swiftly spinning back around to the show.

“I *said*, where’s my cabbage?” the bootlegger shouted from down the car.

I was surprised to see all eyes were on the flapper.

“Ugh! It’s my line!” I heard her mutter. She cleared her throat and set her tray down on Chet’s empty chair. “Oh no. What’s my line?”

She fished her script pages from the top of her dress and skimmed until she found the right spot. “Wouldja quit being such a wet blanket!” she projected to the car.

“Hi, Mr. Crowley.” I flashed him my winning grin.

“Why, hello there again, young man,” he replied, his ice-blue eyes crinkling at the corners.

“I hope your stomach’s feeling better. And your sister’s grandson’s too.”

Mr. Crowley wiped at his brow again and cringed. “Unfortunately, the bug is back.”

Judging from the way he kept swaying and glancing over at the bathroom, I knew I didn’t have much time before he’d have to excuse himself. “I’m sorry to hear that. Hey, are you excited to see a historic train like this one back up and running?”

Mr. Crowley chuckled. “I love these old trains. They’re part of Bayport’s rich history. They should see the light of day.”

“Is that why you’re the museum’s biggest patron? To keep its restoration efforts alive?”

He cupped a hand to his stomach. His smile was wavering. “Oh, my donations alone can’t keep Trainsville’s restoration program running, but they certainly help.”

“It must be nice knowing these murder mystery shows are cash cows, then.”

“Murder mysteries and children’s birthday parties are utterly frivolous, but I do suppose Trainsville needs all the money it can possibly get.” That’s what Chet had said. Mr. Crowley’s eyes flitted to the bathroom again, then back to me. “Alas, I can only donate so

much.” He took another sip of soda and grimaced. “That is foul. If you don’t mind.” Then he stood and bowed into the bathroom.

When I returned my focus to the stage, the bootlegger, Sebastian, was mere feet away, and I instantly homed back in on my goal of getting him to talk. “Psst,” I whispered.

Sebastian looked down his wide-set nose at me, eyebrow arched.

“Can we have a quick word?” I asked.

He looked away, eyes fixed on the “musical performance” taking place. (The aristocrat was giving life advice to the flapper via a song, croaking out lyrics about the importance of... *a fire extinguisher?*) “Sure,” Sebastian finally mumbled out the side of his mouth. “What’s up?”

“Did you notice anything unusual before Trent went missing?” I asked.

“Well, me and Alyssa—the flapper—were in the library car and watched him go on ahead to the dressing rooms. Same as always.”

Sebastian’s recollection *did* match the flapper’s....

“Did you notice anything strange? Is there anything I should know about Trent?”

Sebastian’s eyes were still focused on his fellow castmates, but he tensed.

Across the aisle, Charlene and Murph were watching me like hawks. A few other passengers glanced over in my direction as well. I did my best to ignore them all. For some reason, Marigold couldn’t seem to take her eyes off me. Suddenly, I recalled what she’d said about Trent’s unpredictability.

“I’ve heard some things about him, but I’m hoping you can elaborate.”

Sebastian removed his cap and started wringing it nervously. I purposely kept quiet, determined not to break my gaze as I waited him out. “So, you know about the inheritance, right?”

Inheritance? What inheritance? *Now* we were getting somewhere!

“I was hoping you could help me fill in the blanks?” I murmured. I could be a pretty good actor too, when I put my mind to it.

What is going on? Charlene mouthed to me.

The couple in the booth opposite me were also eyeing us. One shushed me. But I was closing in on answers! I chanced another question. “What *about* the inheritance?”

Sebastian’s eyes darted left, then right. “Only that Mr. Mayhem left all his money to his granddaughter. The fortune passed to her daughter, Trent’s grandmother, who recently kicked the bucket, so now Trent’s filthy rich. We’re talking millions.”

Talk about a bombshell! But why in the world would a teenager with a larger-than-life fortune be working as an actor in a terrible theater production? “I didn’t know Trent and the Mayhems were related,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady as I processed the wild revelation.

“Yep.” Sebastian shoved his cap back on, his dark eyes obscured by the brim’s shadow.

I scooted to the edge of my chair. “Does anyone else know? The other actors, I mean?”

He gave a barely perceptible nod. “Trent didn’t want people knowing, but word still got around, of course. You can’t keep secrets in the theater.” Before I could ask anything else, the aristocrat finished her song and summoned Sebastian to her side.

He swaggered away down the aisle, delivering his next lines about a “soup job.”

I stared at my dumbfounded reflection in the dark window, trying to work out what it all meant. I needed to find Frank—and not just so I could brag to him that I was clearly the better detective. If Trent was distantly related to Mr. Mayhem—and sitting on an enormous fortune!—suddenly his disappearance had a sinister whiff to it. I stood and wriggled toward the library car. I was almost there when a hand grabbed my wrist.

“Do you really think you can keep running around and it won’t raise a few eyebrows?” Murph asked.

I glanced back at the other passengers, and sure enough, most of them were staring at us.

“Murph, not now.”

“I mean, how can this junk seriously still be going on?” He wasn’t nearly as quiet as he thought he was. “No one even *likes* this show! We have an actor *missing*!”

The train car fell silent. Now everyone was looking our way. Even the actors.

“Oh my gosh!” cried a man. “An actor’s gone missing?”

“Oh! Was the bad play a ruse and this is the *real* mystery?” a girl asked hopefully.

“What happened?” a concerned voice rang out.

“We’re looking into it,” Biff said quickly. “Everybody, stay calm.”

“Is this some kind of joke?” another passenger called out.

Well, cat’s out of the bag, so I might as well go with it.

“Has anyone seen the actor who plays the detective or a set of keys?” I yelled. “Or cell phones? Did anyone sneak theirs aboard?”

My questions were met with a carful of shaking heads.

“I *wish*,” someone muttered.

It’d been worth a shot.

The train car rumbled both from the tracks and voices filled with concern and doubt. Half the passengers were panicking. The other half didn’t seem to buy the breaking news.

I shot Murph an annoyed look. “Nice going.”

He cringed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

I shook my head, then stormed out before he could finish.

7

GHOST TRAIN

FRANK

| **FOUND SOMETHING!” CHET HELD** up a gold button with an intricate design. “Maybe it’s a clue!”

I lifted a jacket missing a gold button and shook my head.

Chet dug into another heap of clothes and screamed, yanking back his hand.

“What? What is it?”

He reached back into the pile and pulled out a fake-fur stole. “Oh, sorry. I thought it was a stowaway raccoon or something.” He chuckled uneasily. I wasn’t amused.

I’d already rummaged through the actors’ belongings, sifting through mounds of stale clothes, cans of hair spray, tissue boxes, hairy combs, rubber knives, and rubber chickens. Nothing seemed too out of the ordinary. And though we had been exhaustive with our search—we’d even run our fingertips into the deep etchings of a feather motif in a wood wall panel—we hadn’t found the keys. Maybe we needed to talk to the flapper again.

I rooted around in a satchel with **TRENT** stenciled on it. Inside was a pack of mint gum, ChapStick, and a Nintendo Switch. As expected,

there was no phone, or anything of interest.

A note fluttered out of the front pocket to the floor. *I spoke too soon.*

“What do we have here?” I picked it up and examined the scrap of paper, trying to make out the writing in the dim light: *Meet me in the fifth car from the back at eight p.m.*

It was written in a messy, scrawling hand that looped like ribbons. Chet’s eyes went wide. “I don’t think that’s a prop.”

“Frank!”

I jumped as Joe burst into the dressing room corridor. I steadied myself on the door. “Hey! You can’t do that!”

“Sorry.” Joe never fails to take pleasure in scaring the living daylights out of me, so when he didn’t burst out laughing, I knew something was wrong. *Seriously* wrong.

“What is it?” I asked, feeling my heartbeat return to normal.

“Trent is somehow related to Mr. Mayhem and inherited his lavish fortune,” Joe blurted.

“What?” Chet and I asked at the same time.

“Yeah.” Joe’s expression hardened. “Trent isn’t some random actor in the production. He’s the heir to Mr. Mayhem’s wealth.”

I gawked. “No way.”

“Cool!” Chet said. “Things just got interesting.”

“I’ll say,” I muttered.

“I can’t believe it’s real!” said Chet. “I thought Mayhem’s fortune was only a rumor, like the tales of the Phantom Express and the stories that the train was once used to smuggle gold.”

“Wait, what?” Joe shook his head. “I’m not too sure about ghosts and gold, but Trent’s flashy fortune might mean this is a real

kidnapping after all.”

“How do you know Trent was related to Mayhem and inherited his fortune?” I asked.

“Sebastian, the bootlegger, told me. It stands to reason that if he knows, the other actors might know too.”

My head felt like it was spinning. “If that’s true, why didn’t anyone else say anything?”

Joe shrugged. “People, you know?”

“Well, if this is a kidnapping, we’ve sure got ourselves a motive.”

“But why would someone abduct a victim on a train?”

Chet cocked his head. “Why not?”

“Well, kidnappings on trains involve removing people from those trains, but the Mayhem Express hasn’t slowed, let alone stopped. That means Trent must still be onboard.” Joe’s gaze landed on the locked door.

I let out a shuddering breath. “I hope so.”

“Don’t kidnappings usually involve ransoms?” asked Chet.

“Typically, yes,” I replied. “I guess in our case it’s too soon to tell.”

Joe checked his watch. “If Trent is aboard, we have under two hours to find him before we’re back at the station.”

I straightened up. “We’ve got to hurry then.”

“Yeah,” Joe agreed. “I shared what I uncovered. What about you guys? Find anything useful? Like, oh, I don’t know, the keys to get us past that door to search the rest of the train?”

“No luck on that front, bro. But...” I waved the note in the air before Joe snatched it from my hand.

“If Trent was kidnapped, then whoever left this for him must have used it to lure him into the next car.”

“Exactly,” I said. “But why would Trent follow instructions from some sketchy note?”

“Did you hear that sound?” Chet grabbed Joe and crouched down, eyes darting around the car.

“What sound?” All I heard was the train rattling on the track.

“Chet,” Joe began. “Is this all getting to be too much for—?”

“Shh!” I heard something too.

A creak from overhead.

A *ghostly* creak...

Chet lifted a finger to his lips, then raised it skyward, following it with his gaze.

“What is it?” I asked.

“*The Phantom Express*,” Chet whispered.

“Oh, come on.” Joe rolled his eyes. “The train’s been creaking and squeaking all night.”

I let out a breath, trying to settle my jittery nerves. If I was being honest, the whole thing was giving me the heebie-jeebies. “Okay, I guess you’re right.”

Joe started walking back toward the gift shop. “Sweet! Let’s go back to the performance car to calm down the masses.”

I gave him a puzzled look. “Why do the masses need calming down?”

“Um... everyone may know about the whole missing actor situation now.” He shook his head. “You can thank Murph. He kind of tipped everyone off.”

“Oh, Murph,” I said, burying the mysterious note in my pocket. “Well, maybe we can use this opportunity to ask the rest of the actors

about why no one thought it might be useful for us to know about how Trent is a Mayhem who just became mega-rich.”

After Chet and I followed Joe into the library car, I stopped short. “Wait! I had a thought.” I crossed over to the counter where the train’s ledger was sitting. “Let’s do a little handwriting analysis, shall we?” I pulled the note from my pocket and set it down beside the ledger.

“Guys, where’s Ravi?” Chet whispered as he and Joe crowded around me.

Maybe he was organizing books behind one of the shelves. “Beats me,” I said. Besides, I was onto something! We all glanced from the crumpled paper to the list of names. After a moment, I slammed my finger onto the page. “The writing on the note is awfully similar to Karen’s.”

Joe squinted at the ledger entry, then glanced back at the slip of paper. “I disagree. It looks more like Mr. Crowley’s. I just learned he’s Trainsville’s biggest patron, by the way. Guy must be loaded.”

“It’s *definitely* Marigold’s.” Chet let out a chuckle. “Sorry, Frank.”

I glanced from Mr. Crowley’s and Marigold’s entries to the note, then shut the ledger with a sigh. “I hate to say it, but I think the verdict on this handwriting analysis is inconclusive.”

“Well, it was worth a go,” Joe said, clapping me on the shoulder.

Chet scratched his chin. “Anyone else still hungry?”

8

Bells and Whistles

JOE

WHILE I HAD BEEN EXPECTING pandemonium inside the performance car, I was surprised to find it was kind of empty; a few actors and passengers had spread out across the coach. We navigated around the mafia mama and the milkman, who had broken character and were talking quietly with the married couple seated at a little table. Mid-car, I nearly collided with the flapper as she emerged from the kitchenette carrying a plastic-wrap-covered tray of cookies. At last, we reached the back of the car, where Biff was reclined in a booth, cracking his knuckles. It appeared the show had taken a permanent intermission.

“Where’s everybody else?” I asked, noticing Karen seated in a chair staring out the window.

“Dining car,” Biff replied. “People wanted to get up and move around.”

“I have a question for you, Biff,” Frank said. “Why didn’t anyone think we should know about Trent being related to Mr. Mayhem and inheriting his fortune?”

His shoulders rose as his eyebrows vanished into his fedora. "Not sure. Why? Is it important?" He looked from Frank to me, appearing genuinely concerned.

"Forget it." I pressed my face to the window in the door to the dining car and saw people seated at tables. A group of girls were playing a game of Miss Mary Mack. Murph had a hand of solitaire laid out with a deck of cards that had been a show prop, and Charlene was talking to a passenger, stopping every now and then to jot down a note in her pad. "What's Charlene up to?" I asked Frank.

"Interviewing people. She's writing an article about tonight."

"Of course she is. I'd expect nothing less of Bayport's finest journalist."

"Anyway, the night's a wash," Biff explained, gnawing on a hangnail. "We're offering everyone discounts at the Trainsville gift shops, the one here and the main one at the museum. Oh, and we're also serving more complimentary snacks. Nothing smooths things over like sweets."

"I'll take one," Chet said, plucking cookies from the flapper's tray. "Or maybe two."

We watched the white-haired woman and her grandson coming out of the bathroom. The boy looked like he was still feeling kind of queasy.

"Yikes. He doesn't look so hot," Frank whispered. "Must have eaten something bad."

"I can't relate. The dessert tonight was top-notch!" Chet said through a mouthful of cookie crumbs. "Besides, none of us are sick!"

"Seems like a few people might disagree," I countered.

“Excuse me for a sec. I need to iron the old shoelaces.” Frank winked as he stood up to head to the bathroom.

The flapper eyed Frank. “Did you sneak a peek ahead at the script?”

“What?” Frank paused, looking confused.

“You just said the last line in the show!”

I snorted. “The show’s last line is 1920s slang for ‘I have to go to the bathroom’?” *Of course it is.* I turned my attention back to the flapper. “Hey, was there something else you wanted to tell us earlier?”

The flapper bit her lip and set down her tray. “Well, actually, yes...” She looked around to make sure no one was listening.

Frank sighed. “I guess the bathroom can wait.”

“I—I haven’t been completely honest with you. It was me who locked the door at the end of the dressing rooms. I kept seeing her poking her nose around where it didn’t belong.” She half turned to subtly point a gloved finger at Karen.

I snuck a glance. Karen had turned back to face us and her eyes were wide, but I couldn’t tell if she’d heard our conversation from where she was sitting.

“I was going to say something earlier, but she came up and interrupted us. And I was telling you guys the truth before. Right after I locked that door, the keys went missing.”

Karen jumped up out of her seat. “How dare you. I told you—I was only looking around the train. Last time I checked, that wasn’t a crime.”

“You were poking your head in our dressing rooms,” the flapper shot back. “If you ask me, there’s something fishy about that.”

“Well, no one asked you, did they?” Karen snapped.

“Everyone, take a breath,” I said, trying to keep my tone light.

Karen stared daggers at the flapper, but finally sat back down.

Frank, Chet, and I exchanged nervous glances. What was going on?

Choo! Choooooooo!

I snapped my head up, looking for the source of the sound.

Choo! Choooooooo!

But it wasn't our train, or any train at all. It was a ringtone.

And it was coming from a sequined purse.

9

MAKING HEADWAY

FRANK

KAREN PULLED OUT A SMARTPHONE and pressed it to her ear. “Hello?”

Chet voiced the question we were all thinking: “She has a *phone*?”

“Does she have *our* phones too?” the mafia mama blurted out.

“Shh!” I wanted to hear what Karen was saying.

“Is anyone there?” Karen asked, then held the phone out, peering at it. After a moment, she tapped the screen and dropped the phone back into her purse. “Spam callers,” she muttered. “Well, if you’ll excuse me.” She stood and headed toward the door leading into the library car.

“Where does she think she’s going?” Joe asked, loud enough for her to hear.

Karen scowled at him.

“No, seriously. We’re on a train. There aren’t a lot of places to go.”

“I don’t know,” Karen seethed. “The ladies’ room? Anywhere other than here.”

“You had a phone this entire time!” the flapper shouted at her.

Karen tucked an unruly tendril of hair behind her ear and flashed a sugary-sweet smile. “And your point is?”

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner?” I pressed. “You said you didn’t have one.”

“So?” she spat. “And before you ask, I didn’t mention mine because I didn’t want to get tied up in whatever’s going on here.” She looked like she’d sucked a lemon.

“For someone not involved, you were acting super shady earlier when I found you prowling around in a car that’s off-limits to passengers,” the flapper shot back.

Karen took a long, steeling breath. “I work for Escape Rumble, okay?”

“Escape Rumble?” Joe turned to me, confused, but I had no more clue than he did.

“It’s a new escape room company,” Chet explained. “‘Virtually unlock secrets of the past!’ Haven’t you seen the billboards all over Bayport? They’re supposed to be having their grand opening soon.”

“That’s right. We open next week. This little murder mystery company is Escape Rumble’s competitor. Not that it’s any competition,” she scoffed. “I’ve been taking photos all evening, which is why I’d been ‘prowling around.’ I have nothing to do with your missing actor.”

Joe donned a fake but convincing smile and held his hand out. “Well, now that that’s settled, may we please use your phone to make a quick call?”

Karen sneered as she unlocked her home screen and dropped the phone into his hand. “Fine. Make your call. But get off my case. I’m no criminal.”

“Thanks. Much appreciated.”

With a *humph*, she strode to a corner booth and slumped down, arms folded on the tabletop, then gave us a withering stare.

“Does anyone know Trent’s number?” Joe asked the car. The actors and passengers (who were all clearly caught up on the situation) shrugged, even the ones now crowding in around the doorway to the dining car.

“What about the engineer’s number?” I asked. “Maybe he could unlock the doors.”

“No one memorizes numbers anymore,” a passenger replied. I hated to admit it, but they were right.

“I think we may want to call the Bayport PD now,” Joe said.

“Not a bad idea,” I replied.

“About time!” Chet chimed in.

“Let’s call them from somewhere private,” I murmured to my bro.

“Agreed.” Joe waved the phone at Karen. “Be right back.”

Before reaching the library car door, we passed the little boy, who still looked a little green. “Is he okay?” Joe asked his grandmother. “Was it something he ate?”

“We both ate the same things, but I feel fine,” replied the woman. “It must be motion sickness.”

Chet threw up his hands. “See? I *told* you it wasn’t the food.”

“We’ll be back to the station in about an hour and a half,” I promised her. “In the meantime, you should have him look out the window at the city lights on the horizon. Staring off into the distance helps.”

Nodding, she took a seat. The little boy groaned as he slumped against her side.

After I made a quick pit stop in the bathroom, Chet, Joe, and I headed back to the spot in the library car under the train route map. Joe held out Karen's smartphone.

"Cell reception's even spottier than usual," I said. "Look. There's only one bar."

Still, Joe put it on speaker and dialed the police. Typically, Joe and I end up solving cases before the Bayport PD, but it was safe to say we needed their help now.

The phone took forever to connect.

Behind the register, Ravi was dusting an old railroad lantern, not paying us the least attention.

Finally we heard a ring, and then someone picked up. "Hello?" Chief Olaf said gruffly on the other end of the line. Bayport's top cop wasn't our biggest fan. According to him, even with all our successful cases, we were just amateur sleuths.

"Chief Olaf!" Joe said, relief in his voice. "We'd like to report a missing person."

"Hardy? Is that you?" the chief asked flatly. "What is it this time?"

"We're on the Mayhem Express for a murder mystery show. One of the actors, Trent"—Joe glanced at the brochure, which I held out for him to read—"Couture, has gone missing. We have reason to believe he's been kidnapped." Hearing Joe say the words aloud, the statement sounded laughable.

Clearly, Chief Olaf thought so too. "The Mayhem Express? Is this some kind of prank?"

Joe clutched the phone harder. "No! I swear it's not."

The chief sighed. "Hardy, you should know by now you can't report a missing person for at least twenty-four hours. Besides,

you're on a murder mystery train, right? I'm sure it's all part of the show. Now, quit causing trouble. I have real police business to deal with."

The line went dead.

"That went well," Joe said sarcastically.

"I guess it's on us to figure this out."

I reached out for the phone. "May I?"

Joe slid it into my hand, and I opened the call log. All of them were outgoing calls to Escape Rumble, except for the call we'd seen Karen take: RESTRICTED.

"Maybe she was telling the truth about the spam caller," mused Joe.

"Maybe. Karen mentioned she took photos. Maybe she caught something useful."

"Are you guys done yet?" Karen stood in front of us, arms crossed.

"Hey, perfect timing," I said. "Do you mind if we look at the photos you took tonight?"

She twisted her mouth up. "Sure. You saw all the same pathetic stuff I did." She snatched her phone out of my grip, then showed us her photos folder. "Go ahead and flip through. I've got nothing to hide now."

Taking her phone back, I scrolled through the photos, most of which had been snapped at awkward angles, clearly taken from inside her purse. Shaky images showed passengers seated and eating. The gift shop's wares. Biff and the mafia mama playing out their scene before the kidnapping, Mr. Crowley and Marigold standing in the background. I sighed. There wasn't anything useful.

Chet frowned. "Rhatz!"

Closing the photo app, I handed the phone back to Karen. “Thanks anyway.”

“See? I told you.” She glanced down at her screen. “Ugh! Thing’s gonna die any minute.”

“I still wish you’d told us about your phone sooner,” Joe replied, crossing his arms.

Karen glared at him. “For the record, I don’t think anything bad happened to the actor. This is all some sad, desperate ploy the murder mystery company’s using to provide actual entertainment. Why not let the night run its course? If this show fails in its first couple months, Escape Rumble will have nothing to worry about. And vanishing actor aside, from what I saw tonight, it’s going to fail. I can’t wait for this train wreck to be over with.” With that, she stormed back to the performance car.

Chet turned to Ravi. “Hey, do you know if the company’s hiring? She’d bring some great energy to a scene!”

Ravi chuckled, folding his rag. “I’m just the gift shop guy,” he said, before setting his satchel on the counter.

I leaned in to talk quietly with Joe and Chet. “So, we don’t think she’s the kidnapper, right?”

“Not from what I’ve seen,” Joe replied. “But she *is* guilty of lying and deceiving.”

“And if she’s guilty of that, who knows what else she’s capable of?” I rubbed my eyes. “Do you think she intentionally did something to Trent to ensure the show was a disaster so Escape Rumble’s only competition would be wiped out? She still could have stolen the keys and the actors’ phones.”

“Maybe.” Joe dragged his hat down over his forehead. “If only we had a clue already!”

The train lurched, and Ravi’s satchel fell to the ground, spewing its contents across the wide runner. Ravi swore under his breath and lumbered around the counter to clean up the mess.

Joe crouched down to help. “Whoa! Check *this* out!”

“Hey! What are you doing?” Ravi grabbed for his satchel, but Joe had already reached down and picked up a shiny gold key that had fallen on the floor. ME5 was stamped on the fob.

“ME stands for Mayhem Express, doesn’t it?” I said. “Is this the key to car five?”

The spooked look on Ravi’s face was all the confirmation I needed.

Ravi, who’d been in the library car when Trent had gone missing.

Ravi, who according to the flapper had been on the train early, poking around.

Ravi, who it turned out had one of the missing keys all along.

Joe narrowed his eyes. “‘Just the gift shop guy,’ eh?”

“I *swear* I don’t know how that got there,” Ravi insisted, shaking his head.

“*We’ll* be the judges of that.” Chet was back in bad detective mode, but I couldn’t blame the guy.

Joe waved the little gold key at us. “Let’s go see what’s behind door number five.”

I glanced at Ravi. “And leave him here?”

Joe shrugged. “How far can he go? Unless he plans on jumping off the train while it’s moving, he’ll still be here to answer our questions when we get back.”

Chet picked up the antique railroad lantern Ravi had been polishing. “Mind if we borrow this? That next car looked preeetty dark when I peeked through its window earlier.”

Ravi was trembling. “Of course.” He reached into the display case and pulled out an intricately engraved lighter, then took back the lantern and pressed his ear against the base as he moved it slowly from side to side. “Good. It sounds like there’s still a little fluid left,” he said, before raising and lighting the wick. The flame inside flared to life as he turned a knob at the base. “Be careful with this, okay? It’s an antique. Dropping it could start a fire, and that would be bad —”

Chet seized the lantern. “We’ll be careful! Thanks!”

Joe, Chet, and I hurried through the dressing room car and stopped once again before the locked door at the far end. Chet held the lantern up to the keyhole. Who knew *what* we’d find?

Joe took a sharp breath. “Here we go.” He stuck the key into the keyhole and turned it with a resounding click, then grabbed the brass handle and pulled open the door.

“It worked!” Chet cheered. He handed me the lantern. “Hardys first.”

“Let’s do this.” I lifted the lantern higher and realized that the gap between these cars was much wider than between all the others. It looked like an extra coupler had been inserted. The tracks rushed by on either side. I stepped forward slowly, the clacking louder now, roaring in my ears.

Chet chewed his inner cheek. “You know, maybe I should stay here.”

Joe grinned. "Or maybe you should come with us to witness me finding Trent."

"Yeah, right." I nudged past him. "Not if *I* find Trent first."

The train jolted, throwing us sideways. Suddenly I felt my foot slip, and I was falling through the narrow windy space between the cars toward the blur of tracks below!

A hand clamped around my arm, and the next thing I knew, Joe was pulling me back up to safety.

I stood beside him, clutching his forearm with one hand, the lantern safe in my other. "Thanks for saving my tail," I panted.

He grinned. "Don't mention it." But he kept his eyes locked on mine.

"What?"

"Look, I... I think we need to join forces. This bet was a fun idea, but it's time the Joe and Frank Show returned to streaming."

"I thought it was the Frank and Joe Show."

Joe just shook his head, holding back a chuckle. He gave me a quick hug. "Don't scare me like that again."

"So no one owes anyone anything anymore?"

He grinned again. "Let's worry about that later."

"Deal."

And with that, Joe slid the door open and we stepped forward into the dark.

10

CAR TROUBLE

JOE

TRENT! TRENT? YOU IN HERE? I called, peering ahead into the gloom of the mystery car. I could make out gold-leafed wallpaper twinkling in the lantern light, and dark antique-looking sconces with fringed lampshades atop tarnished pipework.

“Let’s turn back,” Chet said, clinging to my jacket. “He’s clearly not here.”

The floorboards creaked as I took a step forward. “Don’t sound so sure.”

“Hello? Trent?” Frank called out beside me, holding up the lantern so we could get a better view of the car ahead.

“Ugh, that smell!” Strong fumes accosted my nose. The odor was overwhelming; my eyes were watering. And soon enough, it made sense as I glimpsed glossy dark wooden tables and benches among uncoated pale ones and what appeared to be the original hardwood floorboards—the carriage was still being restored in spots.

“Careful where you step,” Frank said, swinging the lantern in a wide arc. “Think this is the original woodwork? It’s remarkable.” He gaped at the embellished cornices, the ceiling, and a gilded panel

between a set of windows carved with a giant insignia of lavender flowers.

As Frank shifted the lantern again, a tall man loomed from the darkness. A man with gaunt cheeks, fire in his sunken eyes, and a shovel gleaming in his hand.

“Gadzooks!” Chet stumbled backward, stepping on my foot. I yelped out in pain and fell on Frank. The force knocked him against the wall, but he managed to stay upright.

“Guys, it’s only a painting.” I moved in to take a closer look. Frank held up the lantern to illuminate a semi-faded panel of wall, where a life-size image of a man wearing spiffy overalls and a newsboy hat had been painted.

“That’s Mr. Mayhem!” Chet said, grinning. “Bayport’s railroad hero!”

Frank chuckled. “Bayport’s railroad hero looks like a serial killer.”

“Focus.” Taking a breath, I scanned the rest of the car. Rows of curtains ran down either side of the aisle, swaying with the motion of the train. I gripped the nearest panel with one hand, then glanced back at Frank and Chet and held my other finger to my lips.

One... two... *three!*

I ripped the fabric aside with a screech to reveal two bunk beds. That suddenly made sense. We must have been in another sleeping car—a second-class one, if I had to guess. I couldn’t get a good view of the top bunk, so I grabbed hold of one of the rusty sconces as I stood on the edge of the bottom bunk, then hoisted myself up. I didn’t see anyone up there, and exhaled in relief.

But the relief was short-lived. The sconce rotated in my grip, and losing my footing, I tumbled back off the bunk bed and landed on my

backside. There was a loud clicking and the grinding of gears, followed by a snapping noise coming from somewhere ahead.

Frank rushed to my side. "You okay?"

I held up a hand and strained to hear over the rumbling of the train. "What was that?"

"What was *what*?" Frank asked.

Rising, I leaned forward to inspect the sconce. "I heard something click when this twisted."

Chet's gaze flitted around the space. "I thought I heard something too!"

Waaaaaah! Waaaaaah!

We all jumped at the unexpected sound of the train horn. The lantern swung, nearly colliding with a curtain, but I grabbed it in the nick of time. With all the night's excitement, we didn't need to start a fire on top of everything.

I turned to Frank and gently lifted the lantern up. "I'll hold on to this from now on."

"Thanks," he murmured. "Ravi would have killed me if I broke his lantern."

"Not if a big old fire killed us first," I quipped, casting the lantern light so I could inspect the sconce more closely. I moved the sconce arm up and down, like the tiller on a sailboat, but there was no clicking sound. With a sigh, I released the cold metal. "Keep your eyes peeled for anything that may have opened or shifted. A set of bunks pulled away from the wall or maybe a panel. I think I might've stumbled upon an old secret lever."

"Cool!" Chet cried. "Secret levers were all the rage in the twenties!" He paused. "Or was that secret lovers? No, I'm pretty

certain it was levers.”

I regarded the rows of curtains. “So, should we get to it?”

One by one, we pulled back the curtains, but found no hidden actor among the bunks. I led the way, Frank and Chet always one step behind me.

We were nearing the front of the car when I heard a squelching sound underfoot.

I’d stepped in something sticky and wet.

Directing the light down, I glimpsed a pool of dark liquid...

My breath caught.

Was that... *blood*?

A moment later I exhaled in relief as the lantern revealed a wide-mouthed can on its side, with dark, thick liquid pooling around it. Not blood, then. I tilted my head to read the label: WOOD VARNISH.

“Look!” Frank whispered, pointing to the weathered floorboards beyond the mess.

There, barely visible against the splintered hardwood, were irregular shapes leading away, growing less distinct the farther they went.

“Footprints,” I said. “Judging from the looks of it, two sets. And they’re fresh.”

“Trent and his kidnapper?” Frank suggested quietly.

I moved forward slowly, holding the lantern low so its glow followed the trail. “They lead into the carriage ahead.”

Stuck to the door with a bit of blue tape, was the fan with STAY BACK! written on it that we had found earlier in the dressing room.

I tore it from the wall and flipped it over in my hand. “How on earth did *this* get here?”

“Yeah, the door’s been locked this whole time,” Frank said.

“Which means somebody moved this here *after* we saw it in the dressing room car,” I mused.

Chet crowded a little closer to me. “It may be a prop, but the threat feels very real!”

I tried the door once, twice, three times. It was locked tight, its window dark.

Frank buzzed his lips. “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Someone doesn’t want us snooping around,” Chet said anxiously. “Someone’s onto us!”

“Well, we haven’t exactly been quiet about our investigation,” I said. “And it could be anyone. It’s not like we’ve had eyes on everyone every second of this train ride.”

Frank crossed his arms. “Yeah. And the photos on Karen’s phone certainly didn’t help.”

“Guys, I’m getting worried.” Chet rattled the door. “Trent could be in big trouble.”

“He could.” I shuddered. “Unless Trent found a way to pin that note up himself and vanished through the train. Maybe he doesn’t want anyone following him, like Marigold said.”

Frank shrugged and took the hand fan from me. “I’d believe that if we didn’t know he was loaded. He’s the perfect person to kidnap and hold for ransom.”

“We can’t know anything for sure until we find the rest of those missing keys to get into the car ahead.” I checked my watch. “We have less than an hour and a half left to crack this case. Let’s go.” Leading the way back, I was careful not to step in more pungent wood varnish.

“Ouch!” Frank winced, rubbing his foot. “I’m okay. I stubbed my toe.”

I swept the lantern low over the floor. “On *what*?”

Frank stepped back, knelt down, and felt along the planks. “Huh. The floorboards are different here. They seem to have popped up an inch or so.” He felt along the wood until he found a fingerhold along the edge, then pulled. An entire panel rose up, like a hatch.

I peered down into a rectangle of darkness. “Whoa! What is this?”

“It’s a secret compartment!” Chet said, bouncing on his toes. “That lever you pulled must have been connected to some sort of mechanism to get the door to pop open!”

Moving the lantern down closer, I could see the compartment was empty. It was a sizable space, at least a foot deep, and could easily fit a human body. A chill ran down my spine, and I shook the thought away. “It gives me the willies.”

“Secret compartments in the floorboards were common on old trains,” Chet remarked. “Secret passages, too.”

“Secret passages?” Frank scowled. “You didn’t think to mention that earlier when Trent first went missing?”

“Oops.” Chet had gone bright red. “I think I got so caught up telling you guys about the gold-smuggling rumor and the ghost rumor that I kind of forgot about the secret passage one.”

“Think the restoration team at Trainsville found all the secrets of this train?” I asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” replied Frank.

Chet threw his shoulders back. “Maybe it’s up to the Hardys to unearth the train’s deepest secrets, along with their trusty apprentice, Chet Morton!”

“Maybe. But if we know about secret passages, I wonder who else knows,” I said darkly.

Frank closed the panel, stood and brushed himself off, then grinned. “I know who else might know! Follow me.”

SAFE PASSAGE

FRANK

WE BURST INTO THE LIBRARY car to find it empty. “Ravi’s gone,” I said, trying to catch my breath.

“His satchel, too!” Chet pointed out.

“Well, how do you like that? He couldn’t have gone far. I’ll check the cars back here,” Joe offered. “You check the dressing room car. Maybe he’s hiding in one of the compartments.” With that, Joe vanished through the door toward the rear of the train.

Chet and I hurried back through to the dressing room car, where I stopped short.

There was an unnatural sloshing sound coming from one of the bathrooms. I motioned for Chet to be quiet, and then we leaned against the door, straining to hear.

Someone was inside.

I rapped my knuckles against the wood. “Hello? Ravi? Is that you?”

The sloshing stopped.

Chet’s eyes went wide. “It’s definitely him.”

I grabbed the handle. It twisted, surprisingly unlocked, and the door swung open.

Inside stood Ravi, shoving paper into the toilet.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

With a grunt, Ravi turned back and started cramming the papers farther into the toilet with one hand, while desperately attempting to flush with the other. He jammed the handle so hard, I thought it’d snap clean off. Shouldering him aside, I reached into the nasty toilet bowl.

“Hey, get off!” Ravi yelled.

My fingertips grabbed hold of the sodden edges of the papers as Chet managed to wrestle Ravi off me, and Joe came running in, drawn by the commotion. They held Ravi’s arms behind his back as I stood in the cramped space, peeling apart the dripping pages. They smelled terrible and were yellowed—hopefully from time, and not from...

I took a closer look. Intricate overlapping black lines showed numbered diagrams of the train, complete with precise measurements and labeled figures. Notes were scribbled in the margins about lights and fuel, angles and oil capacity. “Just as I thought.”

“Diagrams of the train,” Joe said, materializing at my side.

“And old ones, from the looks of it.” Chet released Ravi, who staggered to right himself.

Something was clipped to one of the pages. A torn sheet of stationery.

“Who’s S. Mayhem?” I wondered aloud. “I thought the train guy’s first name was Easton. Maybe S. Mayhem was another relative of

Trent's?"

"Dudes, this isn't what it seems," Ravi insisted, making a weak attempt to snatch the papers back. Sweat was beading on his brow.

"Then what are you doing with diagrams of the train?" I asked, examining the wet sheets—six in all. Each seemed to feature a detailed sketch of a different train car. *Mayhem Express* was neatly written across the top of every page. I knew Ravi was part of the Trainsville restoration team, shadowing a professor and all, but why would an intern have train diagrams? And why would he be trying to dispose of them?

Ravi made another attempt to escape, but Joe shifted to block him. "Will you move?" the gift shop clerk snapped.

Joe folded his arms. "Not until you tell us what's going on."

"Fine. But can we not talk here?" Ravi had a point. It smelled foul.

Joe took the waterlogged diagrams from me, his lip turned up in disgust, before he and Chet shoved Ravi around the corner and into one of the enclosed little compartments. I furiously scrubbed my hands at the bathroom sink before joining them. In Trent's dressing room, I settled down beside Joe and Chet on one bench, with Ravi facing us on the other.

"Hey, what did you guys do with my lantern?" he demanded.

"Don't worry," I said. "It's back in the library car where it belongs."

"We're doing the questioning here." Joe waved the soggy diagrams. "Start spilling."

"Yeah, why were you trying to flush these papers?" I asked.

"Because all the windows are sealed?" Ravi said, cracking a smile. When we all remained stone-faced, he let out a long breath, then

continued, “Fine. I was on... a treasure hunt.”

Joe laughed. “A *treasure hunt*?”

He nodded. “I’ve been looking for gold.”

Chet sat up and beamed. “So this *was* an old gold-smuggling train! This is great content right here. ‘Treasure on a Train.’ The clickbait practically writes itself!”

Ignoring him, Joe glared at Ravi. “Why do you think there’s treasure onboard?”

“Look. I don’t know if there’s actually a treasure. I haven’t found anything yet. I’ve been sneaking into the empty compartments and rereading those diagrams every chance I get, even tonight during the show. But I can’t figure out where a treasure could be stashed.”

“I thought you said you were in the library car during the show,” Joe said, raising an eyebrow.

“I lied, okay? But I promise my treasure hunting has nothing to do with Trent.”

Joe shook his head. “So, *now* you expect us to take you at your word?”

“Back to the treasure,” I interrupted. “Gold? Like, from back in the day? Wouldn’t Professor Woodward or your restoration team have found any treasure hidden onboard by now?”

Ravi yanked off his conductor’s hat and wrung it in his hands. “We’re only doing surface-level refurbishing. Shine this up. Slap a coat of varnish on that.”

I lifted the soggy diagrams. “Are these the *original* diagrams?”

“Seems like it.” Joe pointed to squares along the floor in one of the sketches. “Look. Secret compartments!”

The diagram showed arrows around a wall sconce, and a dotted line leading to a hatch on the floor. “That’s the secret compartment we found in the second-class sleeping car,” I said, a little awestruck. There were more images sketched in as I flipped through the other pages—drawings of little ladder rungs and crawl spaces, and blocky figures climbing or flattening onto their stomachs.

Chet pointed at a drawing. “Secret levers! See? Told you!”

An odd phrase written on the bottom of one sheet caught my eye: *For a moss corpse, see Diagram No. 7.*

“A ‘moss corpse?’” I shuddered. “I don’t want to see any corpses covered in moss!”

“Don’t be silly,” Chet said. “It’s probably twenties slang, like ‘the icy mitt.’”

“The *what?*” Joe and I asked in unison.

“You know, the icy mitt,” Chet said matter-of-factly. “If your crush rejects you, she’d be giving you the icy mitt.”

After rolling my eyes at Chet, I looked back at Ravi. “Well? Are these originals?”

“Yeah, they’re originals from before the train was retrofitted to run on electricity.”

Interesting. I skimmed through the rest of the pages—library car, second-class sleeping car (the car with the mystery footprints), parlor car, observation car, writing car, and cab. The cab diagram showed a switchboard and coal box, the word “box” underlined twice.

“Hey, we’re missing a few pages,” I said, noting the numbers in the upper right-hand corners.

“Are you sure?” Joe asked.

“Yeah. The dining car, performance car, dressing room car, and one other car—the seventh one from the back of the train. They aren’t here.” We all looked up at Ravi expectantly.

“Did you flush those before we found you?” Joe asked.

Ravi gave an exasperated sigh. “No. I never had them.”

“Uh-huh.” Chet narrowed his eyes. “A likely story.”

Joe tapped his finger on the page outlining the second-class sleeping car. There was a narrow path drawn across the ceiling, marked with the words: *For safe passage to parlor car*. That was the one where our luck had run out. An arrow pointed off the page. The diagram for the parlor car showed a little hidden door in a wall. He slid his finger along the ceiling path. “Is that a—”

“—secret passage,” I confirmed. “And it leads to the parlor car.”

Chet could barely sit still.

“Only one small problem,” I said, frowning as I traced my finger along the secret passage from the parlor car back to the second-class sleeping car, where it bled off. The page for the performance car was missing, and the page for the library car showed no passageway. “The hidden entrance doesn’t appear in the library car, which means it has to be... in *here*.”

“How can that be?” Joe glanced around. “We already checked this car top to bottom.”

“Let’s check again,” Chet suggested. “What do we have to lose?”

“You said the diagrams were always missing a few pages. Where did you get these, anyway?” I asked Ravi.

“More to the point,” Joe said, studying the pages over my shoulder, “there’s nothing here about a treasure.” He looked up. “So, how do you know there’s one on the train in the first place?”

“And what were you really doing aboard early today? Who were you meeting with? Why did you have one of the missing keys?!” Chet said, jabbing his stubby finger right in Ravi’s face.

Ravi bolted up—and ran.

“Hey!” Joe called after him, flying from the bench. “You guys find the entrance to the secret passage. I’ll grab Ravi. Not that he can go far.”

“Be careful!” Chet and I hollered at my brother’s retreating back.

I folded the diagrams into a thick wad and shoved them in my jacket pocket. Then Chet and I got to work, running our hands along the walls and the floor in the narrow corridor before ducking in and out of each cluttered little dressing compartment.

We jangled wall sconces in hopes they’d turn, flung aside heaps of costumes, and felt behind cushions. Pulled at the overhead luggage racks, knocked against the floor, and tapped the walls and backboards of benches, listening for hollow sounds. Everything seemed unremarkable.

I wished we had the missing diagram page for this car. “What do we do?”

Chet grimaced. “Yuck! It smells like the angel of death! Is that you?”

I lifted my hands to my face and took a whiff, then recoiled. “I should wash them again.” Hurrying back to the bathroom, I ran my hands under the faucet. And then it hit me. We hadn’t thought to check in here for the secret passage entrance.

I turned the faucet off and dried my hands on a paper towel, taking in the tiny space. The walls were done up in a creamy white on the upper half, and a rich brown below. A grimy rectangular

mirror was mounted above the sink. A brass handlebar had been screwed into the wall over the toilet, so passengers could steady themselves on the rocking train. The handle! I rattled it, but it remained sturdily fixed in place despite my tugging.

I kicked the wall in frustration. Surprisingly, it pushed in, clicked, then sprang out.

My heart raced. “Chet! Come here! I found something!”

“What is it?” he asked, appearing in the doorway.

I swung open the little door. *Tada!* And then we squeezed side by side and crouched down to examine my discovery more closely.

Squinting into the dark square hole, I could just make out the bottom rungs of a cobwebbed wooden ladder leading upward into shadowy murkiness.

“Voila,” I said with a proud smile. “Our passage into the parlor car.”

“Great going, Gatsby!” Chet gave me a fist bump. Then he turned back to the opening and bit his lip. “I’m kinda scared, but shall we?” He made to move forward.

“Let’s go get Joe first. We’re a team, after all.”

Relieved, Chet followed me into the corridor—where I bumped smack into Marigold.

“Hey,” she said, looking as surprised to see us as we were to see her.

“What... uh, what are you doing in here?” I asked, suddenly keenly aware that my hands had been plunged in dirty toilet water not too long ago.

“I saw your brother race out of here, so I thought I’d make sure you were okay.” In the dim light cast by the nearest wall sconce, I

could have sworn I saw her blush.

“Yeah, we’re okay.” I thought of the secret passage and not-so-subtly shut the bathroom door behind me.

“Do *not* go in there,” Chet blurted, pantomiming waving away a terrible odor. He meant well, as always, but I suddenly had the urge to crawl into a hole.

Marigold twirled a short strand of her blond wig. “I won’t plan on it, then.”

Chet and I continued into the library car, with Marigold trailing behind us. I waved awkwardly to her and watched her wandering over to a shelf of comic books, where she picked one up. Was she as comic-book-obsessed as I was? My heart soared.

“Earth to Frank,” Chet whispered. “Let’s find Joe.”

12

BACKTRACKING

JOE

YOU FOUND ME,” RAVI SAID from behind a bookcase.

“And in the library car of all places. That’s the good thing about trains. Not a lot of places to hide.” I squinted up at the ceiling. “Scratch that. Given that we still haven’t been able to find Trent, apparently there *are* a lot of places to hide on the Mayhem Express.”

“What do you want? I told you what I could.”

I steadied myself on the bookcase. “I’m not so sure about that. But let’s begin with how you know about this supposed treasure.”

Ravi loosened his purple bow tie and drew in a deep breath. “I... I can’t answer that.”

“Fine. Who else knows about the treasure?”

He shrugged. “Beats me. I haven’t told a soul.”

“Okay, so why won’t you tell us where you got the diagrams?”

Ravi stood and fidgeted with his vest. “Someone... left them for me.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Someone left them for you?”

He craned his head around the bookcase. Sure the coast was clear, he turned back to face me. “The papers were left for me on the

counter at the museum's main gift shop last week, with a note instructing me to use the diagrams to find the treasure and where to stash it for them."

"Why would someone expect you to help them find a treasure?" I asked.

"Because I'm... I'm being blackmailed," he confessed, his whole body slumping forward. He glanced over his shoulder. "Dude. You have to *swear* not to tell anyone."

So there *was* more to our gift shop guy. "When we asked if anyone had seen anything strange today, why didn't you think to bring this up? What are you being blackmailed for?"

"I can't tell you that."

I took a calming breath. "Do you at least know *who's* blackmailing you?"

"Can't tell you." He wiped his palms on his vest. "Wish I could."

I sighed. "Can I at least see the note they left you?"

"Nope. Tore it out and flushed it. I got nervous, okay?" I thought of the little scrap of paper clipped to one of the diagrams. That must have been the note—or what was left of it.

"Lovely," I said, fighting irritation. "So if you find the rumored treasure for this mystery person, the blackmailer keeps your secret safe."

Ravi nodded. "It was a harmless treasure hunt for gold bars or diamonds, or whatever, until Trent disappeared. I swear, I have nothing to do with that."

I tilted my head. "But you know about his connection to Mr. Mayhem and his fortune."

"I've heard about it, sure. The whole cast knows."

“You still haven’t explained what the key was doing in your satchel.”

“I guess someone must have planted it there. Now, if that’s all, I have to go.”

“Oh? Someplace to be?” I chuckled. “A secret passage, perhaps?”

Ravi snarled, “I’ve got a gift shop to run.” He climbed back behind the counter and wiped his rag over a clear box housing a fire extinguisher, pretending I wasn’t still standing there.

Since we didn’t have diagram pages for the last couple of cars, I walked through the performance car and dining car, covertly checking for signs of other secret passages, but found nothing. Doubling back to the library car, I checked the bookcases for grooves to slide on or hinges that would allow them to swing forward. Nada.

Just as I was standing and dusting off my hands—Ravi really needed to do a better job of sweeping—Frank and Chet burst into the coach.

“Joe!” Frank panted. “We found something.”

“The way into the parlor car!” Chet added. “It’s in the bathroom back there!”

“Shh!” I glanced at Ravi to see if he had overheard, though the odds were likely he already knew about all of this train’s secret passages.

Ravi just rolled his eyes. “Like I said, I’m through.”

“Through? With what?” Frank asked.

“I’ll explain later,” I insisted. We had a missing person to find!

Ravi slid the lantern and lighter over to Frank. “Godspeed, Hardy bros.”

I clapped my big brother on the back. “Well? What are we waiting for?”

13

LIVE WIRE

FRANK

| **TILTED THE LANTERN UP** into the dark square opening, revealing the bottom rungs of the ladder. “Go on, Joe. After you,” I said with a sweeping gesture, sidestepping into the corridor.

“Gladly.” He squeezed past me into the bathroom, got on his hands and knees, and crawled through the narrow little door. When he reached back, I passed him the lantern. He began to nimbly start climbing.

“So, let me get this straight,” Chet said. “An anonymous blackmailer left original train diagrams for Ravi so he could hunt for a treasure that may or may not be on this train?”

“And Ravi won’t say what he’s being blackmailed with,” Joe added, his voice muffled from inside the hollow wall. “*And* he thinks maybe someone planted the key in his satchel.”

I motioned for Chet to follow Joe, and he wriggled his way into the gap, muttering about the space being too tight. Once his loafers had vanished from view, I stepped back into the bathroom and locked the door so no one else could stumble inside while we were off exploring. And then I slipped into the wall.

The space was cramped—I could barely fit through it myself. The ladder rungs were rough under my hands, and the narrow space was choked with dust and the musty odor of decay. My stomach knotted at the uncertainty of what lay beyond.

“There’s a crawl space up here,” Joe called down.

At the top of the ladder, I slid onto my belly—the opening was maybe a foot high—and followed Joe and Chet, army-crawling over decaying boards and beams. The ceiling scraped against my newsboy hat, threatening to knock it off. Every few feet, there was a peculiar gap between two slats. Peering down through one, I saw we were in the ceiling over the second-class sleeping car.

“I’m gonna get stuck,” Chet whimpered ahead of me. “I should’ve stayed behind. I could’ve been the one who guards the door and goes for help when his comrades don’t return. And what if there are spiders? I think I see one now!” He shrieked, then stopped himself. “Oh, wait. It’s just a dust ball.”

“Keep it down,” I shot from behind him.

The boards creaked below us, making an eerie sound as we continued forward.

A ghostly sound...

“Hey, this creaking would explain the rumored Phantom Express noises,” I remarked.

“Someone must have used this passage to kidnap Trent!” Chet said.

“Well, now we know Ravi wasn’t in the library car when Trent vanished after all,” Joe called back over his shoulder. “He claims he was in a compartment rereading his diagrams during the show, but maybe the blackmailer thing is a cover-up. After all, Ravi had the

train diagrams *and* the missing key. And he knows about the secret passages.”

I continued to crawl along through the dust clouds that Joe and Chet were kicking up. “Maybe Ravi was looking for the treasure and Trent got in the way.”

Up front, Joe was still talking. “I can see marks in the dust ahead of us! Someone else has definitely been using this passage.”

I was about to reply when Chet erupted in a sneezing fit.

“But who?” I said when he was finally done.

“We can’t rule anyone out,” Joe called back. “Not even your crush.”

I had never been so grateful to be stuck in the dark.

“Quit blushing,” Joe ribbed, then groaned.

“What’s going on?” I called.

“We’ve hit a dead end.”

“Oh no!” cried Chet. “I don’t want to die!”

I could hear Joe fumbling around. “Got it!” A panel swung open in front of us with a soft click, and Joe vanished through it. He held the lantern up so Chet and I could find our way out of the crawl space. I felt the fabric of my pants catch on a nail and grimaced as it ripped. Between that and all the clambering around in a dirty crawl space, our good suits were going to be toast by the end of this train ride. Our parents were going to kill us. But at the moment, that was the least of my worries.

I felt a blast of cool air blowing on my face. My fingers closed around metal rungs, and next thing I knew, I was pulling myself out of the passage and onto the exterior of the train car. I climbed down to a tiny platform at the end of the car, landing shakily beside Chet. He clutched his hat to stop it from flying off into the wind. Ahead of

us, across another wide gap, was the next train car. Joe had already climbed across and stood just outside on the platform, jostling the door handle.

“Locked!” he called out. “But look!” He pointed to metal rungs next to him leading up the side of the car. In the light of the lantern, I could faintly make out a square hatch at the top.

“There’s another little door up there! I bet the secret passage keeps going!” I yelled.

Joe shimmied up the new set of rungs and unfastened the hatch in the next car, then flattened himself onto his stomach and squirmed inside. His hand reached out, beckoning us to follow.

We made quick work scaling the rungs and wriggled into the new, equally dusty crawl space.

At the end of this second passage, the top of a wooden ladder poked up from a slit. It looked like this time, we were heading down into the carriage.

“What do you think we’re gonna find in here?” I asked, once my feet hit solid ground again. My heart was racing.

“I don’t know,” Chet said, “but I’m thinking it’s not too late to turn back.”

At the bottom of the ladder, I stood up inside the coach and brushed myself off.

Joe lifted the lantern high, taking a few cautious steps while my eyes acclimated to the dim surroundings. The car was mostly empty except for a thick layer of dust on the ground. The few pieces of furniture were draped in white sheets, including an upright piano, which peeked out from where its covering had slipped. A fan adorned with frosted globes was fixed in the ceiling, and windows

made of emerald stained glass ran the length of the carriage. Even if I hadn't seen the diagram for this car, I'd have known from the uncovered bar decorated with a carving of a large bunch of grapes that we'd arrived safely in the parlor car.

"Hey, guys. Looks like we're on the right track." I knelt down to study what appeared to be signs of a scuffle in the dust leading away to the next coach, but when Joe stepped away with the lantern, the details became harder to make out. "Joe, can I get some light over here?" I called.

He didn't reply.

"Hey, why so quiet?" But when I glanced up, I understood why.

There, at the far end of the car, Joe stood frozen as the lantern illuminated a face.

Marigold stepped forward, the world passing outside throwing strange shadows over the sockets of her eyes, making the hollows of her cheeks appear ghastly.

"M-Marigold? W-what are you doing in here?" I stammered.

She flashed a playful grin. "Relax! I heard you two talking about the secret passageway outside the dressing rooms, so while you were in the library car talking with Joe, I snuck back in and found the opening in the bathroom. And here we are. No biggie."

"No *biggie*?" Chet demanded. "Do you know how sketchy this looks?"

She laughed. "What? I was curious."

"Yeah, well, you standing here in the dark doesn't exactly cast you in an innocent light," Joe replied. "Especially given the potential kidnapping situation."

“You think *I* have something to do with that? I’m just trying to find Trent, same as you guys.”

“Are you his girlfriend or something?” I asked.

“What?” She burst into another fit of laughter. “No.”

As the lantern light fell across Marigold’s face, I looked again at her bright green eyes and narrow face, and found myself pulling out the show brochure. Joe stepped closer so I could see the headshots more clearly.

There was dark-haired Trent with his narrow face, and even though the photo was black-and-white, it was his eyes that sealed the deal.

I remembered them from the show. Emerald green.

Joe’s head snapped up. “I *knew* you seemed familiar.”

Marigold fiddled with her blond wig. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then tell us,” I said, pushing the pamphlet toward her. “Why do you and Trent look so similar?”

“You’re related to him,” Joe added, eyes narrowing. “Marigold Couture.”

She slid off her short blond wig and yanked out a handful of bobby pins, sending dark curly hair cascading down her shoulders. “Trying to trick siblings is never a good idea. I should know. I am one.” She paused with a coy smile. “You got me. I’m Trent’s sister.”

I couldn’t believe it. The “live wire” was her. “Why didn’t you tell us, Marigold?”

“That is, if your real name is Marigold!” Chet lobbed.

She sank down onto a dust-cloth-draped chair. “I didn’t want you to think I had anything to do with his disappearance.”

“Then why *are* you here?” demanded Joe.

“I was worried, and I figured I’d keep an eye on him. He’s been in a funk all week. Our grandma just passed away. Trent’s sad, even though he just came into a lot of money. I’m guessing you figured that part out already? And that we’re related to the Mayhems?”

I nodded. “So, did you come into a lot of money too?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Only him. He shouldn’t have run his mouth to the other actors, though. Everyone knows now. Even the museum’s donors. When people find out you’re rich, they treat you differently all of a sudden. He probably got his feelings hurt and he’s off somewhere sulking. I just need to find him. If anyone can talk him out of his bad mood, it’s me.”

“So you still don’t think him going missing—or being kidnapped—has anything to do with the inheritance?” Joe let out an irritated laugh.

“Because there are probably plenty of people who would love to get their hands on his money,” I added.

“I mean, Trent’s a total diva...,” Marigold said, rolling her eyes. “How could anyone kidnap him anyway?”

I gestured to the ladder leading up into the hole in the wall behind us.

“That could be a coincidence,” she said, though her voice wavered.

“How do you explain the two sets of footprints leading into this car, then?” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the fan with its STAY BACK! warning. “And this? We found it taped to the door.”

“Well, what makes you so sure they were *his* footprints? Or that this fan isn’t a prop from the show that someone stuck there as a joke?” She sounded nervous.

“Well, the fan is a prop, but—”

“Not helping, Chet!” Joe muttered.

I rooted around in my pocket and showed her the note we’d found telling Trent to go to the fifth car from the back of the train at eight p.m.

She regarded it coolly. “Aren’t you two supposed to be the best detectives in town?” Marigold sneered, shaking her head. “Have you found a single real clue proving he’s been kidnapped?”

I pocketed the note and held up the fan again with its little strip of tape at the top. “You honestly aren’t worried about this warning? He could be in danger.”

“You’re *desperate* to make junk into evidence to fit your ridiculous theory! What a joke!” Marigold smirked. “That’s probably tape from the renovation. This car is *littered* with garbage like that.”

I felt myself go pink. I’d been so stupid, falling for her. Chet had been right. Detective Work 101: Don’t fall for suspects. “Well, what about the dust over here? It looks like there was a scuffle.”

Marigold crossed her arms. “I don’t know. *I* could have accidentally made those marks.”

I glared at her. “You realize how flimsy that sounds, right?”

“Moving on,” Joe said, giving me a knowing look. I was not going to live this one down for a long time. “If Marigold’s hiding anything else, it’ll come out eventually. Let’s look at the diagrams again. Maybe Trent’s in another secret compartment in here.”

I pulled the papers from my pocket, unfolded them, and spread them out on the bar. The lantern cast enough light for us to scrutinize the page for the parlor car. “Here,” I said, pointing at some

lines on the diagram. “There are two floorboard compartments in this car.”

Using the figures, we quickly located one, and then the other, flipping aside the floor panels to reveal shallow, dust-filled spaces that hadn’t been opened in decades. There was nothing else. Time to check the far door leading to the next car.

I held my chin high and strolled past Marigold. Before I even touched the handle, she said, “Locked. I already tried it.”

I jostled the handle anyway, despising her even more for being right, then breezed past her to consult with Joe and Chet. “We’ll need another key,” I whispered.

“I’m experiencing *déjà vu*,” Chet said. “Why does this keep happening?”

“Hopefully it’ll turn up, like the first one did,” Joe replied.

I sighed. “Guys, I think we’ve really hit a dead end this time. We should head back.”

Marigold hesitated, then said, “Listen. If anything really is going on with Trent, I’d talk to the actor playing the bootlegger—Sebastian Rosé.”

Joe crossed his arms. “And why’s that?”

“His last name is Rosé? Cool!” Chet said, picking dust off his lapel.

“Rosé is just his stage name.”

“Well, what’s his real last name then?” I asked, tilting my head.

“You’ll love this! It’s Mayhem.” She snorted. “He’s the secret great-great-great-grandson of Easton Mayhem—on the *other* side of the family. Trent found out somehow. Wild coincidence, right? Two distant relatives on the same train!”

Chet's eyes bugged. "Wait. Sebastian is Mr. Mayhem's great-great-great-grandson?"

"That would explain this ripped bit of stationery," Joe said, holding up the diagram with the clipped-on scrap.

"S. Mayhem. *Sebastian* Mayhem," I said.

"Maybe Sebastian is Ravi's blackmailer, and this is a piece of the note, the one telling him to look for the treasure!" Joe said excitedly.

"'Secret blackmailer'?" Marigold asked. "Are you detectives or conspiracy theorists? I bet you think Sebastian is a kidnapper too."

"That's what we need to determine," I said stiffly. "If Sebastian is a Mayhem, maybe he feels he should have been entitled to the fortune. That sounds like motive to me."

Marigold chuckled again, but with less conviction. Maybe she was starting to believe her brother was in trouble after all.

One by one, we retraced our route through the dusty crawl spaces. This time, Marigold slithered behind us.

Halfway across the ceiling of the parlor car, Chet let out a whoop. "I found something!"

"Gosh! You can't scream in crawl spaces!" Marigold scolded him.

I had to give that one to her. "What is it?" I asked.

Joe held the lantern up so that some of the light shone back to us.

Between Chet's fingers, a gold coin glinted in the glow. "Maybe it's part of the treasure!"

"Uh, I don't think that belongs to you," Marigold said sharply.

"It does now!" Chet said, pocketing it.

"Trainsville owns this train and everything in it," she insisted.

"When did you start playing by the rules?" I mumbled.

No one said another word the rest of the way back.

14

THAT'S THE TICKET

JOE

TOKEN FOR YOUR TROUBLES, GENTS?" the flapper asked with a dazzling smile as we passed her in the library car. "They're our way of saying sorry for tonight's misfortunes." She held a few shiny gold coins out to us, and I noticed she looked confused as she took in our disheveled appearances. But she thankfully didn't comment on it. "They're good for twenty dollars off any purchase in the gift shop onboard or the main one at Trainsville." I flashed Frank and Chet an excited grin as we each took one from her gloved hand.

Chet seemed less enthused. "So the coin I found *isn't* a piece of lost treasure from the twenties?" He drew the crawl-space coin from his pocket and turned it over in his hands, comparing it to the one the flapper had just given him. Both had overlapping rail spikes engraved on one side and a railroad crossing symbol emblazoned on the other.

"Who else did you give these to?" I asked.

It seemed Frank had landed on the same idea as me. Whoever had one of those gold coins had dropped it in the secret passage.

“Hmm. Let’s see....” The flapper glanced around the library car now full of bored passengers thumbing through books or glancing around suspiciously, or whispering behind cupped hands.

My heart hammered in my chest. This was it!

“Well, now that each of you have one, I’ve given a coin to every passenger on the train.” Our faces fell, but she didn’t seem to have noticed. “Glad I could help you boys!” she said, beaming before she sauntered away to strike up a friendly conversation with the married couple by the far wall.

I glumly returned the lantern to Ravi. “Thanks again.”

He took it and pointed to the display case. “Did you take a rail spike?” he asked. “I swear when I came back in here from the bathroom, it was gone.”

Frank, Chet, and I shrugged and shook our heads. I pocketed my coin.

Shoulders slumped, Ravi turned back to ring up a girl’s purchase.

“*Murder on the Orient Express!*” Chet said, taking in the book’s cover. “Agatha Christie. Classic,” he said before turning back to us.

“The flapper gave a coin to every *passenger*,” Frank mused. “Marigold? Karen? Mr. Crowley?”

“Whoever crept into the secret passage to meet Trent in the second-class sleeping car would have needed to know when to step out of the performance.”

“Which means they’d need to know the script,” Chet mused. “It must be an actor, then.”

“Unless it’s a passenger....” Frank rushed back to the counter and madly flipped through the ledger. “There’s only one way to know for sure if any of the other passengers have been onboard before. Here.

Look,” he urged, pointing at the page. “Mr. Crowley. He was on the train last weekend.”

“That must be how he knows the ironing shoelaces line,” I concluded.

“Duh, of course he’s been on before,” Chet said. “Isn’t he Trainsville’s biggest patron?”

Frank pursed his lips.

“Wait a minute!” I gestured to Frank’s jacket. “That handwriting on the note. Can we compare it to the ledger again?”

Frank dug the scrap out and set it down beside the ledger.

I looked from the note to the list of names. “I think it’s a match!”

“Yeah, this does look pretty similar,” Frank said.

I grinned. “See! It’s Mr. Crowley!”

“Bathroom Man?” Chet said with a laugh.

Frank leaned lower over the ledger, closely comparing Mr. Crowley’s handwriting to the anonymous note. “Yeah, I’m not convinced. It doesn’t seem like enough evidence to confirm anything. I still think we should follow up on the information from Marigold about Sebastian.”

“Let’s do it,” I said. Maybe we could at least figure out the truth about Sebastian, one way or another.

Back in the performance car, passengers and actors were sucking mints and drinking sodas, stretching their limbs. The milkman was in a complicated yoga pose on the floor. The aristocrat was reading in a chair. The group of girls were playing Truth or Dare as they sipped on steaming cups of coffee. I overheard one of them muttering about how nothing beat the Coffee Stop’s iced lattes.

“Why is that woman in pink staring at me?” Chet whispered out the side of his mouth.

“I don’t know.” Frank gave him a once-over. “You don’t have anything on your face, but you are pretty dusty everywhere else.”

“She’s been watching me almost all night,” Chet quietly complained. “What’s her deal?”

I shrugged. “You’re a handsome fellow. Can you blame her?”

“Dear?” a voice called out. I turned as the grandmother flagged down my brother. “Thanks for the motion-sickness cure! My grandson is doing fine now.” The little boy turned away from the window and gave us a shy wave before focusing on the horizon again. The color had returned to his cheeks.

“Glad to hear it!” Frank called back.

“See?” Chet said. “It wasn’t the dessert after all!”

“Save it for your YouTube review,” I teased.

In the dining car, we found more actors and passengers seated around the little tables, and Sebastian at the back of the coach playing cards with the mafia mama, the reporter, and Biff.

I gestured for Frank and Chet to follow me. It was time to get some answers from the guy. Across from them, Murph looked like he was catching some z’s, while Charlene scribbled furiously in her pad, presumably taking notes for her story.

Before we reached the table, Murph shot out of his chair and stepped into the aisle. “This prison on wheels is getting old,” he griped.

Charlene closed her notepad, then rose to join us. “Yeah. Any updates?”

I shook my head.

Murph sighed. "Sorry, again. For causing a scene earlier."

"It's okay." I cracked a slight smile. "People were bound to find out sooner or later."

Charlene clipped her pen to her notepad. "Do you guys need anything?"

"A private word with the bootlegger," Frank said.

They nodded before clearing out of the car.

"Hey," I called to Sebastian. "Sorry to interrupt your game, but can we have a quick word?"

He nodded, and the other actors scooted out of their chairs so we could slide in. Soon, Sebastian, Frank, Chet, and I were alone in the bumpy carriage.

"How can I help you?" he asked in a playful tone.

"Just killing time until we get back to the station at ten p.m.," I said lightly. "Less than an hour to go. How about you? What have you been up to?"

"Winning at cards... until you guys came in." He winked, but his smile had faded.

Frank jumped in. "So you're pretty good at cards?"

"I heard the original owner of this train, Mr. Easton Mayhem, was a real card shark," I added, flipping over the king of clubs.

"Uhh, guys, I don't think—" Chet began, but I elbowed him.

"Is that so, Joe?" Frank replied. He looked at Sebastien. "Did you know that?"

"No." Sebastian started to stand up. "Better get going. Last call for coffee."

I rested my hand on his arm. "Speaking of lasts, what's your last name?" I asked, hoping my tone was still upbeat and conversational.

“Rosé,” he said in a tight voice. He hadn’t sat back down.

Frank closed in for the kill. “I heard it was actually Mayhem.”

Sebastian stiffened, then smiled. “I guess the rumors about you two are true. No case you can’t crack, huh?”

“Get to talking,” I said through my smile.

He sat back down. “You got me. I’m the great-great-great-grandson of Mr. Mayhem. The inheritance could have been mine, but it went to someone else. I’m broke and bitter as can be. Can you blame me?” He turned his palms faceup. “But that doesn’t make me a kidnapper.”

“So then why keep your relation to Mayhem a secret from us?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I just didn’t want to get involved.”

“You seem pretty involved to us.” Frank reached into his jacket and slammed the damp diagram pages down in front of Sebastian with the clipped-on scrap at the top of the pile. “Care to explain why one of these diagrams has stationery attached to it with your name?”

Sebastian wearily regarded the pages and scrap of stationery. “My great-great-great-grandfather left my family an old trunk of his belongings. I was cleaning out my folks’ attic a few months back and I looked inside for the first time. That’s where I found these diagrams. In a false bottom.”

“Just like a secret passage!” Chet blurted. “Oh, I just love a good theme!”

“Along with the diagrams was Mayhem’s diary,” Sebastian continued. “He wrote about how he had a bad falling-out with his daughter, so he left his inheritance to his granddaughter out of guilt, to try to make amends. I met Trent one day, and we got to talking. He

told me that he was also related to Mayhem, and on top of that, he'd inherited the great fortune. It was a real punch to the gut, or salt in the wound. Well, you get the picture."

"I'm sure it was," Frank murmured, giving him an expectant look.

Sebastian released a long breath, then flashed a gleeful smile. "Anyway, at the end of the diary, there was an entry that really got my attention: 'I've hidden a treasure on my train.' When I looked more closely at the diagrams, I noticed secret passages and compartments drawn in. I knew I needed to get access to this train. I managed to snag one of the roles in the new show, but then I realized that wouldn't help one bit. An actor constantly sneaking off to snoop around the other cars of the train would have raised more than a few eyebrows." He picked up the old diagrams and riffled through them. Puzzlement flitted across his face before he returned to his usual self-assurance.

"You're Ravi's blackmailer, aren't you?" I said, leaning forward. "You couldn't hunt for the treasure on your own, so you had to get someone else to do your dirty work."

"Ravi had twenty-four-seven access to the train because of the restoration work, didn't he?" Frank chimed in

Sebastian nodded. "Luckily, I knew how I could get him to help me. I told him to find the treasure or I'd turn his boyfriend in for stealing from the gift shop back at the museum."

"How could you possibly know something like that?" I asked incredulously.

Sebastian leaned back, interlacing his fingers behind his head. "I've been a security guard there for the past year. The CCTV footage I have from a few weeks ago doesn't lie."

Chet leaped in excitedly. “And then you and Ravi worked together to kidnap Trent!”

Sebastian chuckled. “Why would I need to threaten Trent when I’m so close to finding a fortune of my own? Everyone can be a winner here.” He stood, took a few steps, then turned back to us. “One more thing. You boys are missing some pages.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I left Ravi ten pages, one for each car. It seems you only have six.”

I furrowed my brow. “Ravi said he only found six pages.”

Without another word, Sebastian shrugged and strolled from the car.

“What if *Trent* knew about the treasure, and that’s where he’s been this whole time?” Chet exclaimed. “Off in the secret passages looking for it? Maybe the fortune wasn’t enough. Maybe he wanted the treasure, too, and he used acting as a cover to get onto the train to find it!”

Frank and I shot each other an amused look.

My brother rubbed his forehead, then readjusted his cap. “We’re running out of time, and we aren’t any closer to solving this thing.”

He had a good point. “If Trent is tied up somewhere, this is our only window to find him.” But before I could think of next steps, the performance car door flew open and Marigold rushed in. Her mascara was smudged from crying.

“I—I need to talk to you guys.”

BLOWING SMOKE

FRANK

MARIGOLD SNIFFLED FROM THE doorway. “You guys were right. I think my brother really is in trouble. I don’t know what I was thinking. Please, you have to help find him.”

Poor Marigold. I could feel my heart melting all over again.

From the look on Joe’s face, he wasn’t having any of it. “First, be honest with us for once. Why didn’t you tell us Trent was your brother?”

Marigold sighed. “You want the truth? I’ve always been the little sister in Trent’s shadow. He gets everything—attention, money, and even the role in this dumb production.” Angry tears ran down her cheeks. “But I don’t care about any of that anymore. If he’s been hurt... If something happened to him... I’d never forgive myself.”

Just then a loud noise blasted through the car—the train horn.

Chet covered his ears. “Probably just a railroad crossing!” he shouted over the din.

The horn sounded over and over again, in a series of random wails. No, not random. It sounded like Morse code.

The horn stopped, then sounded again.

Waaah! Waaah! Waaah! Waaah!

Waaah!

Waaah! Waaaaaah! Were there another two short *Waaahs*, or had that been another long *Waaaaaah*?

Waaah! Waaaaaah! Waaaaaah! Waaah! Or were they four *Waaahs*? It was hard to tell.

“Help!” Joe said after a moment. “Someone’s calling for help!”

“I bet it’s Trent!” I cried, my heart pounding. “He must be up front. We’ve gotta go get him!” I was secretly relieved he was still alive.

Chet glanced at the door ahead, then winced. “But we can’t get through the train, remember?”

Joe balled his fists at his sides. “Ugh! We need that key ring!”

“Oh no...,” Marigold said as her eyes brimmed with fresh tears.

Suddenly, bloodcurdling screams sounded from the next car and the lights cut out, enveloping us in darkness.

“What’s happening?” I called out, gripping the rattling tabletop to orient myself, then felt for the window. I managed to send the blinds rolling upward, but unfortunately, that did little to illuminate the car.

“Is everyone okay?” Joe yelled.

Chet and I confirmed we were fine, but Marigold didn’t say a word.

“Marigold? Are you there?” I asked nervously.

The only response was more screaming and shouting from the carriage ahead. The cries were louder now, as if someone had just opened the door....

And was it my imagination, or was the train picking up speed?

TUNNEL VISION

JOE

GUYS, WE NEED RAVI'S LANTERN," I shouted, gripping Frank's wrist with my left hand and latching on to Chet's sleeve with my right. Together, we stumbled our way through the darkness into the shaking performance car.

Inside, the scene was chaos, people screaming, shoving past me despite our calls for everyone to calm down.

A body slammed into me hard, and I spun and fell into a chair. Someone tripped over my ankle, swearing as they fell with a gut-wrenching *thud*.

"That's *it*. I *demand* to speak with a manager!" It was unmistakably Karen.

"Where's your phone?" I asked as I helped her up. "If it's not dead, we need the flashlight."

I heard her rooting around in her purse. "It's not here," she said. "Really?"

Doors slid open and shut as more people pushed by. I reached out, but Karen was gone. "Frank! Chet!" I called, lifting an arm to shield my face as more frantic people pressed past.

A hand gripped my shoulder, and I jumped.

“Joe,” Frank said in my ear. “It’s me.”

Relief washed over me, and my muscles eased up. “You’re okay!”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

I craned my neck. “Where’s Chet?”

“I don’t know,” Frank replied ominously.

My imagination fired up with terrible visions of Chet trampled, or worse, tied up as our culprit—or culprits—threatened him. I reminded myself that Chet was smart and strong, and he’d be okay wherever he was. “Let’s find him,” I said, mustering every ounce of courage I had.

Arm in arm, Frank and I charged ahead through the dark, rattling coach, calling for our friend. Reaching out, I felt for the handle, and before we knew it we were inside the library car, where I nearly tripped on a toppled pile of books. Baby dolls leered up at me through flickering moonlight, their smiling porcelain faces cracked like eggshells, while a ventriloquist dummy’s eyes seemed to follow me from where it was slumped on the floor.

Shadows stretched and shifted around us as we continued forward, glass crackling under our feet.

Frank stopped short and I slammed into him, my gaze skittering around the car. Then something hissed, and a gift shop lighter ignited in Biff’s meaty hand.

“You guys okay?” he asked from behind the counter. The glass display case beside it had shattered, and its knickknacks were strewn across the floor. The shelves behind it were now skeletally bare.

“Been better,” I said, thankful to be able to see my surroundings again.

“We need to get to the front of the train,” Frank added, his voice urgent.

Biff stepped out from behind the counter. “Let’s go, then.”

“One sec!” I yanked the lantern off the ground and, using Biff’s lighter, coaxed the flame to catch on the wick. Once it was lit, I nodded, ready to go, and Biff took back the lighter.

“Wait!” a voice called, and Charlene stepped out from behind a bookcase. “I’m coming with you.” She smoothed her silver dress, not an auburn curl out of place.

“Okay!” said Frank as she sidled up next to him, taking her arm.

Biff led the way, charging headlong into the dressing room car. Outside the windows, thunder boomed as a summer storm began, flashes of lightning illuminating the jumble of costumes and props.

We entered the second-class sleeping car next and passed the creepy portrait of Mr. Mayhem. As I was about to bring up the secret passageway, I looked up at the far end of the car, and what I saw took my breath away.

“Guys.” I lifted a shaking finger. “Someone unlocked the door to the parlor car.”

FULL STEAM AHEAD!

FRANK

NOT ONLY HAD THE DOOR to the parlor car been unlocked, but as we passed through it, we found the door to the mysterious car ahead also wide open. We hurried into the eerie new train car.

The carriage must originally have been outfitted as some sort of deluxe suite. A full canopy bed up ahead faced a sea of velvet sofas and old travel trunks. Looking up, I took in a beautiful ornate wood ceiling, like the ones capping the rest of the cars, but this one had a carving that looked like a compass rose.

We navigated around the scattered furniture, heading for a miraculously open door to the side of the canopy bed. There, the flapper cowered in the corner behind a tall ladder. “W-what happened?” she asked. “When the lights went out, I ran.”

“Stay calm,” Biff told her. “We’re checking it out.”

“Guys.” Charlene stooped down and picked up a hat. “Isn’t this —?”

“Trent’s!” Joe exclaimed.

She handed it to him, and he turned it over in his hands, carefully examining it.

“Good find, Charlene,” I said with a shy smile.

We passed between the bed and a grandfather clock half covered by an old sheet, into what was clearly the train’s old observation car. Lightning spiderwebbed across the dark sky through the tall windows as the train rumbled on. I noted the sculpted moons, suns, and stars embellishing the wood wall of windows—Mr. Mayhem really loved a theme.

“We’re almost to the front of the train,” Joe called, as we all struggled to keep our balance despite the train’s jerky movements while it jostled along on the track. “Whoever’s up there must have the rest of the keys.”

Nearing the next door, I recoiled as my foot brushed, something—a limp hand was sticking out from a splintered opening in the floorboards.

“Trent!” I rushed forward, Joe, Biff, and Charlene at my heels. Together, we pried the wood away to widen the opening. Joe lowered the lantern to reveal a figure bound with lengths of chain and rope. A figure dressed in navy overalls. A strip of duct tape covered his mouth.... “The engineer.”

Joe probed beneath the man’s thick glove and felt for a pulse. “He’s unconscious, but he’s alive.”

Charlene gasped. “If *he’s* here, then who’s driving the train?”

Chet burst through the door behind us. “What did I miss?” When his gaze landed on the engineer, his smile faded and he let out a whimper. “Tell my subscribers I love them.”

“Can you untie him and get him out of there?” Joe asked.

Chet nodded, despite the fear shining in his eyes.

“I can stay too,” Charlene said resolutely.

“Same,” Biff chimed in. “Besides, they’ll need some muscle to get him out of there.” He flicked the lighter to life and handed it to Chet, then bent and, with a labored grunt, tried to hoist the engineer out, his biceps flexing and straining so hard I was sure his pin-striped jacket sleeves would split at the seams.

At the same time, Charlene knelt and got to work on the chains and ropes with the deftness of a tailor searching for the end of a thread.

Joe and I had no time to waste, even if we had no idea what we were walking into.

Joe lifted the lantern high to light the way, and we passed through the door ahead of us.

In the writing car, the smell of fresh varnish was overwhelming. There were buckets of it spilled everywhere, puddling on the hardwood and soaking into heaps of curtains and newspapers, which had been spread out across parts of the floor. So much for trying to keep things neat.

I shuddered, my eyes combing a wall panel with an inkpot-and-pen insignia carved into it, before peering back at the mounds of curtains. For some reason, I couldn’t help picturing Trent tied to the tracks ahead, the train barreling closer.

“It’s obvious *someone* is responsible for tonight’s strange turn of events.”

“Who’s left?” But with a sinking feeling, I knew.

Before I could tell Joe what I’d figured out, we were bursting through the door facing the coal tender. We clambered up its side, ran across its sooty surface, descended using the metal rungs on the

outside, and hopped down into the engineer's cab at the very front of the train.

We faced a defunct firebox, a kind of oven for burning fuel back in the day. Its surface was covered in a web of brass valves and tubes. A little box hung from the wall on a coil. Two empty seats looked out the front, one with an orange vest draped over the back. A soda can and a half-eaten sandwich sat on the other. To the right of the firebox was a tall and narrow door, presumably leading to the outside of the train. Leaning in the corner was a flat-end coal shovel.

Where was the switchboard to turn all the lights back on? And where was Trent?

I craned my neck to gaze up through a grate in the covered part of the ceiling, flanked by flickering fluorescent lights. They made the cab feel even more like an eerie Halloween Horror Nights scene. The rest of the cab was open—luckily, the lightning had let up—and a wailing wind and the clacking and rattling of the train roared loudly in my ears.

But the cab was empty.

“Help!” a voice cried. “Let me out....”

We raced forward across a short length of sheet metal that latched to hardwood boards, and peered into the darkness of the firebox.

Inside was nothing but ashes.

A soft *thud* sounded behind us.

We spun around to face the back wall of the cab. Against it, there was a dark coal box. I noted the shiny new padlock dangling from it.

Taking the lantern, I crossed the space and rattled the lock. Pounding met me in reply. “Trent’s inside! We need a key!”

“Well, well, well...,” came a deep voice.

The skinny door beside the firebox now stood open, and a figure was silhouetted in the gap.

Joe and I instinctively stepped back.

The figure raised what was undeniably a rail spike, which glinted menacingly in the dim moonlight. Well, now I knew where Ravi's antique rail spike had gone. "The two of you call for something with a bit more *oomph*," the figure said, reaching for the shovel with their other hand.

"We don't want any trouble," I croaked.

"Leave it to you two peepers to ruin my plans. But it looks like you boys are in a tight spot this time. Such a shame it's come to this."

I inched forward and held up the lantern, revealing ice-blue eyes that glinted dangerously, a smug, leering smile set in a gaunt orange face that eerily resembled a jack-o'-lantern.

The Morse code confusion with the train horn earlier now made perfect sense.

Trent hadn't spelled out *H-E-L-P*.

He'd spelled out *H-E-A-T-H*.

Before we could react, the museum patron lurched at us, rail spike and shovel poised to strike!

DERAILED!**JOE**

| **DOVE SIDEWAYS, NARROWLY AVOIDING** the downward swing of Mr. Crowley's rail spike. Beside me, Frank stumbled to the coal box, where he hung the lantern on a coat peg just above. We could hear Trent inside again, banging his fists against the blackened metal. The seal around the box looked airtight. It was practically a vault.

"Get m-me out...." Trent spluttered and coughed, drumming his fists. "P-please... I can't breathe!"

Mr. Crowley, still dripping from the downpour, tucked the rail spike into his belt and lunged at Frank, smacking his stomach with the flat end of his shovel. Spinning around, Frank steadied himself beside me, but Mr. Crowley was right behind him. The old man brought the end of the shovel slicing through the air at my head. I ducked just in time as Frank dove, grabbing Mr. Crowley around the ankles. He gave Frank a hard kick, and my brother doubled over in pain. Acting fast, I grabbed the shovel by the blade, holding it firm even as he thrashed it, trying to shake me off.

With surprising strength, Mr. Crowley used the shovel to drive me backward, ramming me through the tall door beside the firebox.

I found myself precariously balanced on a narrow platform outside that ran from the cab to the tip of the engine. The wind rushing by pulled at me, sending my hat flying off into the night. And then I was tipping backward toward the craggy rocks and scraggly trees far, far below. With a final surge fueled by desperation, I lunged up, my fingers closing around a thick steel bar running the length of the train's exterior.

Wham!

Standing outside on the platform, Mr. Crowley smacked his shovel where my left hand had been moments before. I scooted to the right, but he moved with me, the blade clanging against the side of the train with each sinister blow.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

The shovel came down hard on my left hand, and I yelped in pain, releasing my grip as my feet gave out beneath me.

Now I was dangling by only my right hand, the track below whirling past in a dizzying rush.

If I fell, the drop would kill me.

"Leave my brother alone!" Frank yelled from the cab, and Mr. Crowley glanced back at him.

I used the distraction to regain my handhold and get my feet back up on the ledge. Hugging the curved glossy side of the train, I panted hard. I couldn't tell if I was shaking from nerves, the train's vibrations, or both.

Mr. Crowley retraced his steps, edging back into the cab and toward my brother.

I shuffled sideways, one foot and then the other, moving toward the skinny opening, and then I was back inside the cab. Frank had

his hands up defensively, bracing for Mr. Crowley's blow.

Just as Mr. Crowley raised the shovel, I kicked out at him, connecting with the back of his knee. He dropped like a tree, howling. I took the opportunity to punt the shovel, which skittered across the floor, out of the cab, and off the train.

I raced over to Frank. We stood side by side, united once more.

But Mr. Crowley wasn't done. He pulled himself up again, panting like a feral animal as he squared off against us, his eyes on fire. "I did what I had to do," he snarled, sliding the rail spike from his belt. "You boys should never have gone poking around."

"It's the end of the line!" Frank told him. "We'll be back to the station in forty-five minutes."

Mr. Crowley let out a defeated chuckle. "I was right to break a sweat when I realized who was among the passengers this evening. Bayport's best snoops."

"Now that I think about it, you *were* sweating buckets!" I fired back.

"There's nowhere to go," Frank said. "Now, give us the key to let Trent out."

I could still hear Trent wheezing from inside the coal box. "*Please...*" His voice was growing fainter, his pounding weaker.

Mr. Crowley's eyes darted to the spot behind me as he shifted to gain a better view.

In the same instant, I lunged for the rail spike in his hand. But the old man shoved me back. In our scuffle, I bumped into the box dangling from the wall.

A button on it lit up red.

I grabbed the device. A label read RADIO SWITCH BOX. Switch box? I punched the button again and again, hoping to correct whatever I had unwittingly done. It stayed stubbornly lit.

As the train whizzed past a railroad-crossing sign and a set of red and green lights, I saw the track split up ahead. And then realization dawned.... The button I'd hit on the switch box had signaled us to shift onto another track, one that looked like it hadn't been used in a hundred years.

The train lurched sideways with a shrill screech as we switched. The track we were on now was overgrown with vegetation, and the train jostled over who knew what. I pictured the map of the train route from the library car. There was only one other track we could be on....

We had switched onto the old track heading to the unfinished bridge.

We were hurtling toward our doom!

LOCO MOTIVE

FRANK

AS JOE HELD THE STRANGE box in his hand, Mr. Crowley crept up behind him and raised the rail spike, ready to stab him in the back. Not if I could help it! I charged forward, pried it from the old man's hand, and flung it out the door.

Mr. Crowley bared his shiny veneers. "That was a prized relic!"

"Well, then maybe you shouldn't have tried stabbing us with it!" I spat.

With both his shovel and rail spike gone, Mr. Crowley shrank back.

"You're out of options now," I taunted, rejoining Joe, then realized that we'd need to keep Mr. Crowley calm until we could get the coal box key from him. Getting him talking seemed as good a start as any. "We know you kidnapped Trent. Were you going to hold him for ransom?"

Mr. Crowley gritted his teeth. I couldn't tell if he was smiling or snarling. "Yes."

"But you're supposed to be this big donor," Joe said. "Why would you need anyone else's money?"

Mr. Crowley leaned back against the firebox, taking a deep, rattling breath. "My donations can only help the museum so much."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Hang on.... This is all to get more money to donate to the *museum*?"

"You wouldn't understand." Crowley wiped a hand across his sweaty brow. "These trains were never intended to be used for such frivolous entertainment. The museum is only offering these shows because it's so desperate for money."

"You wanted to make sure Mayhem's money went back to Trainsville," Joe said, his eyes never leaving the old man's face.

Mr. Crowley chuckled sadly. "A train like this belongs in the exhibit hall. Not running the tracks, hosting poorly acted shows. This train wreck of a production isn't what Mr. Mayhem would have wanted."

There was another round of coughing from inside the coal box.

I held out my hand. "You don't want Trent to suffer, though. Why don't you give us the key now?"

Mr. Crowley gave a sly smile. "You're supposed to be so clever, boys. Very well. I'll give you the key if you can tell me how I pulled off a kidnapping on a moving train."

Joe and I exchanged a glance. It was a terrible game he was forcing us to play, but I didn't see any other choice. He could have hidden the key anywhere.

Joe took a deep breath. "There's a secret passage in the bathroom of the performance car. That's how you kidnapped Trent, right?"

Mr. Crowley howled with laughter. "Now, how in the world would I have known about a secret passage?"

The gears were turning in my head. “You must have seen the diagrams on the counter in the main gift shop before Ravi got there, and took the ones you needed. That’s why he never found those pages.”

“You mean these old things?” Mr. Crowley taunted, reaching into his pocket and pulling out several folded sheets. Then, he leered and opened his hand, and they blew out through the open door and into the night. “Oops. Well, now that evidence is gone.”

I lunged and managed to catch one sheet, then stumbled back. “For someone who cares so much about history, you’re pretty careless with original artifacts,” I said, tucking the page into my pocket.

“Those papers?” Mr. Crowley sneered. “They’re insignificant. I have to say, I expected more from you. I thought for sure you’d figure out the anonymous call I placed to that girl’s phone—the ledger in the gift shop had her number right there. I knew shining a light on the fact she had stashed a phone aboard would make her seem suspicious, especially after I’d spied her sneaking photos on her phone all night. I smuggled mine aboard too, just in case. But I wasn’t as careless with it as dear Karen was.” He pushed aside his jacket to reveal the missing key ring dangling from his belt loop. “Oh, and the key I planted in the gift shop clerk’s satchel.”

Ignoring the jeer, I kept going. “You kidnapped Trent during the show so you wouldn’t rouse suspicion.”

Mr. Crowley gave a smug grin. “Very good.”

“After all,” Joe pointed out, “who would have believed an actor got kidnapped in the middle of a murder mystery scene where the script

calls for him to be kidnapped? And all on a moving train? It's actually pretty clever."

"We figured it out," I said flatly. "Now, hand over the key."

"Fine. But just one more thing. How was I going to get Trent off the train?"

I glanced at Joe. He shrugged.

Grinning, Mr. Crowley glanced at the tracks. "Not so smart now, are you boys? I planned on taking the tied-up Trent off the train during its stop at the end of the track. Then I'd bring him to my car I left in the woods. Vintage. I wouldn't expect you to know a Rolls-Royce from a jalopy if it ran you off the road. Young people these days don't appreciate the good old days and the good old ways."

He stepped away from the wall and cracked his knuckles, then checked his watch. "Speaking of which, we should be reaching the end of the track any minute. I'll be taking my hostage with me." He patted his breast pocket. "Of course, the key's been right here all along." Mr. Crowley took a menacing step forward. "But first, I'll need to take care of you two. I can just picture the headline now: 'Gumshoe Brothers Croak after Taking a Tumble from Moving Train.'"

"Wait!" I cried, stalling for time. "You're not at all concerned that this precious train is now a crime scene because of you? I feel like that'd only hurt the museum's reputation."

"It would only add to the history of this great train," Mr. Crowley said with a cold smile.

He was taking "train enthusiast" to a whole new level....

"There's still one little problem with your plan," Joe said. "Actually, two."

“And what might those be?” Mr. Crowley scoffed, but he hesitated.

“One, we were here to throw a wrench into your plan.” Joe flashed me a proud smile. And two”—his expression hardened—“we’re heading toward the unfinished track that Mayhem died on.”

Mr. Crowley started as if splashed by cold water.

I was just as shocked. We were on a new set of tracks? Why hadn’t Joe said something before? Then I realized there hadn’t really been a chance. I glanced around for the emergency brake to stop the train. There had to be one. A pedal. A handle. Anything. But all I saw were dials and gauges and mysterious levers. We didn’t have a second to spare.

“I did this all for nothing,” Mr. Crowley muttered to himself, resignation and sorrow flooding his features. Then his sad blue eyes focused on me. “At least, I can save my own hide.” He made a beeline for the metal rungs screwed into the back wall of the car, leading up to the tender. Joe and I tried to stop him, but he flung out a fist, hitting me square in the jaw and socking Joe in the eye. Then he began climbing up the rungs. “So long, boys,” he called, disappearing from view.

“Help!” A frenzied clanging was coming from the coal box. “I’m running out of air!”

“We’ll get you out of there, Trent!” Joe yelled.

I pointed at the rungs. “We need that key from Mr. Crowley’s pocket.” I began to climb toward the top of the tender, hand over hand, with Joe wielding the lantern and scaling after me.

20

TRAIN WRECK

JOE

ON TOP OF THE TENDER, the wind whipped wildly around us, and my eye ached from where Mr. Crowley had socked me.

Crouching, I tightened my grip on the lantern to keep it from toppling straight off. Mr. Crowley was racing ahead to the end of the tender. “We need that key!” I hollered.

“Think of Mr. Mayhem!” Frank shouted. “He saved a train full of passengers. It’s not too late for you to leave your mark on Bayport. The good kind!”

But Mr. Crowley kept running, and he was fast. Frank and I were faster. Kicking up soot, we reached the end of the tender as Mr. Crowley turned and charged. With a grunt, he threw his weight against me, trying to push me off the side. The lantern flew from my hand and down into the propped-open door of the car ahead of us, followed by the sound of shattering glass. I winced, but was sure Ravi and the Bayport History Museum would understand.

Mr. Crowley sneered as he made another attempt, but when Frank jabbed him, the old man let go with a groan. Then, he was off again,

clambering across the coal pile and to the top of the metal rungs on the other side of the tender.

Just then, a fiery burst rose from the open doorway of the writing car.

The shattered lantern must have set all those varnish-soaked curtains and newspapers ablaze!

I coughed as flames danced and black smoke belched from the doorway, billowing past us into the night sky. Ravi and the Bayport History Museum would understand us destroying the lantern—but the *train*? If it didn't plummet off the bridge, it looked like the fire would take care of it.

"My beautiful train!" Mr. Crowley cried. He seemed to have aged fifty years.

"It's the end of the line, Mr. Crowley!" I called. "Help us put out this fire, or the Mayhem Express will add another tragic chapter to its infamous history."

The man's expression hardened, and he turned again, leaping from the top of the tender onto the roof of the next car. If he couldn't escape through the train, it looked like he'd settle for escaping on *top* of it.

"He's getting away!" Frank shouted.

The fiery gap between coaches was terrifying, but we couldn't turn back now. I knew Frank was thinking the same thing. Taking a deep breath, and with a running start, he jumped and landed cleanly on the other side. I vaulted after him, but as soon as I landed, my feet slipped.

I swayed, my arms flailing.

And then I felt a hand firmly gripped around my own. The next thing I knew, Frank was yanking me back up.

“Thanks,” I gasped, chest heaving.

“Don’t mention it.” His teeth were a flash of white in the darkness. “You saved me from falling off the train earlier. It was the least I could do.”

Crouched, we carefully crossed the writing car’s roof and hopped onto the next one, and the next, and the next. Fear rose in my throat at the thought that with a poorly timed jerk, and we could tumble off at any moment.

Clutching his hat to his head, Frank looked back for a moment. So did I. Clouds cleared to showcase a gleaming full moon illuminating the bay below it. And a bend in the tracks ahead...

We were rapidly closing in on the unfinished bridge!

“Stay back! I mean it!” Mr. Crowley shouted from the other side of the parlor car roof. We whipped around as he fished in his breast pocket and pulled out a long key. “Stop following me, or I’ll toss it!”

“Please,” I cried. “We have to work together.”

He slowly moved back, one foot, then the other, and lifted the key higher. “I’m serious!” He took another step as a hatch in the roof opened.

And Mr. Crowley fell straight through it.

Chet’s head popped up into view. “Oops!” He gazed down. “Are you okay, Mr. Crowley?” Cringing, he looked back up at us. “Sorry! I wanted to know what was going on, and then I noticed this little square in the ceiling, and found this ladder—”

“Chet!” I cried out. “Impeccable timing!”

“Are you guys all right?” Chet asked, taking in Joe’s black eye.

“We’re better now,” I said, cautiously approaching the hatch.

Frank and I climbed down the ladder into the parlor car.

Mr. Crowley had landed in one of the open hidden compartments we’d found earlier. I felt his pulse. He was alive—just unconscious, like the engineer had been. I snatched up the coal box key where it had landed beside him.

“It was Bathroom Man?” Chet squealed. “Can’t say I saw *that* coming.”

“Help me!” I grunted. Together, Frank and I guided Mr. Crowley’s limbs cleanly into the rectangular coffin-size compartment, then clamped the floorboard panel over his prone body. “That’ll hold him. At least until we get back to the station.”

“Did I save the day?” Chet asked. “Wait till I tell my subscribers about *this*!”

I rose back to my feet quickly. “First we have to save Trent and stop the train! It’s headed for the unfinished bridge!”

The smile melted from my friend’s face.

“Chet, watch him.” He flopped down on top of the hatch and gave us a thumbs-up.

My bro and I booked it into the deluxe suite car, where we bumped into Charlene.

“We untied the engineer!” she called after us. “He just went back up to the cab.”

“Nice going!” Frank called over his shoulder as he fell into step behind me.

We passed into the observation car and pulled up short at the entrance to the writing car. Biff was finishing hosing down the fire with an extinguisher.

Taking deep breaths, we charged through the smoke-filled coach, coughing and sputtering, then climbed up and across the coal tender and landed in the cab. Ahead, the strip of track jutted out over rocks—and into sky.

“B-boys! Quick! Help me!” the engineer called. Despite the dazed look on his soot-streaked face, he yanked the brake lever. It didn’t give.

Joining him, we all pulled and pulled and pulled as the train hurtled toward the track’s deadly end.

I felt sick to my stomach. In moments, we’d be plummeting to the bay far below.

Finally the lever slammed down, and the train ground to a screeching halt, sparks cutting through the dark.

All was eerily quiet, apart from my heavy breathing and my heart pounding in my ears.

The engineer slouched back in his seat and let out a deep breath. “I don’t get paid enough for this.” He wiped his arm against his forehead. “Time to head back to Trainsville,” he said, flicking a switch. He sighed again, lifted his sandwich with still-shaking hands, and took a huge bite. “Never thought fear could make a man so hungry.”

As the train swayed backward, I spun around to the coal box and inserted the long key into the padlock. It clicked open, and I unhooked it. Then, with Frank’s help, I lifted the heavy metal lid.

Inside, Trent was folded up, bound with rope, duct tape hanging from the side of his mouth.

“Trent! Are you okay?” I asked

His eyes were shut. He wasn’t moving.

I turned to Frank. We were too late.

He reached down into the coal box, searching for a breath stirring the duct tape, a slight shifting of his body, any indication that Trent was still alive. Extending my hand slowly toward his wrist to feel for a pulse, I stopped.

Trent's eyes stared back at me, a blaze of emerald green.

21

COFFIN VARNISH

FRANK

A **SPEEDY HALF HOUR LATER**, the Mayhem Express had pulled back into the station, where Chief Olaf was waiting to pick up Mr. Crowley and take him to the *other* kind of station, the big one downtown.

Joe, Chet, and I were the first off the train. We'd called ahead and explained to the chief what had happened—or, as Chet had said, we'd dropped a dime with the fuzz to see to it that Mr. Crowley was escorted from one caboose to another. Chief Olaf had sent his officers to collect him in the coffin compartment, and they'd led him, cuffed, down the steps and onto the platform. Mr. Crowley was a bit banged up, but fully conscious. As we watched, an officer slipped the ring of keys into a Ziploc bag, beside another clear sack of the missing cell phones.

Off to the side, a young man in a backward baseball cap and gym clothes appeared to be finishing up a conversation with an officer. Nodding his head nervously, he turned and joined Ravi, sighing a deep breath of relief. The guy gave us a thumbs-up, and then Ravi mouthed us a silent thank-you.

“Guess Ravi’s boyfriend came clean to the Bayport PD about his shoplifting stunt in the gift shop,” I said. “Looks like he got off with just a slap on the wrist.”

Joe motioned to Sebastian, who was being questioned by another cop and looking anything but relieved. “As for Sebastian and his blackmailing,” Joe added, “not so much.”

Nearby, I noticed Charlene talking with the local news crew, who’d set up cameras on the sidewalk, and Karen seated on a bench by an outlet, charging her phone as it was clasped to her ear.

“Safe to say Escape Rumble has nothing to worry about,” she said tiredly into her phone.

Biff clapped us on the back. “Thanks for everything, guys. Knew you could do it.”

I winced. “We’re just glad everyone’s okay.”

Joe gently touched his black eye. “Think the museum gift shop sells ice packs?”

Biff shook his head. “But hey, you can get your name engraved on a rail spike!”

Great souvenir of us almost dying, I thought.

Joe and I exchanged a look as Biff smiled broadly at us before strolling off.

“What?” Chet asked, glancing from me to Joe and back. “Did I miss something?”

“We’ll explain later.” I was too tired to go into the details, and I doubted we’d be visiting the museum gift shop anytime soon. I’d had enough trains for a lifetime.

The rest of the passengers filed onto the platform as the firefighters boarded to examine the writing car. Luckily, it appeared

the coach wasn't totally wrecked. Hopefully, that would warm Heath Crowley's cold little heart from behind bars.

Across the street, Trent sat in the back of an ambulance (or as Chet called it, the old "meat wagon") with a mylar first-aid blanket draped around his shoulders.

"Thanks again for saving me," he said when we joined him. "I should never have followed the instructions on that stupid note." He gingerly touched the top of his head and winced.

Marigold raced over and threw her arms around her brother. He winced again. "Oops. Sorry," she said. "I'm so glad you're okay. I love you. But don't ever tell anybody I said that."

"You were right," he admitted. "I never should've told anyone in the cast about being related to Mayhem and his fortune." His clear green eyes met mine. "You know what? I'm going to use some of that inheritance to fix up the Mayhem Express. It seems like the least I can do."

"Awesome!" Joe said. "That's very noble of you."

"See?" Chet chimed in. "Mr. Crowley didn't need to kidnap you after all."

Trent chuckled, then sucked in a pained breath as he turned back to his sister. "It'll only be a matter of time before you turn eighteen and get your share too."

She put a finger to her lips. "Shh! Not so loud!"

"So you'll get your piece of the pie after all," I said, narrowing my eyes at her.

"I didn't want to say anything. Don't tell anyone, please. I don't want to be kidnapped next!"

I rolled my eyes. "Your secret's safe with us."

As a couple of officers began blocking off the platform with crime scene tape, Chief Olaf marched over, scowling. “You boys—I can’t decide whether to thank you or tell you off.”

“You could tell us what great detectives we are,” Joe said innocently.

The chief shot him an annoyed look but stomped off when he was called away.

Chet sighed. “Talk about ruining our train of thought! Get it? *Train* of thought?”

I groaned.

Just then the passenger in pink pushed her way past the crowd loitering around the station, toward us. “Hey,” she called, “that was funny, kid.”

Chet glanced around, confused. “What was?”

“Your puns. I’ve been listening to you all night. You’re a firecracker! The news cameras were eating up everything you said.” She pulled an oval business card from her bag and handed it to him. “I’m a talent scout. I was hoping to I’d find my next star among the actors in tonight’s production, but they’re all”—she leaned in, lowering her voice—“less talented than the Kardashians. But you... you’re something else. I’d love to represent you.”

Chet’s mouth opened and closed like a goldfish gulping air.

She smiled. “Call me soon to talk shop. Not now, though. I’m too exhausted.” Then she turned and rejoined the line of passengers.

Chet pumped the business card in the air. “Forget YouTube! Hello, Hollywood!”

“Mr. Morton, may I have a selfie?” Joe asked, batting his eyelashes.

I offered Chet a fist bump. “Nicely done.” A flash of red lights caught my attention. “Hey, let’s go check out what’s happening over there.”

Joe, Chet, and I wandered over to watch as the officers guided Mr. Crowley into the back of a squad car. Served him right.

He stared at us through the window as the cruiser rolled off. “Looks like the coppers are gonna throw him right in the big house!” Chet said.

I rolled my eyes and fought back a laugh. “Chet, you are so ready for your close-up.”

“Yeah, Morton, the talent scout’s clearly gone to your head,” Joe teased. “That being said, the line does sound like it came straight from the show’s script. It’s funny how everything came full circle—a man who was ‘off the track’ and ‘a wrong number’ ended up in ‘nippers.’”

“I can see the headline now,” Chet piped up. “‘Sleuths Send Kidnapper to the Caboose.’”

“With the help of their trusty apprentice!” I added.

“Yeah, Morton,” Joe chimed in. “We seriously couldn’t have done it without you.”

Chet flushed. “Aww, thanks, guys.”

As I patted Chet on the shoulder, Charlene wandered over from the news crew setup. “Nice going,” she said to me. “I knew you had it in the bag from the get-go.”

“Well, uh, thank you for the assist back there.”

She smiled. “You didn’t need it.”

I went a little pink. “I hope this didn’t ruin your story for the paper.”

“What? Are you kidding? Now it’s *sure* to get picked up!” she exclaimed, giving me a wink.

My heart did a backflip. “Hey, now that this is all over, maybe you’d want to, uh, see a movie sometime? With me? I mean, uh, there’s nothing better to do.”

I tried to ignore Joe clinging comically to Chet’s arm as they looked on.

The corner of Charlene’s mouth curled upward. “Sure. I’d like that. I’ll send you a text. As soon as I get my phone back.”

I laughed, shoving my hands into my pockets in a way that I hoped looked nonchalant, and my fingers brushed something. I pulled it out: the diagram page I’d caught during our scuffle with Mr. Crowley. Examining it now, I saw it depicted the deluxe suite car.

Chet leaned in, curious, and then he murmured, “Hey, uh, Frank and Joe. I... umm... I need to talk to you. Privately.” He looked a little pale but tapped his foot, whistling, before pointedly walking over to a nearby bench.

I looked at Charlene, slightly embarrassed, but she just chuckled. “Go for it,” she said. “But I want an exclusive later on.”

“Well? What is it?” Joe asked Chet impatiently when we joined him.

“I think I figured it out!” he said, holding the other diagrams we’d taken from Ravi. He pointed to a compass sketched inside a little box. “If there’s a treasure on the Mayhem Express, it’ll be here.”

“Still on about the old treasure hunt, I see,” Joe replied, with a roll of his eyes.

I decided to humor Chet. “What makes you think that a treasure would be there? The wooden compass rose carved in the ceiling? Is

‘compass’ old-timey for ‘gold,’ or something?”

“Seriously,” Joe said. “Every car has elaborate woodwork in fancy designs.”

“At first I thought ‘safe passage to the parlor car’ might have been referring to a hidden safe, but that wasn’t right. And it would have been too obvious. Then, since ‘box’ had been underlined twice in the diagram for the cab, I thought the treasure might have something to do with the firebox,” Chet explained, shuffling through the papers before pulling one out and pointing at the note. “‘Box’ is also an old-timey way of referring to a safe. But I checked the firebox after you guys rescued Trent, and it was pretty empty.” He flipped to another page, the one labeled *For a moss corpse, see Diagram No. 7*. “I would have just chalked up the woodwork to decoration except for this note. All the other ones make sense except this one. See, the pages are full of numbered diagrams, but none of them have a diagram seven. So, I thought, what if it meant to look in *car* seven... and then, when I saw the deluxe suite car diagram, the code seemed so obvious! Or, rather, the anagram.”

“A moss corpse... compass rose!” I exclaimed.

Joe bounced excitedly. “Like the compass rose in the ceiling of that train car! Chet, you’re a genius!”

“Your love of wordplay *seriously* paid off tonight,” I added.

We glanced over at the train. There were no cops standing guard at the moment.

Joe flashed his mischievous grin. “Let’s go see if you’re right!”

Throwing caution to the winds, the three of us sneaked up the steps of the train and tiptoed through the cars. Fortunately, the

power had been turned back on, and everything was once again well-lit.

“I bet the treasure is gold! We’ll be rich!” Chet cheered, racing ahead.

In the deluxe suite car, I stopped under the compass rose carved into the ceiling, studying it carefully for the first time. I hadn’t noticed before how the *E* and the *W* were swapped. Clockwise, it read N, W, S, E. *How odd.*

Joe pushed an old velvet brocade sofa across the floor so that it stood under the compass rose. “Get on up there, treasure hunter!”

Chet climbed up excitedly felt around the ceiling, his fingers brushing against the points of the compass rose, pushing upward. He grunted. “What do I do?” he called down.

Joe scratched his head. “What would Easton Mayhem have thought of—”

“Easton! *East!*” I said, clapping my hands. “Chet, press the *E!*”

There was a satisfying click as the *E* pushed cleanly up into the wood. But nothing happened. Chet tried pushing upward on the ceiling again. It didn’t budge.

I sighed, staring up at the other letters: *N*, *S*, and *W*.

The swapped *E* and *W* gave me another idea. *W* looked like an upside-down *M*.... “Chet, try twisting the *W* so it becomes an *M* for ‘Mayhem.’”

He fumbled with the wood for a moment, then pushed the letter upward.

It vanished into the ceiling with another soft click.

Joe gaped at me. “Frank, you’re brilliant!”

Chet pushed again, and a square of ceiling slid sideways. “We did it! We did it! We found the gold smugglers’ treasure!”

“Can you see anything?” I leaped onto the sofa for a better view. My mind was racing. What would we find...? Gold doubloons. Diamond necklaces. Silver goblets.

Inside the space were... old bottles—cobwebbed, cracked, and dusty.

Chet’s face fell as his dreams of gold faded to dust.

“Apparently, the only thing the Phantom Express was smuggling in the twenties was liquor,” I quipped.

“Or ‘coffin varnish,’” Chet said, looking miserable. “That’s what they called it back then.”

“More like the Speakeasy Express,” Joe teased. “The only spirits haunting the Phantom Express were of the liquid variety.” We all laughed. At least Chet was being a good sport about the whole thing.

“Mr. Crowley got it wrong,” he said. “This train was always a party train. It’s the way Mr. Mayhem wanted it. I think he would have hated the idea of it sitting around collecting dust in some drafty hall beside a little informational placard. Although I do love reading those placards.”

After shutting the panel so the “treasure” would remain hidden, we disembarked the train and collected our phones from one of the officers. By then, just about everyone was gone. Doing our best to avoid puddles, we wandered through Trainsville to the parking lot, passing the log statue of Easton Mayhem.

“So we beat on, boats against the current.” Chet sighed.

“Huh?” Joe asked. “F. Scott Fitzgerald?”

I nodded. “Deep, Morton. Look at you, dishing out quotes from the classics.”

“Speaking of dishing...,” Joe began. “I wanted to revisit dish duty.”

“I knew it! I knew you wouldn’t let it go.” I stopped beside a park bench. “What about it?”

“How about we split it?”

“Really?” I asked, brightening.

“Well, we boarded this train to solve a fake mystery and ended up solving a real one together. And as dangerous and wild as it was, I’m glad I came along. It was fun. Minus the almost dying, of course. And getting this black eye.”

I laughed. “Deal.” We started walking again.

“But you still owe me eighty bucks.”

“What?” I yelled.

“Fine. Sixty.”

“Forty.”

Joe smiled. “Deal.”

“What do you think will happen to Trainsville?” Chet looked around at the collection of old trains. Beyond the lampposts’ glow, I could just make out some of the names emblazoned on their sides: the Flying Express, Blue Moon Canyon Express, Denali Express.

“Any publicity is good publicity,” I said. “I’m sure it’ll survive.”

“Especially after my soon-to-go-viral YouTube video!” Chet cheered. “I thought of the perfect clickbait title for my review: Mystery on the Mayhem Express. Catchy, right?”

“It’s the bee’s knees!” Joe said with a theatrical finger waggle, and I couldn’t help laughing. Everything had turned out great, even if Joe had lost his hat and our good suits had been ruined—how were we

going to explain that to Mom, Dad, and Aunt Trudy? Plus, we were at least an hour past curfew. (I was sure once we told them about the trip, they'd understand.) And I was still over the moon about asking Charlene out to the movies and looking forward to getting that text from her....

As for the rest of our summer, I had a feeling we'd be happy resting our mystery muscles for a few more weeks. At least until we got bored again. And when that happened, we'd be ready to take on the mystery of the future together.

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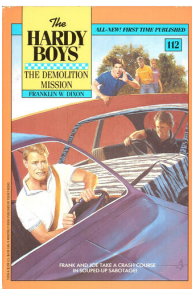
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COMING SOON•

#24 As the Falcon Flies

GLOSSARY OF 1920S SLANG

bean shooter:

a gun

bee's knees:

the best

big house:

prison

bootlegger:

person who illegally makes, sells, or distributes goods

box:

a safe

cabbage:

money

caboose:

jail

cat's pajamas:

spectacular

coffin varnish:

alcohol

copper:

police officer

crab:

figure out

dangle:

leave

dewdropper:

a slacker

drop a dime:

to inform on someone (typically to the police about criminal activity)

duck soup:

easy

fakeloo artist:

con man

fire extinguisher:

a chaperone

flapper:

a young fashionable woman who enjoys the party scene

gat:

a gun

getaway sticks:

legs

glad rags:

fancy clothes

gumshoe:

detective

heebie-jeebies:

the jitters

heeled:

armed

hotsy-totsy:

perfect

ice:

diamonds

icy mitt:

rejection by someone you like

iron the old shoelaces:

a way to politely say you're going to the bathroom

jalopy:

an old beat-up car

keen:

attractive

kitten:

a woman

lam off:

run from the authorities

live wire:

a lively person

meat wagon:

ambulance

nippers:

handcuffs

oyster fruit:

pearls

peeper:

detective

phonus bolonus:

nonsense

rattler:

train

rhatz:

“How disappointing!”

snooper:

detective

soup job:

to crack a safe

speakeasy:

an illegal bar selling liquor during Prohibition

spiffy:

elegant

squeeze:

a girlfriend

swell:

high class

tootin' the wrong ringer:

asking the wrong person

wrong number:

a bad person

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