

# **FOUR LETTER WORDS**

## **ACT 1**

**A Novel**

**Haley Beth Costisick-Unwin**



**Can't Put it Down  
BOOKS**

Four Letter Words  
Act One  
A Novel

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*For the two loves of my life, my dad and my husband.*

## Chapter 1

I HATE GYM CLASS. I'M A SLACK ASS. I drag my feet. So, half-way through senior year when it came time to sign up for my “fun” elective gym class, I dragged my feet like with everything else. I slouched dramatically before the bulletin board in the lobby, to no avail, trying to find any sign-up sheet with a single empty slot. I knew it was the last day for sign-ups but had assumed there would be at least a handful of seniors (like yours truly) who had put it off to the last minute.

There had to be!

There weren't.

I was it. And there was only one class with any space. One space—just for me.

Baseball. Fucking baseball.

Fine. Whatever. I was in the home stretch; seventeen-years-lame, and when I turned eighteen in September, I was out of my one-horse hometown and off to better things. Not college, per say, but something else. Had to be. Shit had to get better than this.

I scowled as I scrawled my name, almost imperceptibly on the pink photocopied paper of the *ladies'* baseball sign-up sheet. Maybe I would be forgotten, not deciphered, and be allowed to coast through the second half of the year with another glorious study hall.

Or, they would realize it the day before graduation and I would have to go to summer school for fucking gym class. Not worth the risk.

Suffice it to say, nothing happened in the two weeks until I started my forced 'elective' so we're gonna skip 'em. My story, my rules.

It was the last period of the day, a Monday, one of those times you see other seniors walking to their cars because they don't have a ninth period. I was not one of those seniors, and only had a bike. I shuffled across the dry grass, still brown from being littered with dead leaves all winter, pondering my ability to walk slow enough to miss the class all together. Attendance was abysmal; out of the twenty kids on the sign-up sheet I counted eleven (including myself) and wondered if that would be enough people for a baseball team. Wondered, but didn't really care. Everyone was sitting inside the diamond as a large man with a red windbreaker and baseball cap held a clip board in one hand and a baseball bat in the other.

His eyes scanned the smattering of students before locking on my gaze as I approached from the outskirts. The guy smiled at me, and not being a total dick, I smiled back. His face appeared warm and friendly, unlike most gym teachers I'd previously annoyed, and he looked young. Green, with a wide easy smile that reached and filled his eyes. Poor guy. High school would take care of that by summer. Eat him alive. He lay the bat down at his feet, grabbed a pen from behind his ear, and glanced my way.

“Welcome to Baseball 101.” He grinned at his lame semi-joke and I decided I liked him right then and there. I could be a good student because he was actually going to try and make a group of mentally checked-out seniors care about baseball. “May I have your name?”

“Collins,” I plopped down near the front of the group, still maintaining eye contact, “Ally Jean Collins.”

“Well, Ally Jean Collins, you're about to learn more than you ever thought you wanted to know about baseball.”

You got that right. I couldn't give a flying fuck about baseball, but I like people. He seemed like good people. “And you are?”

He addressed the entire class, or what part of the class that had shown up and bounced on his toes a little. So very green. “I'm Coach Meyer, and if you call me Oscar you will get an incomplete.”

I laughed in spite of myself. I was the only one, and quickly raised a hand to stifle it. He looked down at me, his round face a little red from the sun, and I knew I was going to be the guinea pig. Damn my good nature. “Well, Ally Jean, as you seem to be the only one who is going to play along and pretend this class isn't a total joke, you can help me out.”

“Do I get paid?” I climbed back to my feet, making a real show of it, and I got a few snickers. None of these kids were my friends, but we all knew each other in one way or another. Small town.

“In wisdom.” Coach “Don't Call Me Oscar” Meyer handed me the bat and made shooing motions to the kids on the ground. They all scrambled backwards without standing up. Yay for enthusiasm. His clipboard disappeared inside of his wind breaker in what must have been one hell of a pocket and he backed up toward the pitcher's mound where a wire bucket was full to the brim with white, red stitched baseballs. The kids actually stood and moved off to the side, settling on the benches to the left of the field.

“Have you ever hit a baseball?” he called to me, taking a stance and digging his cleats into the ground around the pitcher's mound.

“Shouldn't I be wearing a helmet?” I countered, thinking back to television and how baseball players stand. I really didn't want to get hit with a ball. I trusted the teacher not to give me a concussion, simply because it would look really bad on his part, but I was still nervous.

“I'm going to take that as a no.” He turned to address the class, not even realizing how far away they had moved. “I'm assuming this is a first time for many of you, so let's use Miss Collins as a reference point. She knows nothing about baseball. Let's see what she can do.” He climbed up on the mound, putting his left shoulder toward me and leaning back. “Are you ready?”

“I guess!” I called back, the lack of confidence in my voice as clear as crystal.

“Don't be afraid of the ball, it's not that hard and I'm not that great of a pitcher!”

And with that he leaned back, swung his right arm in a big circle, and the white object came hurling at me with a speed totally unexpected. Fast, damn fast. I closed my eyes on instinct and stepped back, tripping over my own feet and falling on my ass. Laughter rolled through the students as I opened my eyes, still clutching the bat. Coach Meyer jogged over to me, smiling a big ass smile.

I was going to get pissy but he was at my side before I knew it, offering me a hand up. I accepted it, leaving the nursing of my bruised ego for later. His eyes turned serious for just a moment, and I noticed their unique green hue. “You okay?”

I nodded, handing him the bat, signaling I was done being the test dummy.

“Class, now that you know what *not* to do, let's learn the basics of baseball.”

He'd made me look like an ass. Smart, considering if I wasn't the ass that day then he was. I should have resented him. But I didn't. That's how it all started.

“YOU HAVE TO LOOSEN UP or you're never going to be able to hit the ball, Ally Jean.”

“Pardon me if I'm not comfortable with flying projectiles aimed in my direction.”

Class had ended ten minutes prior. I had informed the coach that I wasn't leaving until I could hit the damn ball. I'm one of those people who is either naturally gifted at something or doesn't do it—at all. That day felt different, and I was gonna smack the shit out of that ball.

“We can always pick this up tomorrow.” He still sounded encouraging, but a little exhausted.

“Do you have somewhere else you need to be?” I wasn't friendly about it.

I was getting pissed, and stressed. He shot me a look. I'd stepped out of line, sure, but technically it was after hours. The buses were gone. This wasn't school anymore, at least not in my head. It was business. He squatted down in a pitcher stance, not even answering me. I had a brief moment where I pondered if he was going to hit me with the ball on purpose.

“Focus,” he urged. The coach was taking me seriously, and it was appreciated.

I focused. I stared at my new teacher and narrowed my eyes so all I was looking at was the hand that held the ball. The entire class had worked on stance, and I could run and catch a ball with no problem, but I hadn't hit a single one. There were no kid gloves remaining to cram my sweaty palms into. He was on the mound and suddenly the ball was flying in my direction. It was too fast. I wasn't going to hit it. I winced and tightened my shoulders, still trying to focus, and swung.

I felt the ball whiff right over the top of the bat and heard it hit the chain link fence behind me.

I threw the bat down so hard it bounced back up and cracked me in the knee.

“Son of a God damned bitch!”

Fire spread up my leg, and I crouched down and grabbed it. Holy Hell, it hurt. I gritted my teeth and winced through tears. Not gonna cry. Not at school. Not over accidentally hitting myself with a baseball bat.

I heard the swish of sport shorts jogging over and didn't have to look up.

“Crap. Are you okay?”

“Fine. Get back on the mound.”

There was a long pause. I was lucky this teacher seemed like a nice dude. I'd overstayed my welcome and run out of pleasantries.

He wisely changed the subject, shielding his eyes and glancing to the sky before remarking, “It looks like rain.”

For the first time during the conversation, I looked up. Dark, menacing clouds had moved in overhead, and I had a few miles of biking ahead of me before I reached the shelter of my house. I brought my gaze level to his, shaking off the urge to cry and invent new compound swear words. I was going to make this ball my bitch.

“One more time,” I assured with determination, “I’ll get it.” I’d never felt so serious about something so asinine in my life. I had something to prove, even if just to myself.

He looked pissed, but I must have not hidden my pain as well as I thought. “Are you hurt?” he asked, kneeling down. I picked up the bat, used it as a makeshift crutch, and pasted a smile on my face. I’m sure it came off more like a grimace.

“My ego,” I responded, trying to make light. “One more time, please. It’s important. I need this today.”

And there it was. Of course I was dealing with personal shit; everyone else is at any given moment during every single day of their lives. I’d needed something to channel my frustrations, and conquering the ABC’s of this stupid sport seemed to be the way my brain had chosen to go.

He smiled at me, and it was a little sad. “I get it. You can do this. You only need one more time.” He clapped me on the shoulder, and it was weirdly rewarding. I couldn’t help but nod and smile back. He jogged back out to the mound, tossing the ball in the air and catching it like it was no big deal as he moved. Fast for a big guy. It made me wonder what sport he hadn’t been able to go pro in that led him to being a high school gym teacher.

I turned sideways and squared my hips, gasping as I realized how hard I’d hit my knee. It wasn’t going to feel better overnight, so I tried to focus on my adrenaline. I rolled with the rush, crazy and excited; I was going to do this.

“Pretend the ball is someone you feel needs a thorough beating with the bat!” he yelled, as the wind picked up, “And don’t tell anyone I said that!”

I nodded, beating the bat on the diamond, signaling I was ready. Lightning lit up the sky, and the little hairs on my arms stood on end as the electricity crackled through the air. I had this. The time was now.

Coach Meyer leaned back and the ball was coming at me, even faster than before. Definitely no kid gloves—I was going to do this right. Barely a second passed before the ball was inches from the bat and I almost saw it in slow motion but the sound traveled faster. I pictured my mother’s pointy, sunken, ugly mug. There was an insanely loud crack. The ball hit the bat so hard that my arms vibrated and my elbows tingled, and it flew high and far, disappearing off in the distance.

He followed it with his eyes, watched it go, and we exchanged a



mutual look.

“Holy shit!” I squealed, dropping the bat and jumping up and down like an idiot. The joy I felt masked the pain in my leg and I waved my arms over my head and hollered again, “Holy shit!”

“It's gone! You knocked it out of the park!” We'd both graduated to yelling as he walked back toward the diamond where I was hopping up and down like a fool. It felt like Christmas morning, and it must have been written all over my face. “Damn,” he whistled, “I hope whoever you pictured never gets to see the wrong end of a bat in your hands.”

Just the thought made the corners of my mouth turn up in what I'm sure looked like a smile born of purely wicked thoughts. I glanced upward, watching another bolt of lightning surge across the sky, and felt the first few drops of rain hit my face. It felt good.

It was going to be one hell of a storm.

WE WALKED IN SILENCE back to the building, me trying not to limp like I'd busted my ass as hard as I had. I may have done a stupid dance and hollered to the Heavens, but I still had my pride. I even held the door for him, because no one would be holding the door for me anytime soon. No guy, anyway. Yes, I might have problems, but at least they're mine.

My sneakers squeaked down the hallway as Coach gave me a little wave before bee-lining for his office. Maybe he did have plans and I'd made him late. I have a bad habit of not realizing I'm being a dick until after the fact. Hindsight and all that jazz. I shook off my guilt and made my way to my locker, fucking with the stubborn lock for a solid minute. By the time I heard the click, grabbed my backpack and fished my phone out of it I knew I had missed the late bus. I almost always just rode my bike, but in a downpour it wasn't the most comfortable mode of transportation. I hit the button on the side of my Android to light up the screen and heaved a massive sigh.

Grabbing my thin spring jacket and regretting my lack of umbrella, I donned it, threw my backpack over my left shoulder and headed for the side door.

## Chapter 2

DOWNPOUR ISN'T THE PROPER TERM. It felt like a God damned hurricane. Wind whipped my wet, stringy brown hair into my eyes and the rain came down so fast and hard I could barely see an inch in front of my face. The weak yellow light mounted on my handlebars was doing jack and shit for visibility, and with the high of my small victory worn off, my leg hurt like a bitch. Considering I couldn't see shit, and pedaling made my knee tremble and burn like the fires of Hades, I limped along dragging my bike on the dirt shoulder of the road leading away from Thomas Seymour High. My mind wandered briefly to the topic of the school's namesake before coming to the rapid conclusion of; I didn't know who Thomas Seymour was, and I didn't really care.

I'd been walking for less than five minutes and it felt like an hour. I was gonna be a disaster by the time I got home. Five miles is quick work on a bike, but not when you're pushing it in a torrential storm. The only light I saw came from the lightning cracking across the ever-darkening sky until I came upon the one traffic light in the center of town. Suddenly, a wave of water came off the road as a car drove past me and then stopped at the light. It was a tsunami that I couldn't avoid without jumping in the ditch, also full of water, and if I hadn't been soaked before I certainly was then.

"You mother fucker!" I bellowed at the car, not expecting the occupant to hear. The light turned green and the car, a hulking red SUV, put on its right directional and pulled to the side of the road instead of moving through the light. I swore under my breath, tiredly muttering, "Please, don't be a hillbilly looking for a fight." I wasn't up for it. I would've probably just thrown my bike at them and ran.

I approached the driver's side door as it flew open, startling me. "Jesus Christ, I almost ran you over."

Same red windbreaker. Déjà vu. "Coach?"

He shielded his eyes with his left hand and squinted into the rain. "Ally Jean? No car, I take it?"

"It's in the shop," I quipped. We stood there, awkwardly observing each other for a beat, and I continued, "Are you going to offer me a ride or are you just going to stare?"

"I don't think I'm supposed to without parental permission."

I laughed. Hard. "My mother would tell you to make me walk five miles in the rain, it's no big deal." It had been shockingly non-independent of me to ask for a ride, even under those circumstances.

I'm one of those people who would much rather be right than happy. I gave a little wave and started pushing my bike again.

“Wait!” Coach Meyer reached into the open driver's side door of the SUV and the back hatch opened on its own. Electric. Fancy. “You're liable to get run over in this weather. Put your bike in the back,” he instructed, sounding exceptionally tired.

I shook my head. “Don't worry about it, never hurts to burn a few extra calories.”

Even in the murky darkness I could see him roll his eyes. “Wouldn't that be irrelevant if you're roadkill?”

Coach had a point. I conceded and hauled my bike to the rear of the vehicle, shutting off the headlight and hefting it into the back before quickly slamming the hatch closed. I ran around to the passenger side, throwing the door open and looking at the very-new, cream-colored leather seats. Even soaked to the bone, I raised my voice over the downpour. “Maybe I should just ride with the bike? I'm drenched.”

“Don't be ridiculous.” He made a come-on gesture, ushering me inside. I hopped up into the seat, pulling the door shut and letting out a small hiss as I bent my leg. I tried to ignore it. Coach didn't. “I should have sent you to the nurse,” he chastised himself.

I wiped water from my face while pulling my hair back from my eyes so I could clearly see his face. Rain-mottled features were full of empathy and concern, and it made him appear more like a worried little boy. A pang of guilt shot through my guts for putting that look on his face, and that bothered me to no end. My words instantly became defensive and black. “I'll live,” I assured, and it sounded cunty, even to me. I pasted on a smile and added, “No worries.”

He returned the reluctant smile before removing his wet baseball cap and running a hand through wavy, auburn hair. The kind of hair that would grow out to be thick and curly. The kind of hair that exists solely to make girls with straight stringy hair like mine jealous. He tossed his hat over his shoulder into the back seat, and I extricated my arms from my soggy backpack and stowed it on the floor by my muddy sneakers.

“Where to?” He buckled his seat belt and gripped the steering wheel, hands at ten and two, and I buckled mine as well. In a car is pretty high on my list of places I don't want to die.

“Straight ahead.” I pointed into the gray sheets of rain. “I live on Bolt Road, right before the bridge over the river.”

He hit his left turn signal and pulled back up to the light which

was, again; red. “I know the area. I’m renting the loft over the green barn on the corner of Bolt and Elmwood. The river is in my backyard.”

“Small fucking town, eh?”

He laughed. “It used to be worse. I actually grew up here, went to Thomas Seymour. Fifteen years ago this traffic light was a stop sign. We didn’t even have a grocery store.”

“Good God, man,” I balked, “Why the hell did you come back?”

He shrugged as the light changed, gently moving the car forward, slowly, and tensing up just a little. Wind rocked the massive hulking vehicle and I was suddenly very glad to be out of the storm. “Work,” he supplied with a shrug, “Go where you know.”

“Nice car for someone who needed the work,” I mused, peering around the cab and not seeing many personal effects. No clutter, photos, or anything to speak of. Damn thing looked fresh off the lot.

“Alimony.” He didn’t explain further, and I didn’t press. I had a feeling it was a fresh wound and wasn’t going to stick my fingers in it. The silence hung in the air a little longer than intended, and he took it like he’d made me uncomfortable. “Sorry, that’s too personal. Wasn’t trying to get weird.”

I smiled, even though his eyes were fixed on the road. “Weird, like me getting obsessed with hitting a stupid ball? I’m not going to mince words here: I hate gym class. All that…” I waved toward the school at our backs in a useless gesture before poorly explaining, “It was unlike me. Weird.”

He shook his head, “Nah, it wasn’t weird.”

“Liar,” I scoffed.

His eyes jumped to me, then back to the road. “You talk to all of your teachers like that?” he almost sounded miffed, then belied it by cracking a big grin, “It was pretty damn weird, actually.”

“Most of my teachers are old enough to not get ID’d buying beer.”

“Hey!” he interjected as we drove past the only restaurant in town, “I’ll have you know I will be thirty-three in October.”

“Congratulations. The only way you’d sound younger is if you told me you’re thirty-two and a half. Do yourself a favor. Grow a beard.”

Insecurity flashed across his face. “You think that’ll help?”

“With the kids at school?” I was a little surprised by his lack of confidence, but nodded reassuringly, even though his eyes were glued to the road and he couldn’t see it. “Yeah, they’ll give you shit either

way, but probably a little less.”

He nodded. I'd been right about him: Green as the Jolly Green Giant.

“Left or right?”

I hadn't even been able to see the street sign for my road. “Left,” I responded, and we slowly made the turn heading downhill toward the river. “It's the piss-colored little shack, first house on the right.”

“Stop; your sunny disposition is blinding.” His deadpan seemed so real, so spot on, that if I had balls I would have laughed them right off. Instead, I chuckled appreciatively.

The SUV slowed to a roll before I saw the right directional illuminate the mouth of my little muddy driveway that had practically become a lake. While the vehicle swung wide to turn into the unpaved path my stomach turned right along with it. I'd been enjoying myself. I didn't want to get out of the car. I looked at my house, not a home, and it gave me chills. “Could you blast the heat for just a minute before I leave?”

He didn't question it, simply leaned forward and twisted a bunch of knobs. Wonderful, merciful heat began blowing in my face and on my legs. I got startled for a minute when my ass got hot, then relaxed back into it. “Seat warmers? Damn, that's nice.”

“You've got that right,” he agreed, sighing a sigh that sounded more like a grunt.

I closed my eyes for a moment, and when I opened them and looked to my left he was doing the same as I had been. Eyes shut. He appeared maybe thirty pounds overweight, all located in his belly, but still handsome, and nice. Even funny. It made me wonder what had happened between him and his wife. I felt bad, even though I barely knew the man, and cleared my throat. “Hey, thanks a lot.”

He opened his eyes, glancing back and studying my face. His brow furrowed, “You sure you're okay?”

“I'll heal.”

Coach frowned, turned toward me and offered a hard look. “That's not what I mean.”

He was too perceptive, and I was suddenly ready to leave. A person actually seeing through my bullshit wasn't something I was used to. Most didn't try. “I'm good, Coach,” I assured, voice strange; almost robotic.

“Josh.” He was trying to not let me totally disconnect and reached out his right hand. I shook it on instinct. “It's still Coach Meyer at school, though.”

“Thanks, again,” I said, and meant it. His grip felt warm, and comforting, and too much. I had to let go or I would've cried. “Josh.”

“Not a problem, Ally Jean.” He didn't push. He acted kind, open, and helpful. I had to go. I turned and opened the door, the rain immediately deafening. A hand on my shoulder made me jump, and I glanced back into the cab. “If you need to talk...” he began.

I shook my head, “Thanks, I really appreciate it. I've got to go.”

He removed his hand. It hadn't been creepy, just compassionate, and I almost lost it. I climbed down, taking care not to step hard on my right knee, and dashed to the back of the vehicle. The electric back hatch opened slowly, and I pulled my trusty steed out. Limping, I stumbled in a pothole and it fell sideways into the mud. I dragged it to the lawn and abandoned it. Hot tears burned at the corner of my eyes and I didn't look back as I limped toward my front door.

### Chapter 3

NO ONE WAS HOME: THE BEST POSSIBLE SCENARIO. Neither my mother nor her idiot new boy toy only three years older than I. Bliss. I had locked the front door, chained it, and stripped entirely naked in the foyer. I'd stuffed the clothes in the washer with my sneakers, extricating my phone from the right pocket of my jeans and finding it damp. I swore, disassembled it, and it was sitting in a bag of rice on the kitchen counter. The rest of the rice was cooking in a pot on the stove. I'd been surprised to find a scrap of anything in the house not "diet." Does good old Uncle Ben even make diet rice?

I set a timer for the rice and hopped in the shower to quickly get the road dirt off before I ate. I was just about soap free when the doorbell rang. We didn't get visitors, but I had chained the door. Maybe my mother was locked out? Fuck her, though. I'd make her wait.

I finished rinsing off and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around my boobs and tucking it under one arm. Covered enough. I gimped my way across the cheap stick-on tiles in the hallway and saw a tall shadow through the frosted glass. Not my mother, not her boy toy. I stubbed my big toe on the BMI calculating scale sitting to the left of the front door and cursed.

Unbolting the door and unlocking the knob, I left the chain in place and opened the door a crack. Coach Josh Meyer was now just as drenched as I had been, his jovial expression replaced with one of irritation. In his extended hand he held my backpack by a single strap. I thought I had been missing something. I quickly shut the door and slid the chain to the right as I tightened the towel. I opened the door wider and stepped back.

"I'm sorry we don't have an awning," I apologized, rather obviously. He still stood in the rain, backpack outstretched. I took it with my left hand and dropped it on the mud mat against the wall while I held the towel firmly in place with my right.

"Thanks a lot, you didn't have to do that." His eyes darted around the hall, keeping his gaze far away from my state of undress. They lingered on the scale by the front door. The timer in the kitchen began to beep insistently. Shit. "You can get out of the rain for a sec if you want, I need to get something off the stove."

I hobbled down the short hallway and moved the pot to a cool burner. It had just begun to bubble over. Fucking rice. I needed to eat something before my mother got home. Had to. I turned back around.

Coach—Uh...Josh—was standing just inside the doorway looking around. Nosy. *I* didn't even want to be involved with my business, let alone having someone else in it.

“You should have your knee checked out,” he suggested as he glanced down briefly to what I'm sure was the beginning of one beauty of a bruise, “Injuries that seem small now can have major effects on you later in life.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I rolled my eyes, keeping a hand on the towel. “Really, thanks, though. You didn't have to bring that over.”

“I wasn't going to bring it to you at school. I'm new. I've already broken a rule by giving you a ride.”

I closed my mouth in a tight line and made a locking motion, then tossed the key over my shoulder. “My lips are sealed, Josh.” He nodded, still lingering, appearing as if he had something else to say. He made direct eye contact, like I'd start telling him my life story if he remained silent. Someone took psychology courses in college. “Was there anything else?” I asked.

He waited a beat then shook his head. “Alternate hot and cold and keep your leg elevated. See a doctor. You aren't allowed to skip without a note.”

I laughed. A solitary class and he already had my number. “Wouldn't dream of trying. If it's that bad, I can warm the bench for a while, be your assistant.”

He cocked an eyebrow and finally smiled. I immediately relaxed. “Why would I need an assistant?”

I shrugged. “You're obviously so old, maybe to push you around in a wheelchair. Bring you your walker, Grandpa.”

“Hey!” he interjected, feigning hurt feelings.

“What? You claimed to be so mature. That shit just comes with age.”

He laughed, “Have a good night, Ally Jean.”

I smiled and waved as he turned around and shut the door on his way out. I wouldn't have a good night, but that was no one's problem but my own.



## About the Author

Haley's bio is so short because her book—and her name—are so long. She hopes you will take an extra moment to read.

Haley Beth Costisik-Unwin lives in upstate New York with husband, the love of her life who she married at age 17, and five cats. Haley has been writing since age nine and enjoys putting her characters through drama and trauma. “That’s what makes a good story,” she explains. She can be found online at [www.haleybcu.com](http://www.haleybcu.com).

Scroll on for a sneak peak at chapter 1 of Four Letter Words, Act Two, the continuation of Ally Jean’s adventures. It will be arriving on Amazon in October of 2021.