

ADVENTURES
ON
TRAINS

The
**HIGHLAND
FALCON
THIEF**

Praise for *The Highland Falcon Thief*

‘A super-fun middle-grade mystery with steam-trains and samoyeds. I loved it!’ Peter Bunzl, author of *Cogheart*

‘With *The Highland Falcon Thief*, M. G. Leonard and Sam Sedgman bring the classic mystery on a train bang up to date with a carriage-load of wit and suspense’ Ross Welford, author of *Time Travelling With a Hamster*

‘A fabulous, fast-paced ride, packed with clues, illustrations and intrigue’ *Bookseller*

‘A thrill-ride of a mystery, guaranteed to be one of the most fun, atmospheric page turners of 2020’ Lauren St John, author of *Kat Wolfe Investigates*

‘Mysteries on trains – what’s not to love? This absolutely rips along, perfect for the railhead child in your life!’ Ross Montgomery, author of *Perijee and Me*

‘Loved every page of this wild, madcap, delightful ride of a book! Cracking characters, page-turningly pacey, hilarious and nail-biting in turns . . . glorious. It’s going to be a smash hit’ Liz Hyde, author of *Bearmouth*

M. G. LEONARD & SAM SEDGMAN

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The
HIGHLAND
FALCON
THIEF

 Illustrated by
Elisa Paganelli

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*For three generations of Sparlings,
John, Sam and Seb, and for Arthur.*

M. G. Leonard

*For my parents, who support me
with big hearts in everything I do.*

Sam Sedgman



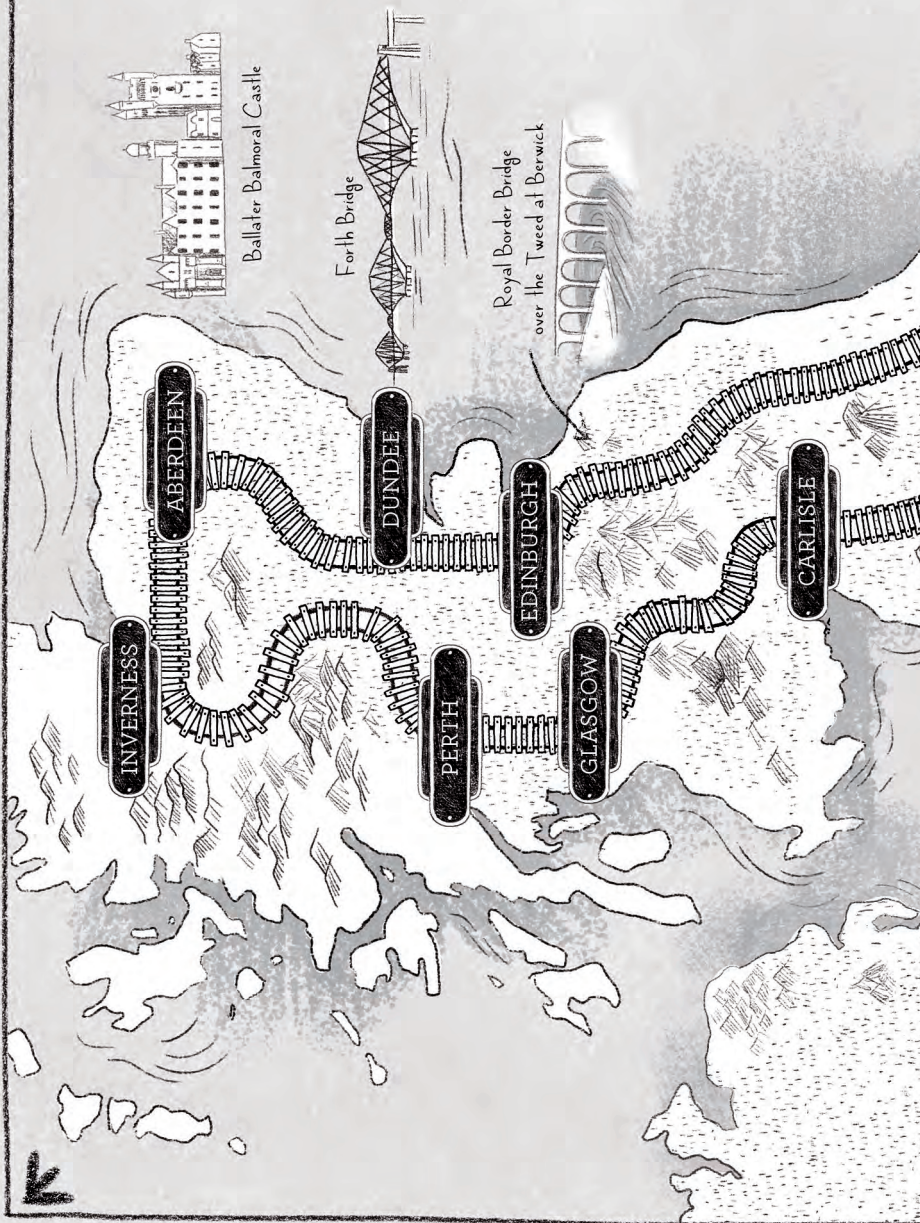
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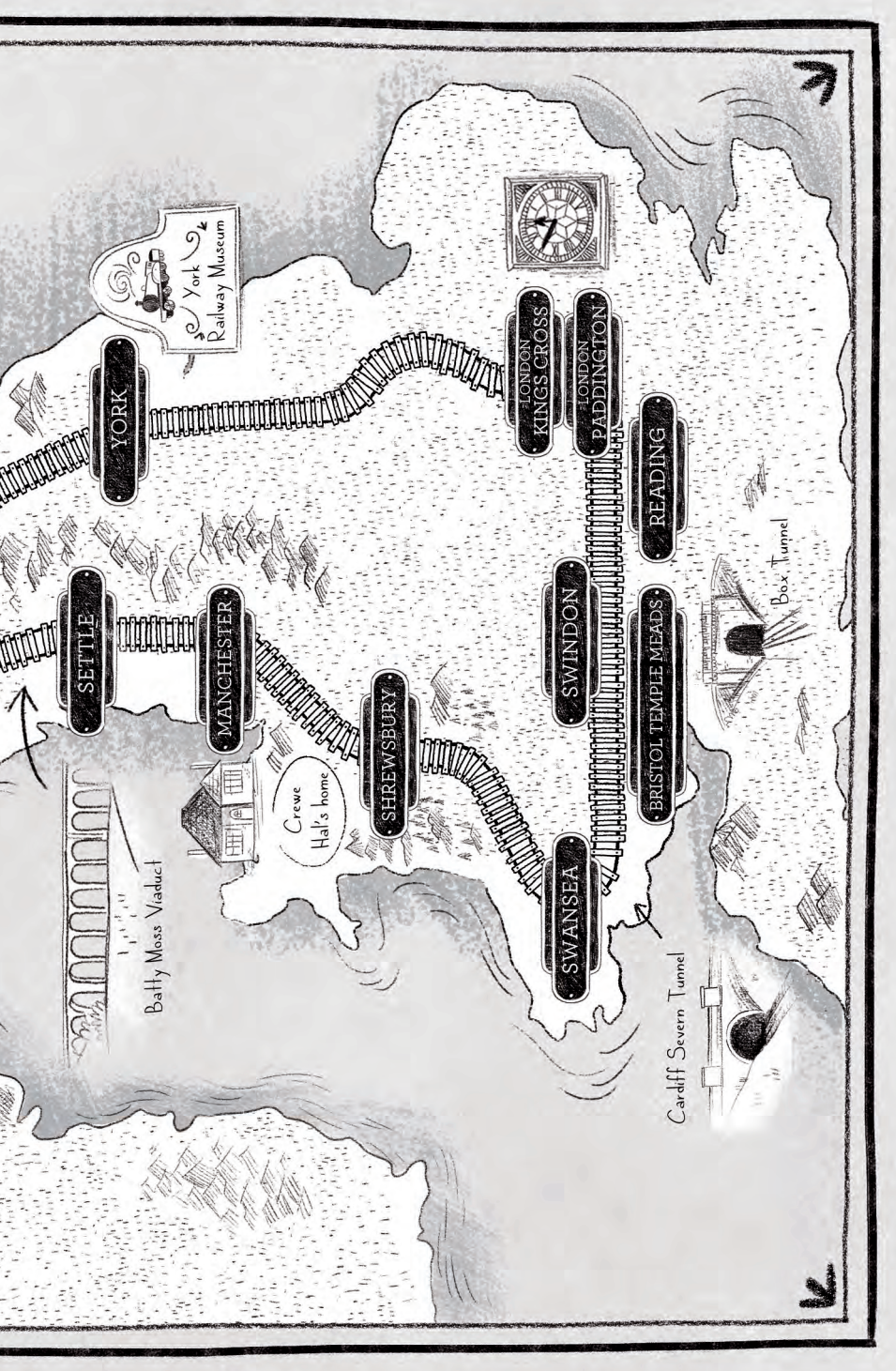
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THE ROUTE OF THE HIGHLAND FALCON





York Railway Museum

YORK



LONDON KINGS CROSS

LONDON PADDINGTON

READING

SWINDON

BRISTOL TEMPLE MEADS

SWANSEA

SHREWSBURY

MANCHESTER

SETTLE

Bailly Moss Viaduct

Crewe Hal's home

Cardiff Severn Tunnel

Box Tunnel



*'As for trains – what can beat a train? . . .
To travel by train is to see nature and human beings,
towns and churches and rivers – in fact, to see life.'*

Agatha Christie



CHAPTER ONE

TICKET TO RIDE

Harrison Beck pulled a biro from the pocket of his yellow anorak, deftly turning it over his index finger so it was point down, and doodled in the central margin of the newspaper spread across the table. The worry lines he saw carved into his father's forehead were making him nervous.

Colin Beck put down the sports section of the paper with a frustrated sigh and pointed at the station clock. 'He said he'd meet us here at five. We're in the cafe your brother specified; it's five o'clock.' He looked out at the people criss-crossing the station. 'So where is he, Bev?'

'Don't fret, love,' Beverly Beck scolded her husband gently. 'It'll give you indigestion.' She laid her hand on his sleeve. 'Nat'll be here.'

Hal's pen twitched as he studied his mother's face. She looked tired. Dad's blue duffel coat drowned her, but she was so pregnant that her bump bulged out of the front. No one had asked him if he wanted a baby sister, but he was getting one whether he liked it or not. He put down his pen. 'Mum,

I don't want to go with Uncle Nat. I want to stay with you. I don't like trains. They're boring.'

'I know, sausage –' she reached over and ruffled his hair – 'but it'll be good for you to spend some time with your uncle. He's an interesting man.'

Hal pulled a face. Whenever a grown-up said something was good for you, that meant it was dull, or disgusting, or both.

'You'd only be stuck in a hospital waiting room, and that's no place for you to end your summer holiday.' She patted his hand. 'You might even enjoy yourself.'

'I won't.' Hal looked up through the glass roof of the station at a cloudy sky. He didn't want to be packed off on a train journey with an uncle he only ever saw at Christmas. The high brick arches of King's Cross were wrapped in a white lattice-work sculpture that made the inside of the station feel like a hive, and all the busy passengers, bees. A seething tangle of people rushed about dragging bags and carrying briefcases. A man stood next to a metal rack stacked with newspapers, shoving them at people. Hal glimpsed the headline 'Jewel Thief Strikes Again' as a woman in a suit snatched one from the vendor, flipping it under her armpit to read on the train. Two bulging-breasted pigeons strutted towards him, pecking at the floor.

Colin Beck kicked out his leg. 'Get away.' He grunted. 'Vermin.'

Hal frowned at his dad, tearing the crust from his half-eaten ham sandwich and ducking under the table to toss it

to the startled-eyed birds. The pigeons grabbed the finger of bread and began a tug of war. A pair of trainers, charcoal suede with three white stripes, stopped beside the table. Hal saw chestnut herring-bone trousers with a crisp vertical crease. It could only be one person. Mum's metal chair scraped against the concrete floor as she got up.

'Nat!' she cried, waddling around the table and throwing her arms around her older brother.

'Careful, Bev – you'll knock me over.' Uncle Nat put down his battered leather suitcase and umbrella, hugging her. 'How are you, pet? Are you well?'

'Yes,' Mum replied, her eyes darting to Hal. 'I'm fine.'

'Nathaniel, good to see you.' Dad was on his feet, grabbing Uncle Nat's hand and shaking it. 'We appreciate you doing this – we really do.'

Hal's eyes flicked from his uncle to his father. Uncle Nat was composed of straight lines. He was thin with neatly trimmed straight hair and wore thick-framed tortoiseshell glasses.



His crumpet-coloured raincoat and mustard sweater went perfectly with his trousers and shoes. By contrast, Dad was a jumble of circles. His kind round face reached up to a receding bowl of salt-and-pepper hair crowned with a bald patch. His shoulders rolled forward, and his navy plaid shirt was tucked into his brown-belted chinos, underlining his overhanging belly.

Uncle Nat turned to Hal, his eyes twinkling. 'It's about time I got to know my nephew better.' He offered Hal his hand 'You've grown since Christmas, Harrison. Are you excited about our steam-powered adventure?'

Hal shook his uncle's hand and nodded, but he wasn't going to say yes, because that would be a lie. A journey all the way to Scotland and back on the slowest train in the world with his weird uncle was not what he called an adventure.

'Are you sure you're all right with Hal coming with you?' Mum said, picking up Hal's rucksack and slipping it on to his shoulders. 'I've told him to give you space when you need to work.'

Uncle Nat was a travel writer. He'd agreed to bring Hal along with him on a work trip while Beverly Beck went into hospital to have the baby.

'Absolutely. Don't worry about us.' Uncle Nat placed a careful hand on his sister's bump. 'You concentrate on bringing this baby out into the world safely. I expect all three of you to be at Paddington station to meet us on our return, in four days.'

'Yes.' Hal nodded furiously. His mouth moved, but no other words came out.

‘I’m going to be all right, Hal,’ his mum said softly. She bent down, putting her hand to his cheek. ‘You mustn’t worry. Your dad’ll look after me.’ She undid the silver chain that hung around her neck. ‘Here, take Grandad’s St Christopher for good luck. The patron saint of travellers will keep you safe on your journey.’

Hal gripped the silver coin between his thumb and forefinger. He felt the engraving of St Christopher, staff in hand, child on shoulders. ‘But what if you need it?’

‘You can give it back to me when you get home.’ She did the necklace up and then fussed with his anorak, pulling out the hood where it had gathered under his rucksack. She ran the tips of her fingers through his ash-blond hair. ‘You’ll be a good boy for your uncle, won’t you?’

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘What route is the Highland Falcon taking, Nathaniel?’ his dad asked.

‘We’ll be travelling up the east coast to Balmoral, where we’ll stop for lunch tomorrow, before looping round Scotland and back down the west.’

Hal’s dad nodded. ‘They’ve spent days putting up decorations in Crewe. The station looked impressive when we got the train down this morning.’

‘I expect there’ll be lots of ceremonial pomp.’ Uncle Nat winked at Hal. ‘This will be a journey you’ll remember for the rest of your life.’

‘You’re lucky to be going on this trip, son.’ Hal’s dad patted his shoulder. ‘When I were a lad, I remember waving to the

Highland Falcon as she passed through Crewe. She's a lovely-looking locomotive.'

'I'm going to miss you.' Hal's mum hugged him. 'Do as your uncle says, and we'll see you in four days.'

'We're going to have fun.' Uncle Nat picked up his suitcase, hooked his umbrella over his arm, and took hold of Hal's hand. 'Right, we've got to get a move on. We don't want to miss our train.'

Hal struggled to speak. He hadn't said goodbye properly. His parents drew back, waving and smiling as Uncle Nat pulled him across the concourse. He saw his father put a protective arm around his mother. They turned and walked into the crowd, and – just like that – they were gone.

'You're going to need your ticket.' Uncle Nat let go of Hal and reached into the pocket of his raincoat.

Scanning the crowd for a glimpse of his parents, Hal only saw the blank faces of strangers.

His insides felt hollow. Uncle Nat pressed a white rectangle into his hand.

'Are you ready, Harrison?' His voice was soft, like Hal's mum's.

Hal glanced over his shoulder, then looked up at his uncle and nodded. 'I'm ready.'



A crowd of people were gathered by the platform entrance, jostling for position.

‘Let’s not dawdle on the red carpet,’ Uncle Nat said, striding towards them. ‘We’ll leave the stage for those who like the spotlight.’

Looking down at his yellow anorak and faded blue jeans, Hal felt a jolt of panic. He wasn’t wearing the right clothes for walking on a red carpet.

‘Tickets, please,’ a uniformed guard said. Hal held out the white card with his name on it. Cameras flashed, and the guard smiled. ‘Welcome, Harrison Beck, to the final journey of the Highland Falcon.’

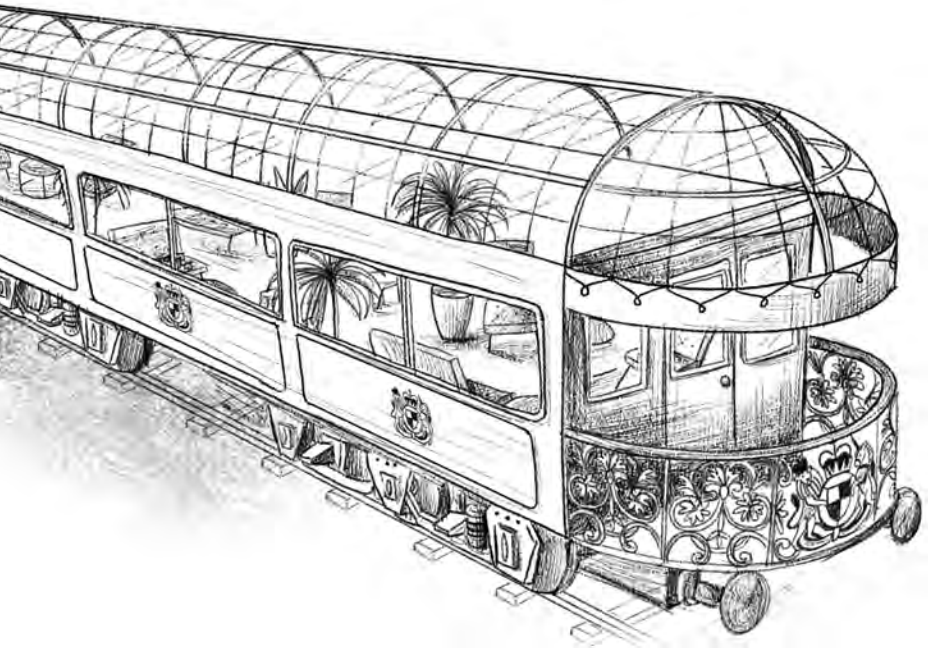




CHAPTER TWO

THE HIGHLAND FALCON

The first thing Hal saw was a glittering glasshouse on wheels. The bottom half of the carriage was varnished wood; the top half, sparkling rectangles of glass held in place by gold rods that arched up and over the train. Inside he could see lush green tropical plants.



‘What kind of train has a greenhouse?’

‘That’s an observation car,’ Uncle Nat said with a grin. ‘As we chuff down the tracks, we’ll be able to admire the late summer colours of the British countryside or gaze out at the North Sea. You might glimpse the kraken.’

‘The kraken isn’t real.’ Hal didn’t believe in sea monsters; he was nearly twelve after all.

Uncle Nat looked surprised. ‘Really? Well then, when it gets dark, you can lie on one of the sofas and look up at the stars.’

A cry went up. Hal turned to see a woman sashaying along the red carpet in a forget-me-not-blue dress. She looked over her shoulder at the cameras, pouting red lips and throwing her head back, laughing at nothing.

‘Sierra Knight! What’s she doing here?’ Hal gasped, but Uncle Nat was striding away from the red carpet. Hal ran to catch up with him. ‘She’s a famous film star!’

‘Sierra Knight is one of the guests, she’s part of the grand tour.’

‘Sierra Knight is coming on the train with us? No way!’ Hal’s best friend Ben had a mega crush on the actress. He was going to swallow his own tongue with jealousy when he heard about this. ‘What happens on a grand tour, Uncle Nat? What do we do?’

‘We live, eat and sleep in one of the finest trains ever created, and we stay out of trouble. We are lucky that we’re nobodies. Nobodies have no formal duties. The royal couple have to do all the hard work.’

‘Royal couple?’

‘Didn’t your mum tell you that you were coming with me on the *royal* steam train?’

‘I wasn’t listening,’ Hal admitted. ‘I wanted to stay and help Dad take care of her.’

Uncle Nat put his hand on Hal’s shoulder and leaned down. ‘Do you know what would help your mum more than anything?’

‘Me being out of the way.’ Hal looked at the floor.

‘No. You having a great holiday with me and coming back with stories to tell her while she recovers. There will be plenty of opportunities to look after her when we’re back. What will make your mum happy is knowing that you’re happy. Isn’t it?’

Hal nodded begrudgingly.

‘So, chin up. Time to start enjoying yourself. Look at that veranda.’ His uncle pointed the tip of his umbrella at a platform extending from the observation car. ‘Exquisite ironwork. See the floral motif around the royal crest? Fantastic.’

Hal looked at the metal and wondered if his uncle wasn’t a little bit crazy. ‘Um, yeah – fantastic ironwork.’

‘Once the royal couple has boarded at Balmoral, the Highland Falcon will slow down to a walking pace as it travels through a station. The prince and princess will stand on that veranda waving at well-wishers celebrating their recent wedding.’ He lifted a finger, and a porter scurried over.

‘Yes, sir?’ The porter bobbed his head.

‘Compartment nine, please.’ Uncle Nat took Hal’s rucksack from his back, putting it down beside his suitcase.

‘Now, Harrison, before getting under steam, I always pay a visit to the loco – that’s short for locomotive.’ He raised the point of his umbrella. ‘*To the engine!*’ As they marched along the platform, Uncle Nat threw his hand out. ‘Look! Pullman carriages – the height of luxury.’

Hal had never seen an adult so in love with a train before, and he found himself smiling as his uncle enthusiastically spouted facts about it.

Uncle Nat stopped dead, and Hal bumped into his back. ‘You see that red? That’s claret – the shade of the royal family’s livery. You won’t see another train this colour.’

Hal stared at it. The dense red suggested wealth and power.

‘This carriage,’ his uncle continued, ‘is the King Edward Saloon. It was built before the war, for King George V. It has a wonderful library, as well as card tables and a dartboard.’

‘Dartboard? Isn’t that dangerous, on a moving train?’

‘Of course. Much more fun. This is the dining car, where we’ll eat breakfast, lunch and dinner, and where we board the train,’ he pointed, ‘through those double doors.’

A tall man in a burgundy suit with gold buttons, gold-trimmed pockets and lapels stepped forward.

‘Mr Bradshaw, sir.’ The man dipped his peaked cap. ‘It’s always a pleasure to have you aboard.’

‘Hello, Gordon. This is my nephew Harrison Beck. Harrison, this is Gordon Goulde, head steward on the royal train.’

‘Welcome, Master Beck.’ Gordon Goulde’s smile exposed a row of horses teeth.

‘Gordon, I want to take Harrison down to the loco. We’ve time, don’t we?’

‘If you’re quick, sir.’

‘We’ll be back in two winks of a mole’s eye.’ Uncle Nat put a hand on Hal’s back and steered him away from the dining car. ‘Our sleeping compartment will be somewhere in these guest carriages.’

‘What’s that one?’ Hal pointed ahead to a carriage with gold-rimmed windows.

‘The royal carriage,’ said Uncle Nat. ‘Out of bounds to us commoners. It’ll be empty until we get to Balmoral.’

Hal caught his reflection in one of the gold-rimmed windows – springy blond hair, ordinary face, yellow anorak.

The curtain of the window twitched.

‘Aargh!’ He jumped back, glimpsing fingers, a button nose, and green eyes – and then they were gone.

‘You all right?’ Uncle Nat looked amused.

‘Yeah.’ Hal blushed. ‘Um, errr, how did that head steward man know your name?’

‘This isn’t my first trip on the Highland Falcon,’ Uncle Nat said. ‘I’m a travel writer, but my specialism is trains. I love these marvellous machines.’ He tapped a finger to his temple. ‘I’ve memorized all the historic routes. If I can’t sleep, I recite the stations, and before I’ve reached the end of the line, I’ve dropped off.’ He looked delighted.

‘Writing about trains – is that a real job?’

Uncle Nat laughed. ‘I’ve written about the Highland Falcon before, which is why I’ve been invited back to do it

again.’ He stared along the length of the train to the plumes of dove-grey smoke dancing about the engine’s funnel. ‘I’m grateful to be given the opportunity to say goodbye to this train. She’s very special.’ He gave himself a little shake. ‘Come on – we must be quick. These last carriages are the service cars for the crew, and there’s the tender.’

‘What’s a tender?’

‘The truck where the coal and water are stored.’

Hal looked at the skip-sized truck and saw a small door in the wall. He blinked as it opened a fraction, and the top part of a face – dark hair and green eyes – peeped out at him and then disappeared. It was the same face he’d seen in the window of the royal carriage. ‘Coal?’

‘Of course, coal. What do you think a steam train runs on?’

‘Steam?’

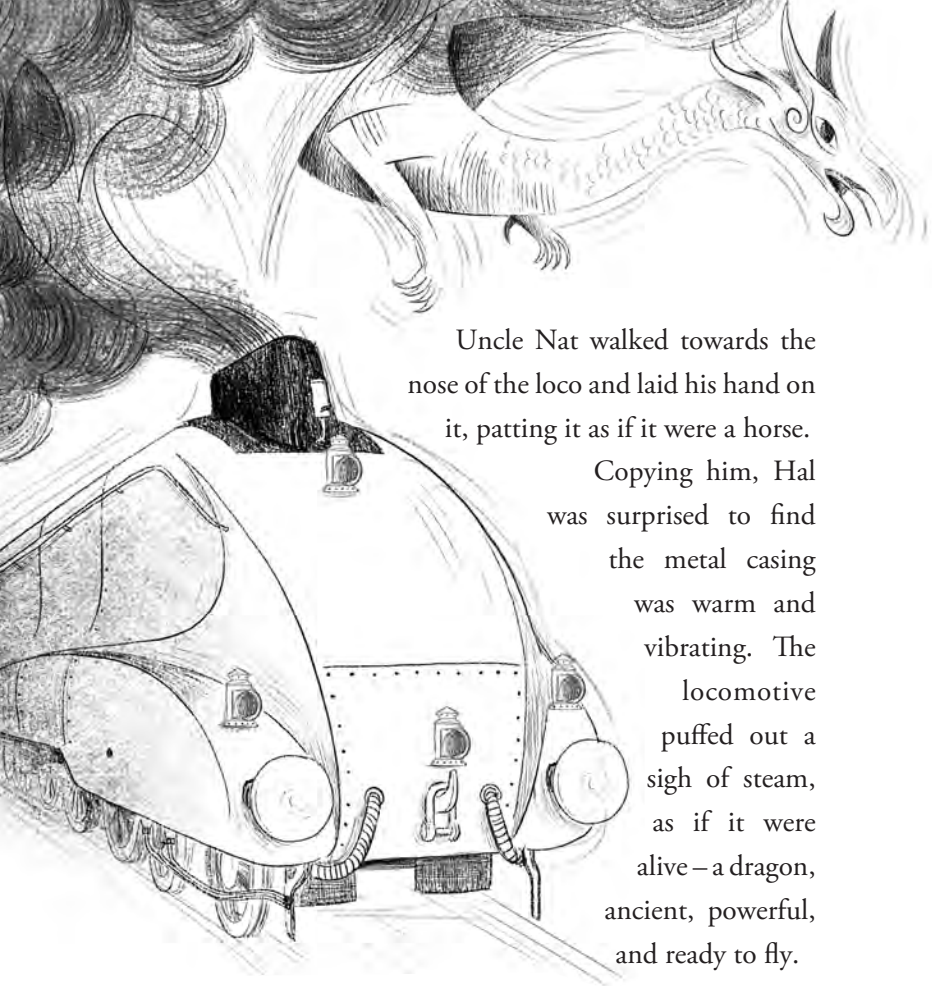
‘And how is the steam made, Harrison?’

‘With coal?’

‘Precisely. With coal.’ Uncle Nat waved him forward. ‘Come on – let’s look her in the face.’

The proud engine was a burnished claret, its roof a brilliant white. The streamlined nose of the loco dipped like a hawk’s beak. The skirt of the casing lifted on both sides, snarl-like, revealing three giant black wheels. Steam escaped from hidden pipes, hissing threateningly. A low cloud of water vapour surrounded the engine. Hal felt the urge to pull out his pen and draw it, but he had no paper.

‘You would have to look for a long time to find an engine more impressive and downright beautiful than this one.’



Uncle Nat walked towards the nose of the loco and laid his hand on it, patting it as if it were a horse.

Copying him, Hal was surprised to find the metal casing was warm and vibrating. The

locomotive puffed out a sigh of steam, as if it were alive—a dragon, ancient, powerful, and ready to fly.