



CHAPTER ONE

CHICAGO

Stepping through the doors of Chicago's Union Station felt like entering a cathedral. Dragging their cases and shaking rain from their coats, Harrison Beck and his uncle Nathaniel Bradshaw stopped to admire the imposing grandeur of the vast marble hall.

'It's like a palace, library and church rolled into one,' said Hal, gazing around.

'A destination station,' Uncle Nat agreed. 'Worthy of a visit even if you're not catching a train. They filmed a famous gangster movie shoot-out here –' he pointed – 'on those steps.'

Hal imagined the white floor splattered with fake blood and shivered.

'Where are the trains?'

'Underground,' said Uncle Nat. 'The tracks snake into the platforms through tunnels beneath the city.'

Hal had spent the previous day riding the 'L' – Chicago's metro system – whose trains clattered between skyscrapers on bridges above the streets, and he laughed. 'The subway is on

stilts, and the trains are in tunnels!’

‘Exactly!’ Uncle Nat said, picking up his suitcase. ‘Now come on. Let’s find the Metropolitan Lounge.’

Hal followed his uncle down the marble staircase, gripping the brass banister with excitement. He’d been looking forward to this trip for weeks. Life had felt flat and dull after his journey on the Highland Falcon that summer. His baby sister, Ellie, had taken over the house with her bottles, tears and dirty nappies, and his parents were too exhausted to be fun.

But everything had changed when Uncle Nat arrived with Hal’s new pet dog, Bailey. The fluffy white Samoyed was fully recovered after the excitement on the royal steam train, and Hal was overjoyed to see her.

‘Hal, do you remember me saying I’d been asked to travel across America on the California Comet?’ Uncle Nat had said, as Hal rolled around on the floor with Bailey and his mum made tea. ‘It just so happens the dates fall in the October school holiday.’ His eyes twinkled. ‘What do you say? Are you ready for another adventure?’

Hal had whooped, Bailey had barked, and Hal’s parents had worried about the cost. But Uncle Nat insisted it would all be taken care of. As a journalist and travel writer, he’d been asked to cover an important press conference being staged by a famous entrepreneur called August Reza. The tickets were being paid for by the newspaper.

‘It’s your twelfth birthday in October, isn’t it?’ Uncle Nat said. ‘Consider this trip your birthday present.’

Hal had needed to get a passport. He’d also bought a new

sketchbook, a tin of drawing pencils and a sharpener.

The flight to Chicago had been his first time on an aeroplane. The rush of take-off, into a grey English sky, was more alarming than he'd expected. Landing on the other side of the world a few hours later, blinking in the American sunshine, was disorienting. Hal realized he liked to see the places he was travelling through. He was more of a train person than a plane person.

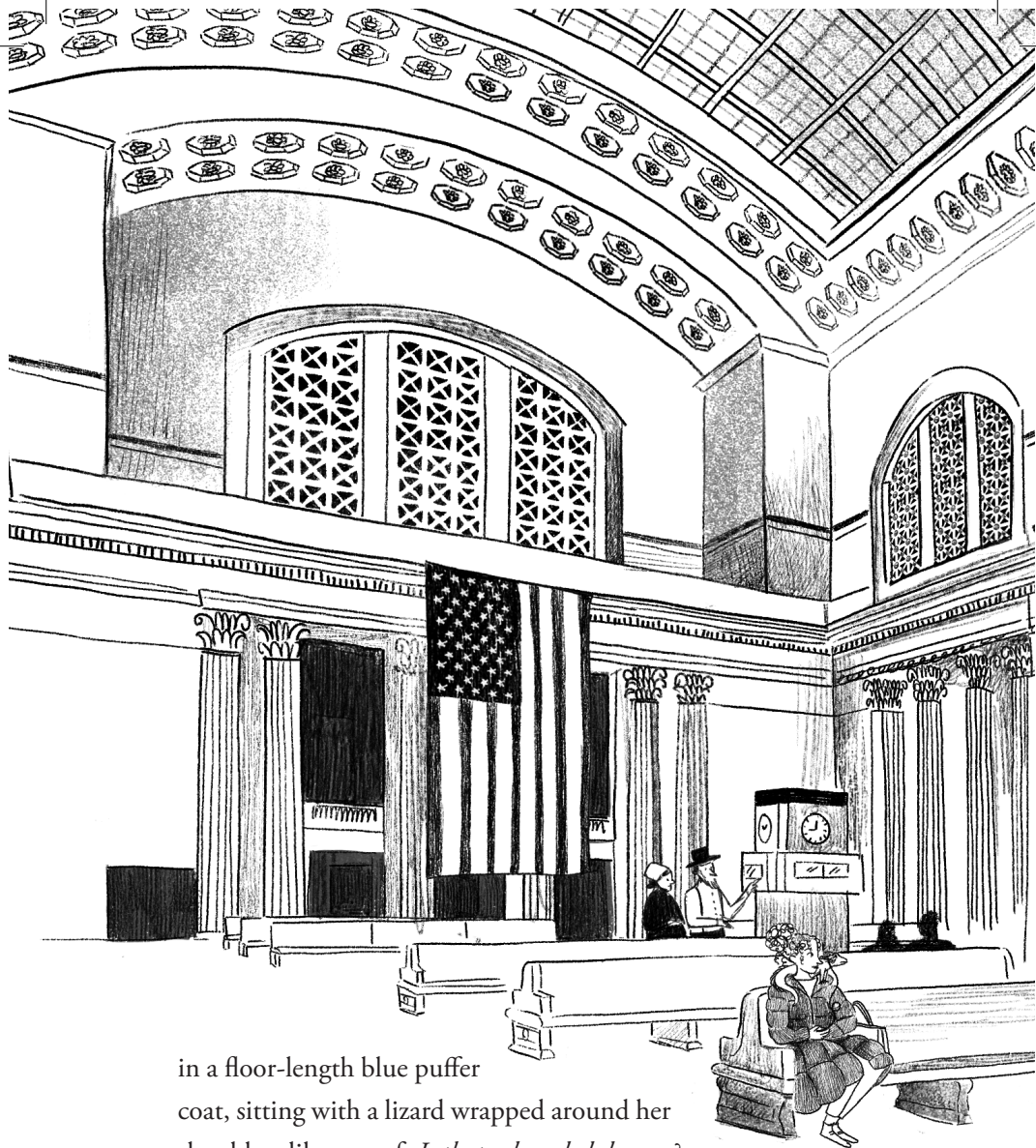
Uncle Nat stopped at the bottom of the station steps, pointing to a distant glass door. 'There's the lounge. I could do with a coffee.'

'I'd like to draw the Great Hall,' said Hal.

'You should. We've plenty of time. Give me your case.' Uncle Nat took the handle. 'Come and find me when you're done. I'll be near the hot drinks.'

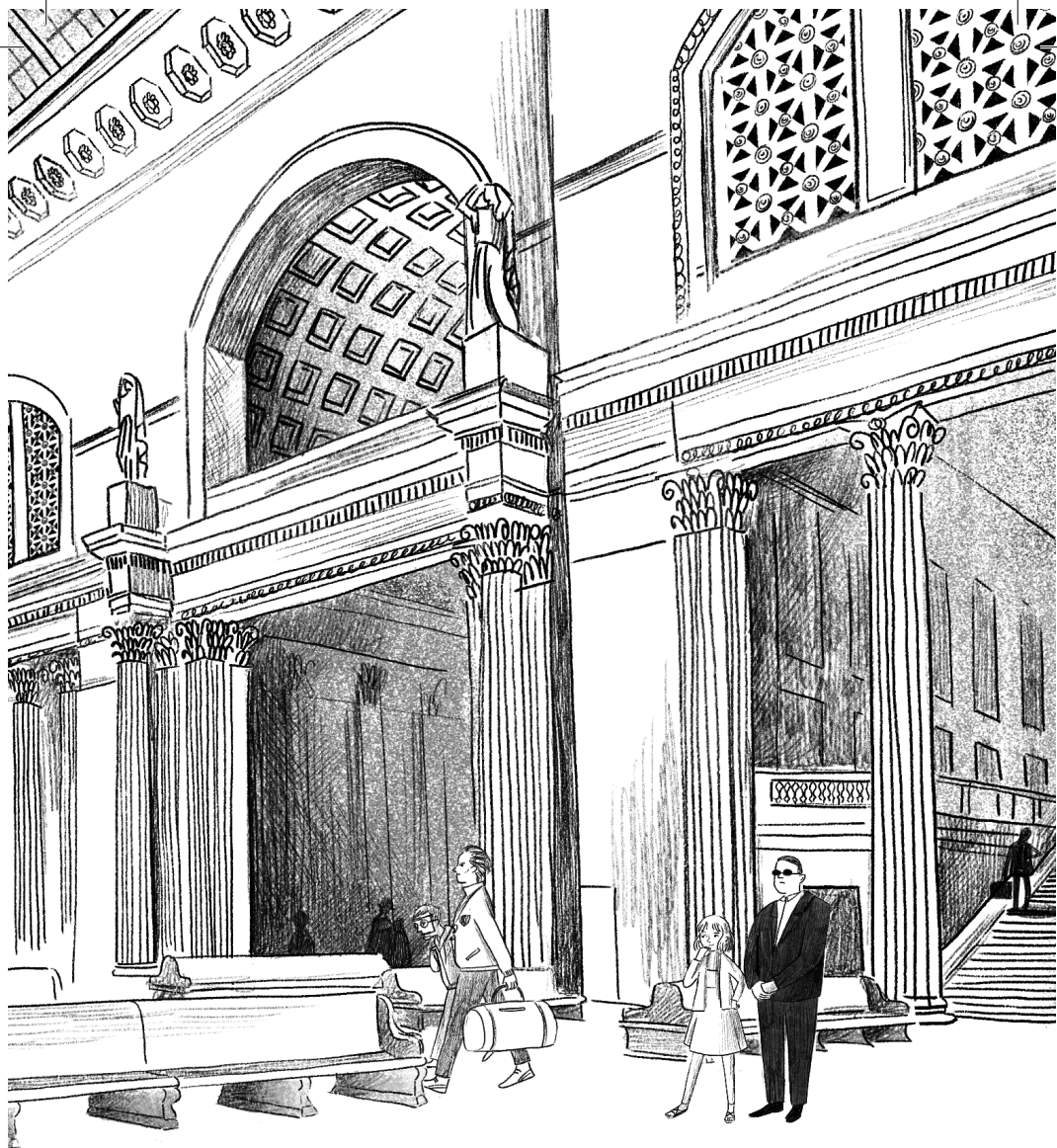
Taking out his sketchbook and a pencil, Hal studied the cavernous room. He drew a drum shape in the middle of the page, making the ticket kiosk the focal point of his picture. Vertical lines either side of it became Corinthian columns, holding up the vaulted ceiling, from which hung the stars and stripes of an American flag as large as a ship's sail.

A man in a crumpled suit, carrying a briefcase, paused at the top of the stairs to check his watch. Capturing the figure with the flat side of his pencil, Hal's gaze swept across the white floor. An Amish family had gathered around the ticket kiosk. Their bonnets, hats and aprons made him think of characters from history books. Marking the diagonal lines of the hall's wooden benches, he sketched a red-haired woman



in a floor-length blue puffer coat, sitting with a lizard wrapped around her shoulders like a scarf. *Is that a bearded dragon?* Hal wondered as he added her to his picture.

A burly man in a mismatched tracksuit – blue bottoms and a lime-green top – crossed the concourse, trailed by a miserable-looking boy in jeans, a red T-shirt, with dental



headgear strapped to his face. The pair passed a muscly man in a suit and dark glasses, striding purposefully across the hall with a blonde girl – in a grey pinafore and pink cardigan – skipping by his side. She smiled at the boy in the headgear and winked, but he looked away.

As he gazed up at the glass ceiling of the Great Hall, the station bustling around him, the back of Hal's neck prickled, as if he were an antenna picking up a mysterious signal that foretold adventure. He stepped back to take in the hall.

'Hey! Watch it, buddy!'

Spinning around, Hal found himself nose to nose with the bulging blue eyes of a stocky boy with dark hair. 'Sorry! I wasn't looking.' He held up his sketchbook. 'I'm drawing the Great Hall.'

The boy cocked his head. '*I'm drawing the Great Hall,*' he repeated.

Hal frowned, unsure if he was being mocked.

'You're British, aren't you?' the boy asked eagerly. 'Say something else British.'

'I . . . err . . . um . . .'

'*I . . . err . . . um . . .'*' the boy imitated, then laughed at the confusion on Hal's face. He swiped his hand. 'Don't mind me. It's a thing I do. You taking a train today?'

Hal nodded. 'I'm taking the California Comet all the way to Emeryville, near San Francisco.'

'Hey, me too!' The boy put his arm around Hal's shoulder. 'This is great. You've gotta meet my sister Hadley. She's in the Metropolitan Lounge. C'mon.'

Hal glanced over his shoulder at the barrel-vaulted skylight. 'But I want to finish—'

'You hungry? I'm starving. The chips and soda in the lounge are free.' The boy patted Hal's back, pushing him towards the glass door. 'Hadley's going to freak when she hears you talk.'

My name's Mason, by the way. Mason Moretti.'

Surrendering with a shy smile, Hal stuffed his sketchbook and pencil into the pocket of his yellow anorak. 'I'm Harrison Beck, but everybody calls me Hal.'

'This way, Hal.' Mason guided him into the lounge towards a table where a girl with wavy honey-coloured hair was playing cards. 'Hey, Hadley! Meet Hal.'

Hadley looked round, sweeping up her deck of cards in one impressively fluid movement. She was wearing a purple hoodie with white writing on the front: *What the eyes see, and the ears hear, the mind believes – Harry Houdini.*

'Hi.' She smiled at Hal. Her teeth were perfect.

'Hal's British.' Mason nudged him. 'Go on, say something.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Hal said, feeling himself blush.

'*Pleased to meet you,*' Mason mimicked.

'I wish you wouldn't do that,' Hal mumbled.

'*I wish you wouldn't do that,*' Mason repeated.

'Mason copies everyone.' Hadley's brown eyes were warm, and her manner friendly. 'It's infuriating, but his impressions are really good.'

'I've never had a Brit to impersonate before.' Mason looked at Hal like a hungry dog looks at a steak. 'I know – say the alphabet for me! Wait, I need my recorder. You gotta be in my voice bank.'

'Voice bank?'

'I collect voices so I can practise the sounds and shapes of words.' Mason stretched and squashed his mouth into several alarming positions, making vowel sounds. His olive

skin was remarkably elastic.

'You don't want my voice,' Hal said. 'I'm northern, from a place called Crewe. I'm not posh like the Queen.' He didn't like the idea of spending his train journey being a guinea pig for an impressionist's voice bank.

'How old are you?' Hadley asked.

'Twelve,' Hal replied, not admitting it had only been three days since his birthday.

'Me too.'

'I'm thirteen,' said Mason.

'Really?'

Hadley giggled. 'Everyone thinks Mason's my *little* brother.'

'There's nothing wrong with being short,' Mason snapped. 'All the best actors are short, and I haven't finished growing.'

Hal sensed this was the beginning of an often-repeated quarrel and changed the subject. 'Didn't you say there were free chips?'

'Yeah, over here.' Mason took him to a counter and a bowl of brightly coloured crisp packets.

'They're not chips.'

'Yes they are,' Mason said.

'Chips are potatoes.'

'Exactly.'

'Chips are hot, and you dip them in ketchup. These are crisps.'

'He means fries,' Hadley said, grabbing a packet and pulling it open.

'You call fries *chips*, and chips *crisps*?' Mason shook his head. 'Wild.'

‘America’s confusing,’ Hal said, taking a bag of crisps. ‘Yesterday I ordered a pizza, but when it came, it was a pie!’

‘Mmm, deep-dish pizza.’ Hadley smacked her lips. ‘That’s a Chicago specialty.’

‘*There* you are, Hal.’ Uncle Nat appeared at the foot of the staircase. He stood out from the crowd in his rainbow-striped sweater, petrol-blue suit and spotless white trainers. ‘Already making friends?’

‘This is Mason and Hadley,’ Hal said, introducing them.



‘A pleasure to meet you.’ Uncle Nat shook their hands. ‘I’m Hal’s uncle, Nathaniel Bradshaw.’

Hal saw Mason silently mouth, ‘*A pleasure to meet you.*’

‘Are you taking the California Comet?’ Uncle Nat asked.

‘Yeah. We’re going to Reno,’ Hadley replied, trying to divert Uncle Nat’s attention away from Mason. ‘Pop’s working at a casino there.’

‘Is your father a croupier?’

‘He’s an entertainer,’ Hadley said.

‘How fascinating.’

‘*How fascinating,*’ Mason echoed quietly.

‘Hal, it’s time to check our bags into the luggage car,’ Uncle Nat said. He nodded at Hadley and Mason. ‘I’m sure we’ll meet again on the train.’

Waving goodbye, Hal pulled on his rucksack and helped his uncle drag their suitcases out of the lounge. A busker with a saxophone had set up in the hall, and Uncle Nat drifted over, enjoying the music. Hal whipped out his sketchbook. He only needed a few moments more to finish his drawing. When the song ended, Uncle Nat dropped a couple of dollar bills into the musician’s case, and he and Hal walked together to the luggage desk. As he followed his uncle across the concourse, Hal wished he were more like him. Uncle Nat seemed at home wherever he was.

After securing their suitcases with small padlocks, and checking them in, Uncle Nat paused in front of a large map of the United States, placing the keys in his jacket pocket, and pulling out their tickets.

‘We want the south gate, track F. The California Comet is train five.’

‘What’s Amtrak?’ Hal asked, pointing at the map, which had *The Amtrak System* written above it. Red lines criss-crossed the country, marking the railway routes.

‘Amtrak run the passenger trains in America.’ Uncle Nat pointed at a dot in the middle of the map, below a big lake. ‘We’re here, in Chicago.’ His finger traced a red line west. ‘We’ll travel through the farmlands of Iowa and Nebraska, up through the snow-capped Rocky Mountains in Colorado, cross the desert in Utah, and make passage through the forests of the Sierra Nevada. From there we’ll sweep south-west to the California coast, arriving in San Francisco in two days’ time.’

Hal looked up at his uncle and they shared a grin – like skydivers ready to leap. ‘Let’s go and find our train,’ he said.



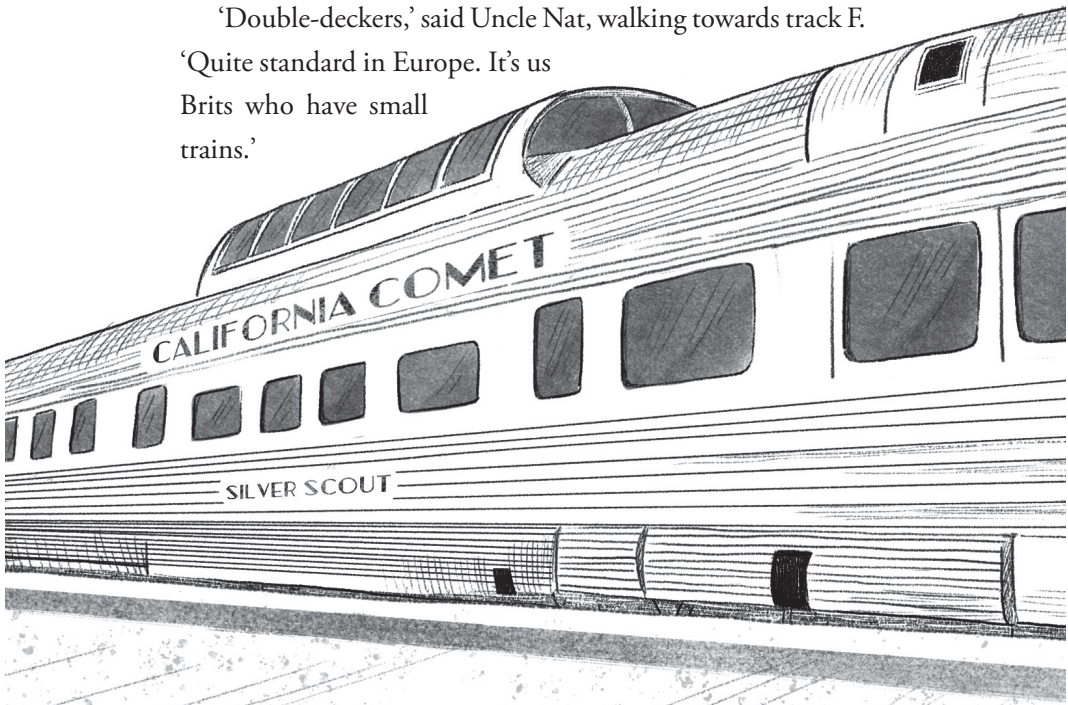
CHAPTER TWO

THE SILVER SCOUT

Descending a sloping walkway, they came to a row of underground platforms, each beside a train as tall as Hal's house.

'They're huge!' Hal exclaimed.

'Double-deckers,' said Uncle Nat, walking towards track F. 'Quite standard in Europe. It's us Brits who have small trains.'



‘Why?’

‘Our bridges and tunnels are low. You’d never fit one of these Superliners through Box Tunnel.’ Uncle Nat came to a halt and let out a low whistle. ‘Well, would you look at that?’

He was staring at an old silver bullet-shaped train carriage, polished so it looked brand new. An art deco sign above a row of tinted windows read *CALIFORNIA COMET*, and a smaller sign beneath them read *SILVER SCOUT*.

Hal gaped at it. It was beautiful.

‘That is one of the original six Vista Dome observation cars built for the California Comet in 1948.’ Uncle Nat

spoke in a hushed voice as they approached it.

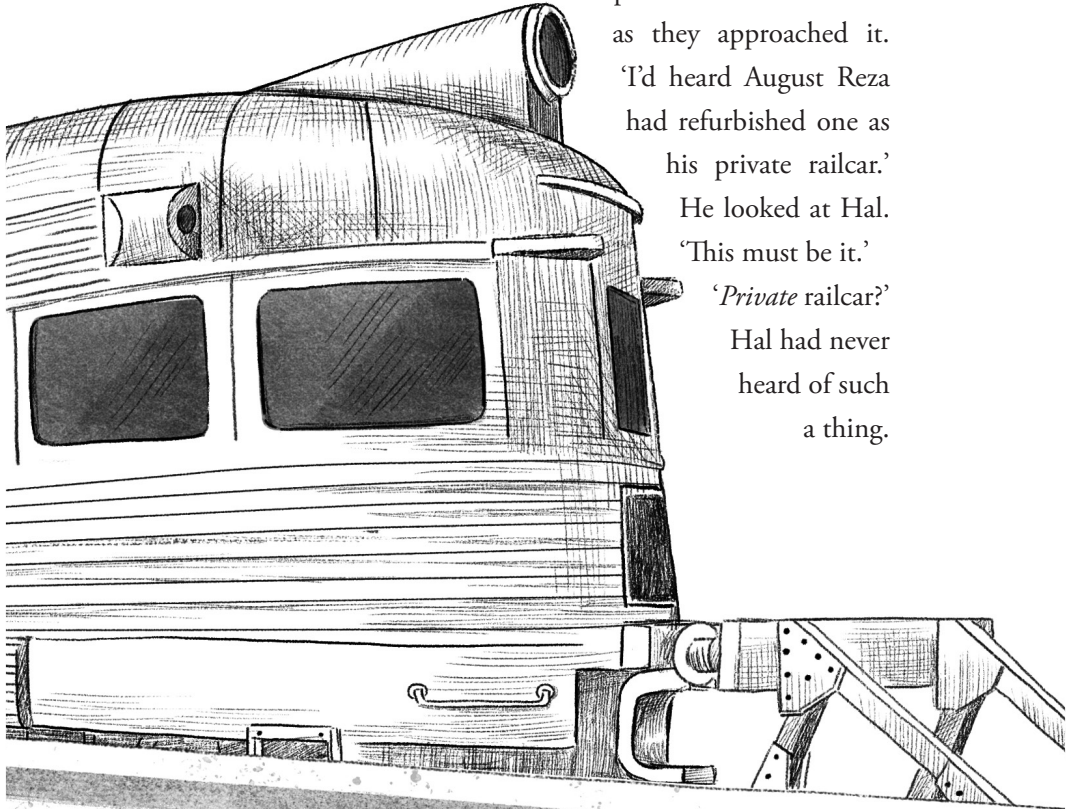
‘I’d heard August Reza had refurbished one as his private railcar.’

He looked at Hal.

‘This must be it.’

‘Private railcar?’

Hal had never heard of such a thing.



‘Your own carriage, to attach to any train.’ Uncle Nat shook his head. ‘I wonder what it’s like inside?’ He reverently brushed his fingertips over the *SILVER SCOUT* sign.

Hal slid off his rucksack, kneeling on it as he tugged his sketchbook from his pocket. ‘I’m going to draw it.’ He pulled out his tin of pencils and sharpened one to a fine point. Leaning the book on his knees, he drew a squared-off bullet shape and the corrugated grooves that marked the body of the carriage. He outlined the edge of the neon light in the bottom panel of the rear door that blazed *CALIFORNIA COMET* in red.

‘I’m going to have a peek around the other side,’ said Uncle Nat, disappearing.

Hal sketched the domed roof. The curved window panels in silver frames that rose up from the centre of the carriage reminded him of an aircraft gunner turret.

‘What do you think you’re doing, kid?’

Hal froze. It was the muscly man from the Great Hall. ‘I’m drawing the Silver Scout, sir.’ He held up his sketchbook.

The man folded his arms, his biceps bulging. ‘That’s a *private* carriage.’

‘Leave him alone, Woody.’ The blonde girl in the pink cardigan Hal had seen earlier stepped out from behind him. She looked older than Hal, but not by much. She glanced at his drawing and smiled. ‘Hey, that’s good!’ There was a touch of French to her soft American accent. ‘I draw too – comics mainly. I copy *Asterix* and *Tintin* to practise, but I also make up my own.’

‘It’s just an outline,’ Hal said, getting to his feet. ‘I’ll work

on it later, on the train. Isn't it the coolest carriage you've ever seen?'

'It's my father's.' The girl shrugged, apparently unimpressed.

'Oh!' *This must be August Reza's daughter!* Hal thought. Remembering Uncle Nat's job to cover the press conference, he held out his hand politely. 'My name's Harrison.'

Woody stuck out an arm to prevent the handshake, but the girl side-stepped, grabbing Hal's hand with both of hers.

'Miss Reza!'

'Oh, calm down, Woody.' She tutted. 'He's hardly going to attack me with you standing there like a great ogre. Or are you worried he'd beat you in a fight?'

Hal dared not smile in case he angered the man, who he realized must be her bodyguard.

'I'm Marianne. Are you coming on the California Comet?'

'Yes – I'm going to San Francisco with my uncle. How far are you travelling?'

'Pfff.' She blew out a sulky breath that kicked up her fringe. 'Who knows? I do what my father decides. I'm told nothing. But we live in Silicon Valley, which is not far from there.'

'Oh, I see,' said Hal. Marianne clearly wasn't happy about going on this train journey. He remembered how he'd first felt about being shipped off on the Highland Falcon. 'Maybe it won't be so bad.'

Woody cleared his throat loudly.

'Bah, *oui!*' Marianne snapped, rolling her eyes at Woody. 'I must go. Maybe I will see you on the train.' She leaned forward, kissing the air in front of his cheeks. On the second

kiss, she whispered, 'I'll escape the ogre and come find you. Perhaps we can draw?' She stepped back, waved her fingertips, and allowed Woody to shepherd her into the Silver Scout.

Dumbfounded, Hal stared at the carriage door. It was the most baffling encounter he'd ever had with a girl. He wished his friend Lenny were with him. She'd be able to explain what had just happened.

'Have you finished your drawing?' Uncle Nat was striding towards him. 'We should find our carriage.'

Hal nodded and followed his uncle along the platform. The double-decker carriages were the same silver as the Rezas' railcar but dented and scuffed. Between the windows of the top and bottom floors was a blue band, topped by a thin red-and-white stripe.

'This is us.' Uncle Nat pointed. 'Carriage 540.'

Stepping inside, they were met by a woman in a dark-blue uniform with curly brown hair. 'Y'all travelling with us today?'

'Indeed we are,' Uncle Nat replied.

'Well, good! Your tickets, please, sir.' The woman beamed as she examined them. 'You're in the right place. I'm Francine, your steward. You gentlemen are in roomette ten. I'll show you up.' She led them past a luggage rack and up a slender flight of stairs.

'We're on the top floor!' Hal exclaimed.

'Sure are.' Francine smiled at him over her shoulder.

On either side of the upper corridor were sliding doors through which Hal could see tiny compartments, each containing two big blue seats facing one another.

‘You’ll be right here.’ Francine stood aside to let them in. ‘Get yourselves comfortable, and I’ll be back to see about your dinner reservations. Anything you need, call out my name.’

‘Home, sweet home.’ Uncle Nat sighed happily. He slid the door shut and dropped his leather holdall on to one of the big blue seats.

Hal clambered on to the other one, pulling at handles and flicking switches, eager to discover the secrets of the roomette. It was snug, but the seats were wide and they had enough room. ‘This is cool.’ A table marked with a chessboard folded out from beneath the window. ‘Do you think Francine has pieces?’

‘Probably.’ Uncle Nat pointed to the plug socket. ‘Look! You’ll be able to charge your games console.’

‘I didn’t bring it.’

‘Really?’ Uncle Nat looked surprised.

‘I didn’t want to miss anything.’ Hal felt his face grow hot. ‘If I’m gaming, I might not notice an adventure, you know, if one happens.’

‘I am glad,’ Uncle Nat said. ‘Though it’s unlikely we’ll encounter another adventure quite like the last one.’

‘It doesn’t hurt to be alert though, does it?’ Hal thought about Marianne Reza and her muscle-bound bodyguard, wondering if she would escape and come looking for him.

‘No,’ Uncle Nat said, taking off his glasses, cleaning them with the bottom of his jumper and putting them back on. ‘And an adventure doesn’t always have to involve a crime.’

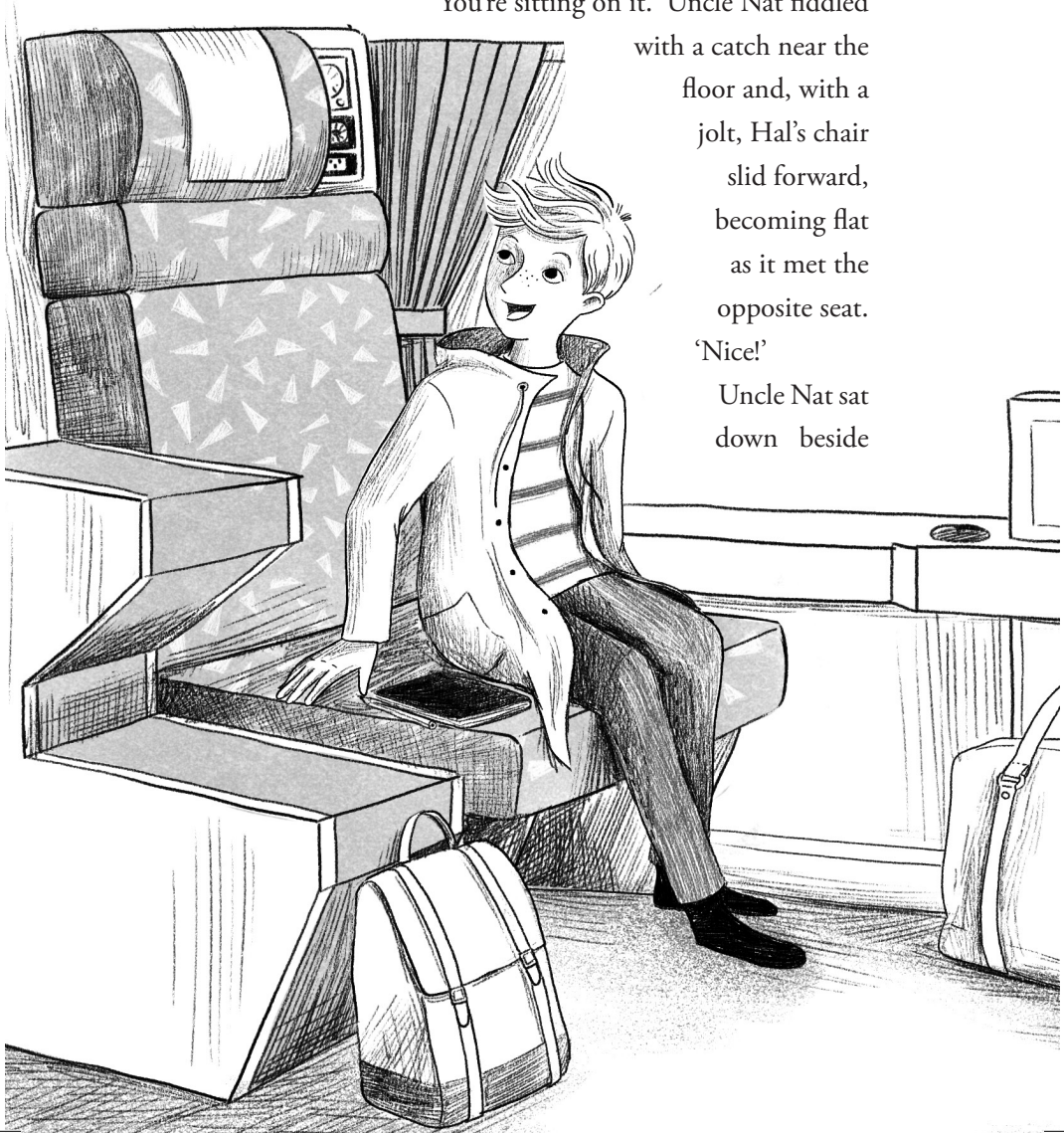
‘The exciting ones do.’

Uncle Nat laughed. 'You'll end up being a railway detective when you grow up.'

Hal thought that wouldn't be a bad job. He pointed to a panel above the window. 'If the top bunk is up there, where's the other one?'

'You're sitting on it.' Uncle Nat fiddled with a catch near the floor and, with a jolt, Hal's chair slid forward, becoming flat as it met the opposite seat. 'Nice!'

Uncle Nat sat down beside

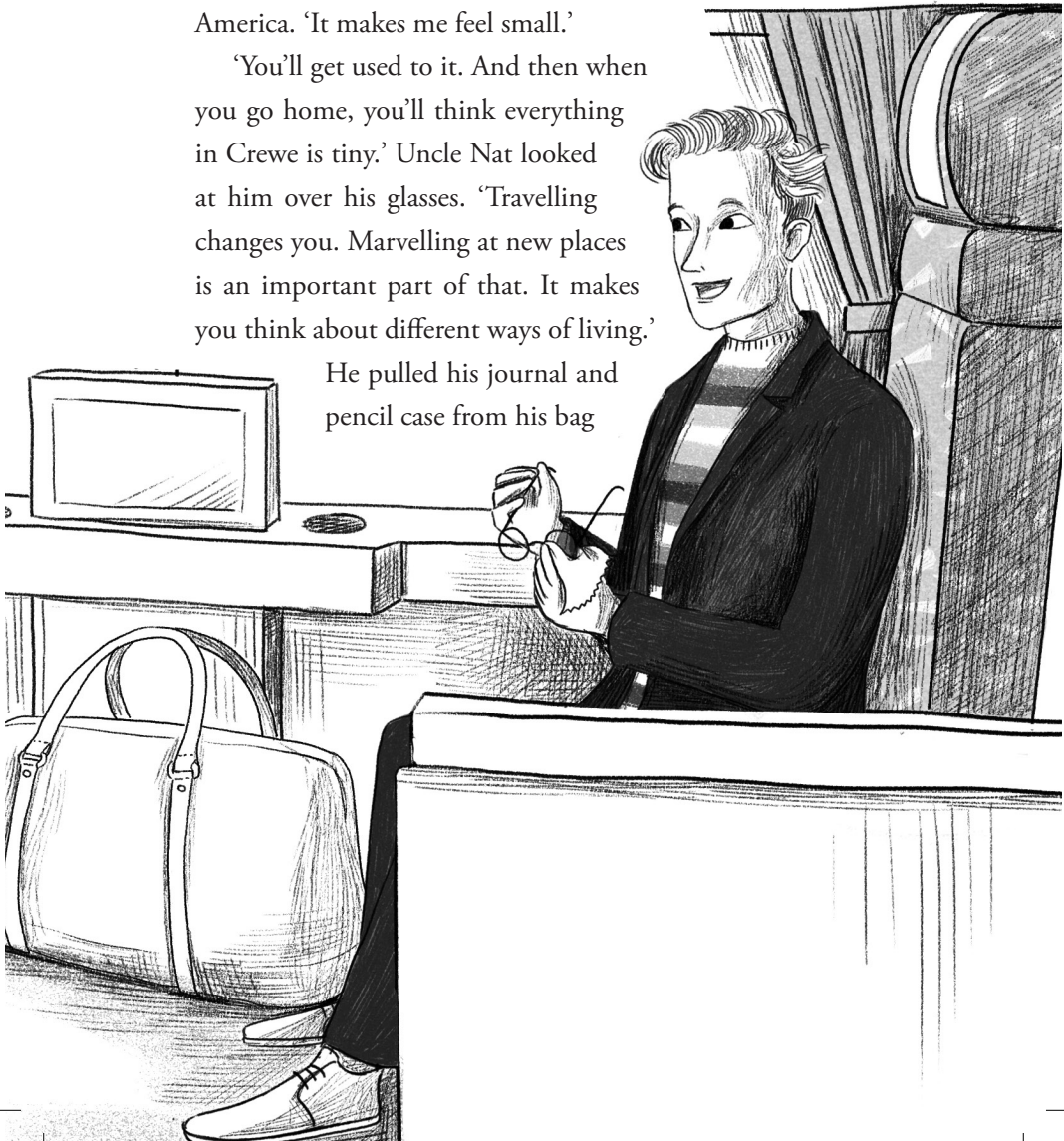


Hal. 'Through that window you'll get to see the wonders of America. It's an incredible place.'

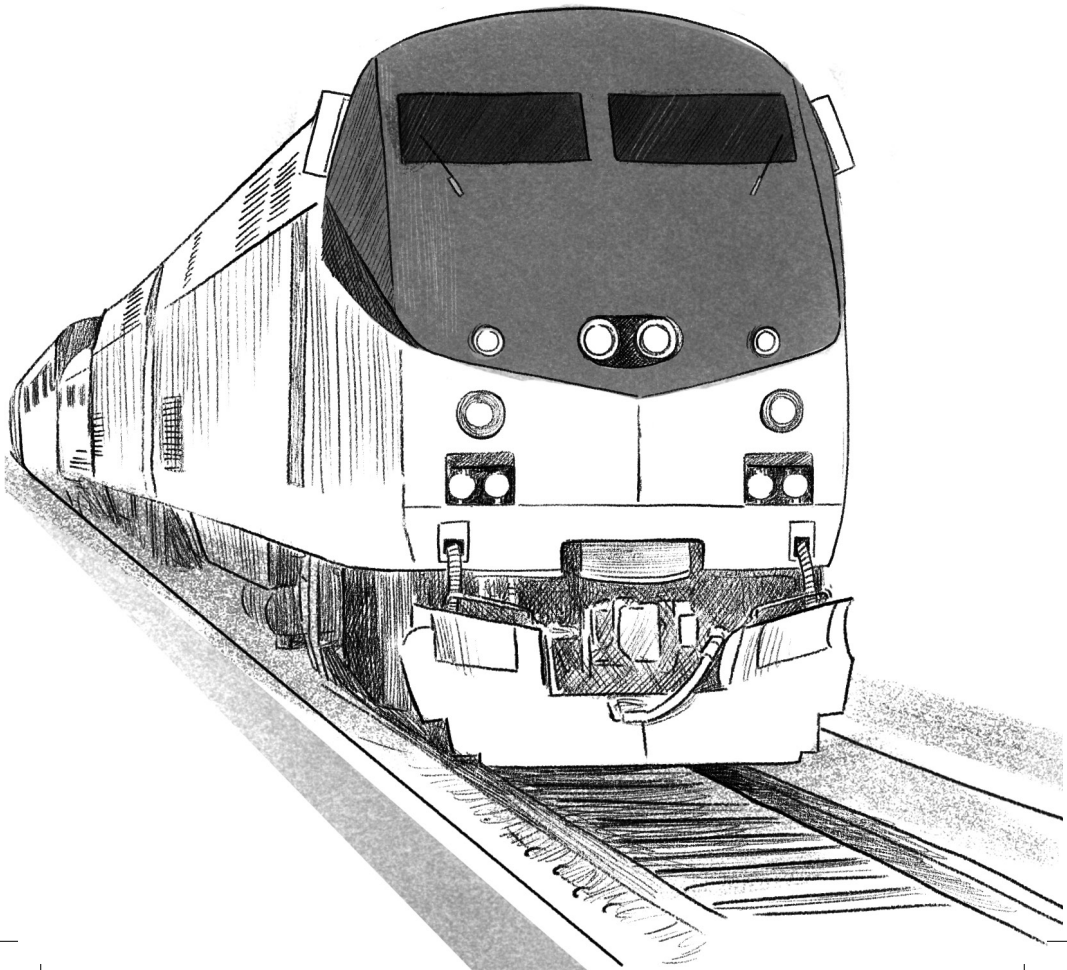
'I thought it would be like England, but it isn't, is it? Everything is *extra*, here. The roads are wider; the cars are bigger; even the food portions are huge.' Hal paused, momentarily overcome by the scale of America. 'It makes me feel small.'

'You'll get used to it. And then when you go home, you'll think everything in Crewe is tiny.' Uncle Nat looked at him over his glasses. 'Travelling changes you. Marvelling at new places is an important part of that. It makes you think about different ways of living.'

He pulled his journal and pencil case from his bag



and placed it in a nook beside the chair. ‘This can be my seat.’ Pulling back his sleeve, he looked at one of the three watches on his left wrist. At first, Hal had thought it odd that his uncle wore six watches – they told the time in London, New York, Tokyo, Berlin, Sydney and Moscow – but each was a souvenir from his travels, and Uncle Nat had explained that he liked to be aware of the rest of the world, wherever he was. ‘We’ve just enough time to stroll up the platform and see the locomotive, if you’d like?’



‘Let’s do it.’ Hal jumped to his feet and opened the door. He found himself staring at a woman with shiny lips and thick caramel-coloured hair pulled up into a topknot. She was wearing a black leather jacket, grey sweater and jeans. She glared at him. ‘Oh! Hello.’

‘You must be our neighbour,’ Uncle Nat said, smiling. ‘I’m Nathaniel Bradshaw, and this is Harrison.’

‘Vanessa Rodriguez,’ she replied, dropping her heavy bag into the roomette opposite with a *thunk!* Stepping in, she slid the door shut and drew the blue curtain across the window.

‘I’m guessing she doesn’t want to be disturbed,’ Uncle Nat whispered. ‘Let’s go.’

Jumping down the stairs and jogging along the platform, they passed the single-storey baggage car, where cases were being loaded from a forklift truck. As they approached the front of the train, the rumble of engines grew to a roar that made Hal’s ribs vibrate. The air stank of diesel.

Two blue-and-silver locomotives growled in the shadows of the underground station, their vents thrumming with exhaust. Each was the size of an articulated lorry and had a face – a pair of shadow-filled windscreens above two blazing pairs of circular headlights.

‘They’re not as friendly-looking as steam engines!’ Hal had to shout so Uncle Nat could hear him above the noise.

‘Diesel-electric,’ Uncle Nat called back, nodding. ‘Genesis class. There’s a power plant in her belly with twice as much horsepower as an A4 Pacific.’ He gazed at the engines. ‘Magnificent!’

‘Why are there two?’

‘They have to drag this very heavy train up the Rocky Mountains.’ Uncle Nat waved at the carriages. ‘If there were only one engine, and it failed, we’d be in trouble.’

Hal stared at the leading locomotive. It glowered back at him. He slipped his hand into his pocket and realized his sketchbook was back in the roomette, so he studied the engine’s shapes, hoping to draw it from memory.

Uncle Nat touched Hal’s arm and pointed. The luggage car doors were being shut and empty baggage trailers driven away. ‘Time to go.’

Walking back, Hal saw Francine leaning out the door, flapping her hands at them to hurry. They broke into a run, and she laughed as they scrambled aboard. ‘I wouldn’t have let them leave without you!’ she said, as the carriage door shut behind them.

Tumbling into their roomette, Hal and Nat dropped into their seats just as the concrete pillars of Union Station slid past the window.

‘What’s this?’ Uncle Nat leaned down, picking up an envelope from the floor. He pulled out a card and drew in a delighted breath. ‘Hal! It’s a message from August Reza. We’ve been invited to visit him in the Silver Scout!’