



CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTMAS  
IN CREWE

*P*<sub>ssst</sub>, Hal! Are you awake?’

Sitting up in bed, Hal blinked open his bleary eyes. His bedroom was dark, but he could smell coffee. A figure in pinstriped pyjamas stood in his doorway, backlit by the landing light.

‘Uncle Nat?’ Hal bounced up on to his knees in delight. ‘You came!’

‘Happy Christmas, Hal.’

Hal turned on his lamp, illuminating the Christmas cards on his bedside table from Lenny, Hadley and Mason, who were friends he’d met on his train travels. The desk at the foot of his bed was covered with loose sketches of his family, his dog and trains – lots and lots of trains. Clustered against the wall beside a leaning tower of sketchbooks were jam jars and tins stuffed with pencils, pens and paintbrushes. Hal loved to draw, and his favourite time to do it was on a train with Uncle Nat.

The glistening black nose of Hal's fluffy white dog, Bailey, pushed past his uncle, panting as she scrambled eagerly on to the bed, blue eyes shining, lolling tongue at the ready.

'Bailey, get off! Urgh, no!' Hal protested as she licked his face.

Uncle Nat laughed. 'I thought children were up with the lark on Christmas morning.'

'What time is it?'

'Six.' Uncle Nat took a sip from his mug of coffee. 'Bev told me to give you a prod. I think Father Christmas has been.'

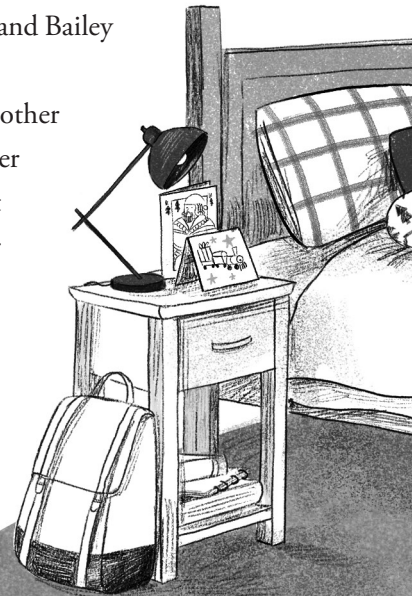
Hal whooped. It had been two months since their adventure on the California Comet and, though he was trying not to get his hopes up for another train trip so soon after the last, the thought of travelling with his uncle again made lightning bolts of excitement crackle in his stomach. He raced downstairs, Uncle Nat and Bailey hot on his heels.

'Happy Christmas, pet,' said his mother softly, carrying his baby sister, Ellie, in her arms, feeding her a bottle. She looked at Nat. 'Will James be joining us later, for Christmas dinner?'

'I'm afraid not. He's working and then driving down to his mum and dad's.'

'Oh, that's a shame.'

'I'm tired. Let's all go back to bed,' said Hal's dad, coming out of the kitchen. Hal



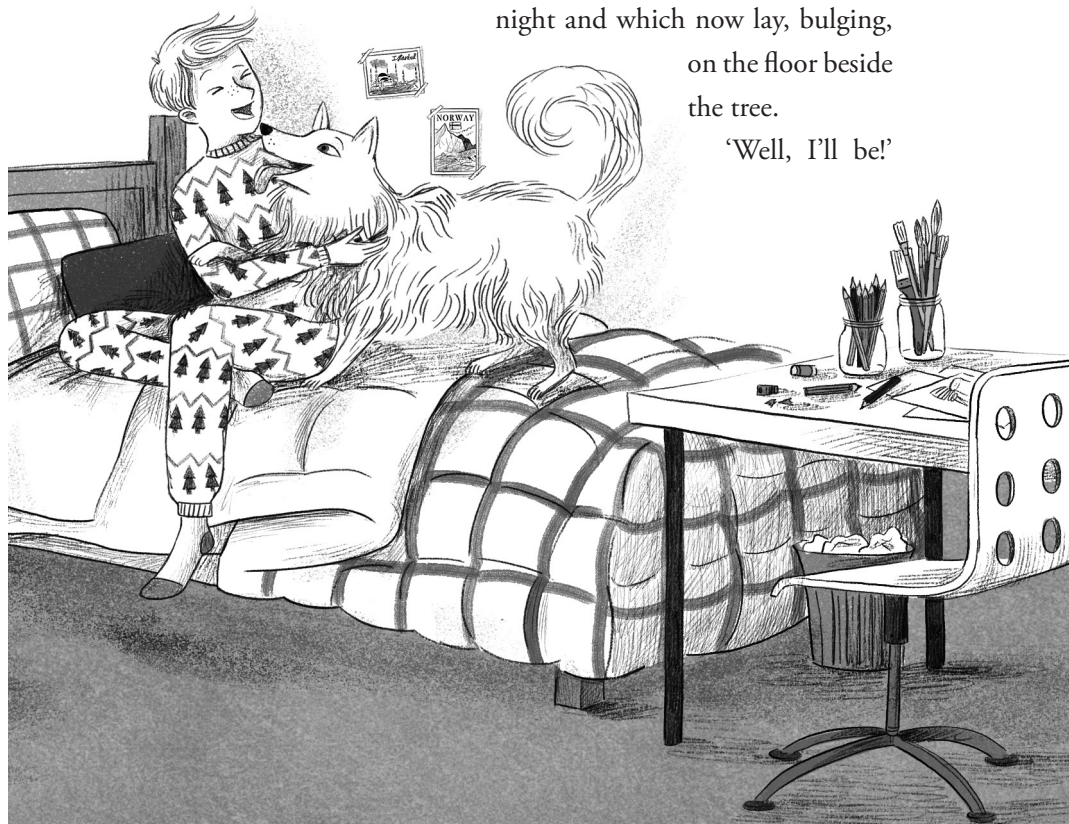
laughed. His dad's eyes were bright with mirth. He loved Christmas as much as Hal did. 'Now, Hal . . .' His dad adopted a serious tone as he followed Hal into the living room. 'We've had a little chat and decided, now that you're twelve, you're too old for a stocking.'

'Da-aa-ad,' groaned Hal. His dad made the same joke every year.

'We took it down from the fireplace last night,' his dad continued, enjoying his son's grumbling. 'You'll be a teenager soon, and—'

'Then what's that over there?' Hal pointed at the stocking that he'd hung beside their gas fire last night and which now lay, bulging, on the floor beside the tree.

'Well, I'll be!'



Hal's dad scratched his head. 'Where did that come from?'

'Dad!' Hal clapped his hands over his face. 'Stop it!'

Uncle Nat was chuckling, perched on the arm of the sofa, as Hal's mum sank into the cushions, still cradling Ellie.

'I hope you've been a good boy this year.' His dad raised his eyebrows questioningly. 'If you haven't, it might be full of potatoes and coal.'

'A good boy? I caught a jewel thief and solved a kidnapping! I've been a great boy!'

'Go on, pet,' his mother laughed. 'Open your stocking.'

Hal unwrapped a yo-yo, a set of grooming tools for Bailey, a whoopie cushion (which his dad immediately blew up and pretended to accidentally sit on), a pair of pencils that doubled as drumsticks, and a deck of cards with vintage train posters on the back. Hal took his time admiring each gift and saying thank you, but as he unwrapped them, his eye kept drifting to the parcels beneath the tree, looking for a label in his uncle's sloping handwriting.

'You made fast work of that!' his mother said, as Hal dangled the stocking upside down and watched a tangerine and a walnut tumble out. She handed Ellie to Hal's father. 'Let's open the tree gifts after breakfast. We're having pancakes, Nat, with bacon and maple syrup. Hal wanted a breakfast like the ones you had on the California Comet.'

'But, Bev, I'm dying to see what Hal's got me for Christmas,' said Uncle Nat, catching hold of her hand. 'Can't we exchange our gifts first?'

'Yes, let's do that!' Hal jumped to his feet and Bailey

barked excitedly. Without waiting for his mother's reply, he dived under the tree, ignoring the prickly spines, and pulled out a rectangular parcel. 'Happy Christmas, Uncle Nat.' He swallowed, suddenly nervous. 'I hope you like it.'

Uncle Nat ripped away the wrapping paper, revealing a framed sketch of the Highland Falcon steaming across the Ribbleshead Viaduct in Yorkshire. 'Hal!' he gasped. 'Did you draw this?'

Hal nodded.

Uncle Nat's eyes had gone glassy. He held the picture at arm's length. 'It's perfect, Hal. I love it.' He held his free arm out and caught Hal in a hug. 'Come here. Thank you – it's the best Christmas present I could have wished for. I will hang it in my sitting room above the fireplace.'

Hal blushed with pride.

'He's been working on it for weeks,' his mum said, beaming.

'Well now I feel bad,' said Uncle Nat. 'My present's nowhere near as good.' He pulled a parcel from his pocket, wrapped in gold paper and tied with a red ribbon. 'I hope you like it.'

'Thank you,' Hal said. The gift was the size of a large chocolate bar, and felt hard. He untied the ribbon and pulled back the paper to find he was holding a tin of charcoal sticks.

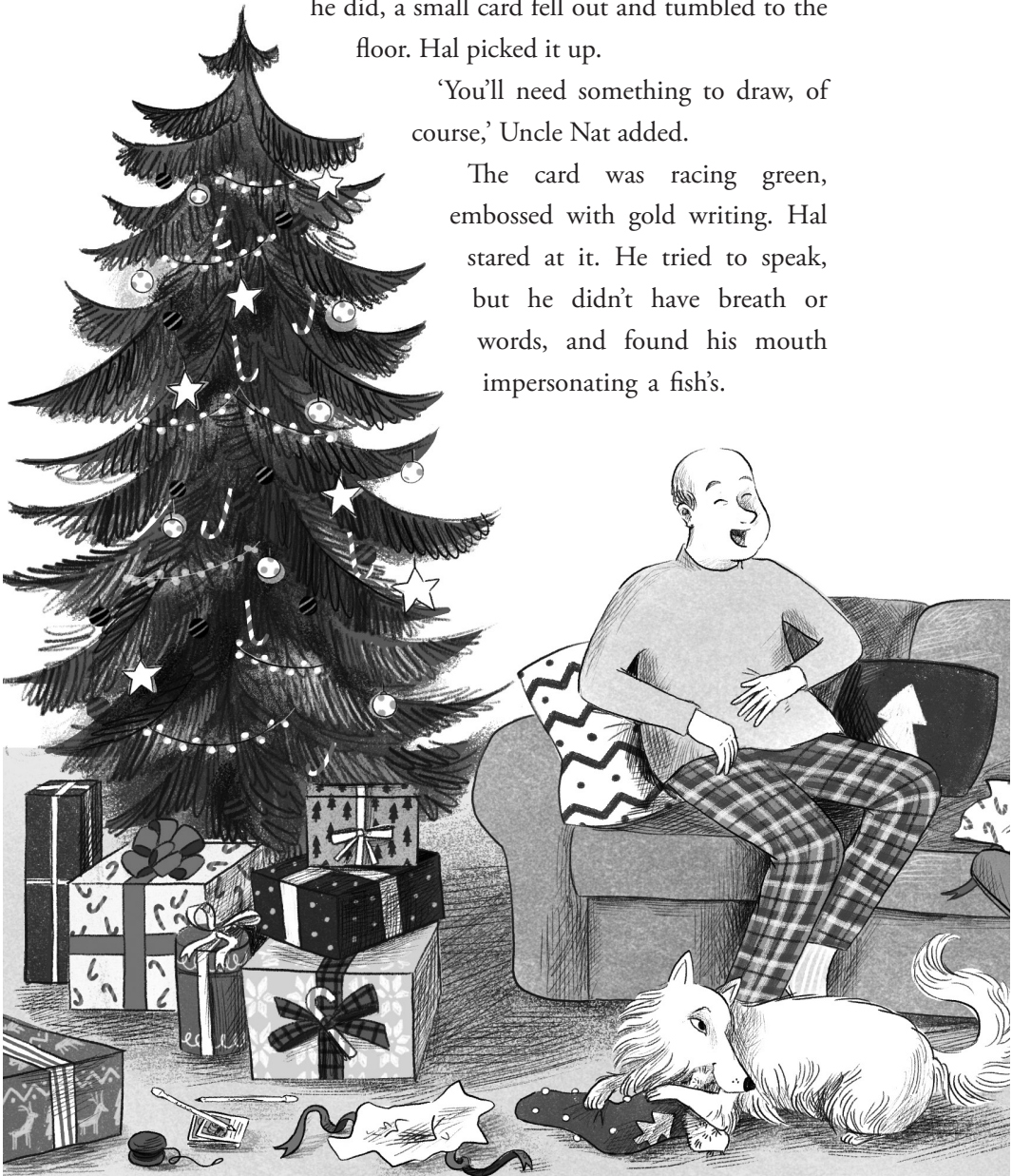
'I thought you might enjoy drawing with charcoal,' Uncle Nat said.

Hal felt as if all the breath had been sucked out of his lungs. He grinned wildly at the tin, trying not to show his disappointment. 'Oh, wow! Uncle Nat, these are amazing! I've never drawn with charcoal before. Thank you.'

Everyone in the room was staring at him, so he opened the tin to show how interested he was in the charcoal sticks. As he did, a small card fell out and tumbled to the floor. Hal picked it up.

‘You’ll need something to draw, of course,’ Uncle Nat added.

The card was racing green, embossed with gold writing. Hal stared at it. He tried to speak, but he didn’t have breath or words, and found his mouth impersonating a fish’s.

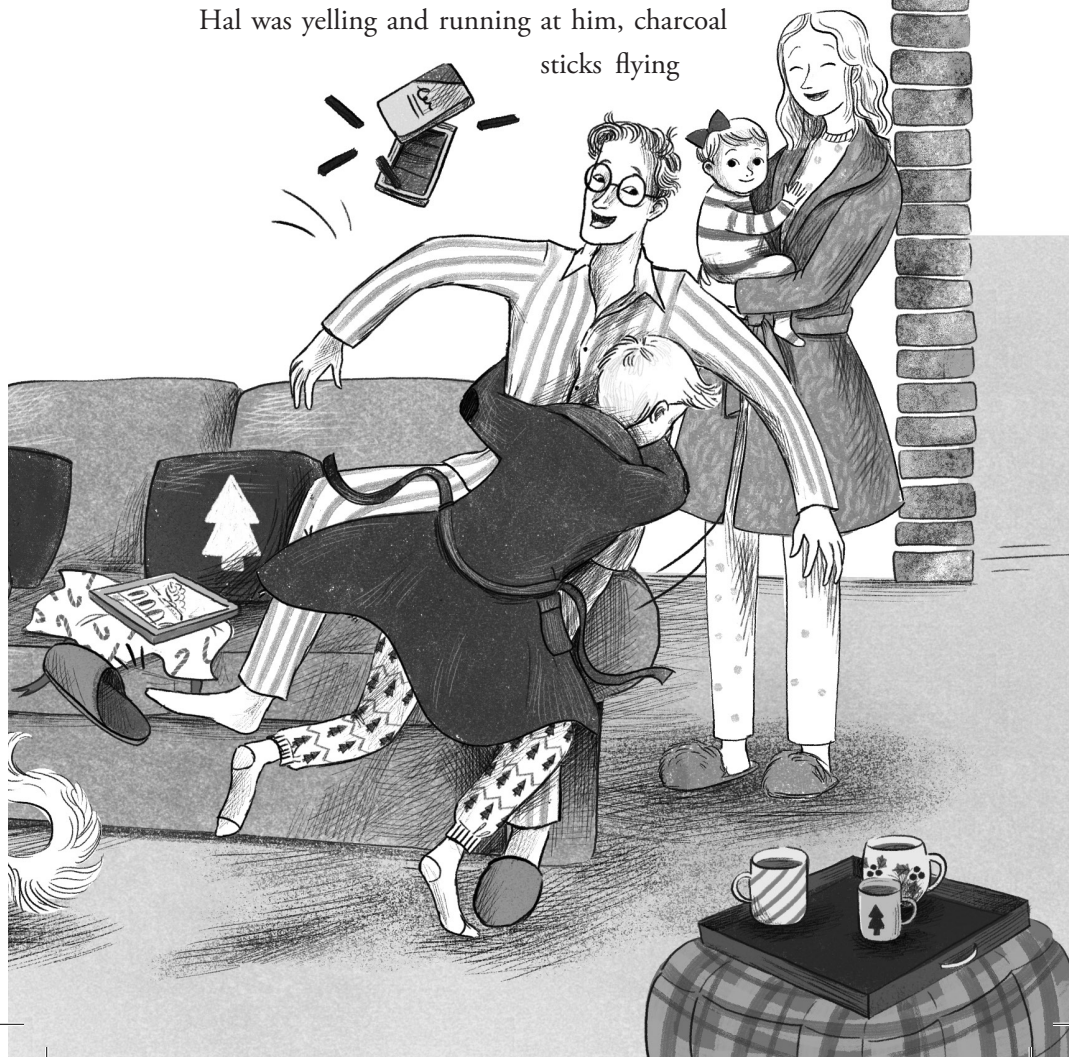


He looked at his uncle, who was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

‘We’re going to South Africa, Hal,’ Uncle Nat said with delight. ‘In the February half-term. We’re taking the Safari Star from Pretoria all the way through Zimbabwe to see Victoria Falls, on the border of Zambia. I thought you might like the charcoal to draw the animals we’ll see in the safari parks . . .’

But he didn’t finish what he was saying because Hal was yelling and running at him, charcoal

sticks flying



as he flung his arms round his uncle, knocking him off the sofa.

*South Africa!* Hal's heart was bursting with joy at the thought of another railway journey with his uncle. But he had no idea it would turn out to be their most dangerous adventure yet.



## CHAPTER TWO

# SAFARI STATION

Hal licked the edge of his thumb and smudged the lines of charcoal in his sketchbook, teasing them out to look like sharp black quills. The subject of his drawing was nibbling tree bark and glowering at him. The porcupine had a spongy nose, a salt-and-pepper mohawk, long prickly spines and a stubby tail. Hal leaned forward to study its face and the spiky creature huffed, mooching off towards the train shed and flopping into a dusty hole.

‘A prickly customer,’ Uncle Nat observed. His fair face was shaded from the glare of the sun by a broad-brimmed panama hat, and he looked every bit the European traveller in his crisp white shirt and ivory linen suit.

They were sitting at an iron table on the empty platform of Pretoria Gardens, a private rail terminal on the outskirts of the city. Before being converted to a station it had been a grand country house, and its grounds, now teeming with wildlife, had once been formal gardens. Hal thought of everyone back home in Crewe having a cold, grey February

half-term holiday and grinned at the red-and-brown speckled Nguni cattle grazing on the other side of the tracks in the morning sunshine.

They had landed in Johannesburg the previous night and left for Pretoria first thing that morning. It was only an hour's drive from their hotel, and Hal had been itching to explore the station. As their taxi had crawled up the white gravel drive, Hal drank in the impressive red-brick building covered with creepers and flowering vines. A bottle-green sign, half hidden in the flower beds, read *Ackerman Rail* in peeling gold paint. A combination of excitement and hunger made Hal feel as if an army of frogs were bouncing about in his belly.

A porter took their luggage, then served them breakfast on the veranda, which was really only a wide part of the platform. The railway track was so close to the house that it looked like an eccentric driveway.

As Hal wolfed down his fruit and pastries, a man with a grin like a hungry crocodile strode towards their table. His closely cropped silver hair and beard made the suntan on his white skin more bronze, and he was dressed in a blue shirt and chalk-white trousers.

'Nathaniel Bradshaw? I'm Luther Ackerman. Welcome to Pretoria Gardens and my family's railway.' He shook Uncle Nat's hand vigorously. 'I'm so happy you accepted my invitation. Prepare for the experience of a lifetime! The Safari Star is a luxury hotel on wheels, the crown jewel of my

fleet. We'll bring the wildlife of Africa to your window – the journey to Victoria Falls is one of the greatest in the world.' His eyes darted to Hal as he finished his sales patter.

'Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr Ackerman,' Uncle Nat replied, retrieving his hand. 'This is my nephew, Harrison Beck.'

'Harrison Beck?' Ackerman stepped back, studying him. Hal moved his hands behind his back in case the excitable man tried to shake them. 'The railway detective I've read about in the papers?'

Hal flushed with pleasure.

'Would you like us to arrange a crime for you to solve on board?' Ackerman laughed loudly. 'What would you prefer? Blackmail? Art theft? I know, how about a nice juicy *murder*?' He winked.

'I'd love to solve a murder one day,' Hal said eagerly. 'It's the ultimate crime for a detective.'

'No, thank you,' said Uncle Nat. 'We've witnessed enough crime on our recent travels. We're here to see the animals.'

'And the trains,' Hal added. 'Is it true you have a railway museum here, Mr Ackerman?'

'Call me Luther,' said the man, clapping a large hand on Hal's back and almost knocking him off his chair. 'And yes!' He pointed across the track. 'Over there are the engine sheds where we restore the locomotives and fit out the carriages. Beyond is the marshalling yard. Along that path is the original signal box and water tower.' He paused as an ostrich strutted past the fountain beside the veranda. 'I promise you won't be

disappointed.’ He threw his arms out wide. ‘Explore to your heart’s content.’

‘Is it normal to have animals at a station in South Africa?’ Hal asked.

‘The animals moved in when the house was left derelict, in the 1940s,’ Luther explained. ‘They’d been living here so long when I bought it, I didn’t have the heart to move them on.’ He looked at Uncle Nat, snapped his heels together and bowed his head. ‘I’ve bothered you for long enough. I will be your train manager on this journey, so I’ll see you on board the Safari Star.’

I wonder if there *will* be a crime to solve on this trip,’ Hal said as they crossed an iron bridge over the tracks. They were following a path through the trees to the engine sheds and the cool shade of the foliage provided welcome respite from the heat of the sun.

‘I hope not,’ said Uncle Nat, fanning himself with his hat. ‘I’d like to relax and enjoy the safari.’

‘But crimes are exciting to solve,’ said Hal, watching a beetle the size of a chestnut flying clumsily ahead of them, ‘and I’m good at it.’ The beetle crashed into a tree trunk and tumbled to the ground.

‘Be careful what you wish for.’ Uncle Nat laughed ruefully.

Through a gap in the trees, they could see two giant sheds straddling the tracks. A royal-blue locomotive was visible through the open doors. Hal hurried towards them, his uncle right behind him.

Inside, the sheds echoed with hammer clangs and whirring machines. Hal and Nat climbed up to a gallery overlooking the workshop.

*'Amazing!'* Hal mouthed to his uncle as they peered down at the old carriages and locomotives in various states of repair. A scatter of sparks gushed from a trough beneath the rails, and he caught sight of a woman tinkering with the belly of a half-dismantled Class 6 loco. She wore overalls and her pale arms were streaked with grease, reminding Hal of his friend Lenny. He leaned his sketchbook on the railing to draw her. As he smudged black lines to shade in the gleaming metal of the engine boiler, Hal saw Uncle Nat wander into view.

The mechanic came up from her trough, wiping her arms on a rag. She had short hair and a snub nose that made her look like an extremely tough pixie. She shook Uncle Nat's hand and he pointed up to Hal.

Hal waved, then followed the gallery along to a set of stairs down to the workshop floor.

'Hal?' Uncle Nat waved him over. 'This is Flo, Mr Ackerman's sister. She's chief engineer here.'

'Hi. I was just telling your uncle about Janice, the loco pulling the Safari Star.' Flo had a blunt but warm manner.

'Are you the driver?' Hal asked, immediately liking her more than her brother.

'No. Sheila and Greg are the crew. I'm coming on the journey as security. You wouldn't want to be stranded on a steam train in the savannah without an engineer.'

'Stranded? Is that possible?' asked Hal.

‘Anything’s possible.’ Flo shrugged. ‘Things here aren’t shiny and new.’ A strange look crossed her face. ‘But we do a good job.’ She blinked, changing the subject. ‘If you’d like to see the engine, come to the footplate before we leave, and I’ll give you the tour.’

‘Thanks, I will.’ Hal beamed.

They said their goodbyes and, after making a lap of the workshop to look at the dismantled carriages being restored, went back outside.

‘We have an hour or so before the train leaves,’ said Uncle Nat, as they returned along the path. ‘I’d like to get my hands on a newspaper.’

‘I want to draw the station.’ Hal pointed at a bench nestled amongst the trees. ‘Maybe from there.’

‘Lovely idea.’ Uncle Nat nodded. ‘Come and find me when you’re finished.’

Sitting down, Hal opened his sketchbook to a clean double page and let his charcoal skim lightly across the paper, capturing the strong horizontal lines of the platform and the vertical lines of the station. Something heavy jumped on to his lap, and he yelled at the sight of an animal the size of a small cat, with coarse sandy hair, stubby legs and a bushy tail. It stared at him with piercing amber eyes.

‘Chipo?’ a boy’s voice called out. ‘Chipo, where are you?’

The animal wheeled around, leaping off Hal as a short boy with a flat-top hairstyle, brown skin and glasses wider than his face emerged from the trees. He was wearing a faded yellow T-shirt and khaki shorts. ‘There you are, Chipo!’ The animal



ran up the boy's arm, coming to sit across the back of his shoulders. The boy smiled first at her, then at Hal. 'She thinks you have food.'

'Oh!' Hal pulled a half-eaten bag of peanuts from his pocket. 'They're from the aeroplane.'

Looking at the boy to check it was OK, Hal poured three nuts into his palm, and Chipo jumped back on to the bench, grabbing one in each paw and stuffing them in her mouth.

‘You’ve made a friend.’ The boy laughed.

‘What is she?’ Hal stared at Chipo as she gnawed at the nuts. ‘A meerkat?’

‘A yellow mongoose.’

‘She’s cool.’ He looked up. ‘I’m Hal, by the way.’

‘I’m Winston.’ Chipo snatched the last nut from Hal and jumped back on to Winston’s shoulders. ‘Where are you from?’

‘England,’ said Hal. ‘I’m travelling with my uncle on the Safari Star.’

‘Were you drawing?’ Winston nodded at Hal’s sketch pad.

‘Yeah, I draw trains mostly.’ Hal showed his sketches from the sheds. ‘But on this journey, I’m going to draw animals too.’ He flipped to the page with the moody porcupine.

‘It needs a face!’ Winston laughed.

‘It didn’t want to sit still.’

‘Chipo will sit still if you give her more nuts.’

As if she disagreed, Chipo leaped off Winston’s shoulder and scampered away into the trees.

‘Not again!’ Winston said, exasperated. ‘Mama said I could bring her on the train if I kept her under control.’ He hurried after her and Hal followed him. ‘Chipo, come back here! Mongooses usually live in packs and she thinks she’s the leader of ours.’

Hal was pleased they were coming on the train. 'Is your mum a passenger?'

'She's the safari guide.' Winston peered through the bushes towards some old sidings. 'She knows everything there is to know about animals in South Africa and Zimbabwe – she's a zoologist. This is the first time I've been allowed to come on the train. Normally I have to stay at home with Pa. I've promised to be helpful – run errands, stuff like that. I really want to see Victoria Falls. Mama made me bring my schoolwork with me.' Winston pulled a face.

'Look, there she is.' Hal pointed at Chipo who was a few metres away beside a tree, standing on her hind legs, sniffing the air. Her ears went flat. Darting across the ground, she leaped and caught a damselfly between her paws, which she stuffed in her mouth.

Winston put his lips together and made a squeaking noise. He made to move through the bushes towards Chipo, who ran towards him, but he froze, then drew back. 'Oh no! There's Mr Ackerman,' he hissed. 'Mama told me to keep Chipo out of his way.' Winston grabbed the yellow mongoose and hugged her to his chest. 'C'mon, let's go.'

Intending to follow, Hal glanced over his shoulder. Luther Ackerman was speaking in hushed tones to a short, sallow man in a khaki shirt and trousers. His shoulders were hunched, his head low and secretive. Hal put his charcoal to a page in his sketchbook, as the other man nodded, passing Mr Ackerman a roll of money held by a silver clip that glinted in the sun. Goose bumps rose all over Hal's body.

Creeping away, he knew with chilling certainty that he'd witnessed something he wasn't supposed to see. His heart was pounding. There *was* a case aboard the Safari Star, and he was going to solve it.

