



## CHAPTER ONE

# AUSTRALIA

*L*ife doesn't get better than this, Hal thought as he gazed out of the window at ox-blood earth sprouting with wiry shrubs pointing to a cobalt sky. He was sitting in a leather armchair, opposite his favourite uncle, in the Outback Explorer Lounge of The Ghan. He had a sketchbook on his lap and a pencil in his hand. He didn't need a mystery to solve. This trip was crime free, and he was having the best summer holiday ever.

They'd arrived in Australia four days ago, exploring the city of Adelaide while recovering from jet lag. Hal was surprised that the weather wasn't much warmer than it was back in Crewe, until Uncle Nat had explained that in Australia August was a winter month. They had a packed schedule of sightseeing and train excursions filling all three weeks of their trip. 'You'll be so busy having your mind blown by the beauty of Australia,' Uncle Nat had said, 'that there'll be no time for detecting.'

The day before they'd boarded The Ghan, Uncle Nat

had taken Hal on a ferry to Kangaroo Island. They had spotted dolphins and seals from the boat. The first page of Hal's sketchbook was covered with pictures of the koalas and kangaroos he had seen in the wildlife park, rescue animals saved from the recent bushfires.

Contrary to his dad's joke about everything in Australia being upside down and that Hal would have to walk on his hands to get about, the only thing that he'd found to be topsy-turvy was a *pie floater*, a delicious meat pie served face down in pea soup.

Yesterday, when they'd arrived on platform one of Adelaide's Parklands Terminal, they'd been met by a welcoming committee. The train crew of The Ghan, smartly turned out in Australian Akubra hats, were lined up in front of the impressively long silver train, waiting for their passengers. Emblazoned on each carriage was the train's name and the red insignia of a man riding a camel.

'Why a camel?' Hal had asked. 'Shouldn't it be a kangaroo?'

'The railway was built using camels,' Uncle Nat had replied. 'The name and insignia honours the Afghan camel drivers who first crossed Australia's scorching heartland.'

'*Are you ready for adventure?*' one of the crew had cried. They each introduced themselves, explaining what they did, so everyone knew who was looking after them and who was driving the train. The staff were proud to work on one of Australia's famous trains and their enthusiasm was infectious. One of them blew a whistle. '*All aboard The Ghan!*' they all shouted, before dispersing along the platform. It had made

Hal feel like an intrepid explorer about to set off on an epic journey.

Because The Ghan was the longest passenger train in the world, Hal and Uncle Nat hadn't had time to visit the twin scarlet locomotives before departure. The train was over three-quarters of a kilometre long, with more than thirty carriages, including a motorail carriage for cars being transported across Australia. Uncle Nat had reassured Hal that they'd see the locomotives when they arrived in Alice Springs, the next day.

Once on board the train, Hal found it was divided into areas. Their Gold Service tickets gave them access to the Outback Explorer Lounge, the Queen Adelaide Restaurant, and their compartment with two fold-away bunks.

As The Ghan trundled out of Adelaide, buildings became spaced out. Hal spotted some sheep, but then they were gone. The trees thinned, then disappeared altogether. Foliage faded and eventually there were more rocks than plants, and greater and greater expanses of rust-coloured earth. *It looks like Mars*, Hal thought as he drew the view.

As the train travelled north, Hal found it increasingly hard to contain his excitement. He'd barely slept last night in his bunk, despite the soothing motion of the train. He was journeying towards a momentous experience. The day after they arrived in Alice Springs, he and Uncle Nat would be some of the very first passengers *ever* to travel on the Solar Express.

The Solar Express was the winner of a global competition to create a futuristic train, for a planet facing the challenges

of climate change. Famous tech entrepreneur August Reza had offered a big cash prize and the opportunity to work with his company, Reza Technologies, to build a prototype of the winning locomotive. The successful train designer was an Australian called Boaz Tudawali, who'd entered a hydrogen- and solar-powered hybrid engine. The Solar Express was his design. Hal had read about it in his dad's newspaper, then yelped with excitement when Uncle Nat had rung to tell him that August Reza had invited them to be guests on the maiden voyage of the Solar Express.

Hal chewed the end of his pencil, remembering his trip across America on the California Comet, when he'd first met August Reza and his daughter, Marianne. To begin with, Hal had got on well with Marianne. She drew comics and was



good at it, but he came to realize that drawing was the *only* thing they had in common. Marianne told lies easily and was used to getting her own way. Hal didn't trust her. But August hadn't mentioned his daughter in his invitation. Hal hoped that meant she wouldn't be coming on the Solar Express.

Taking his ruler from his pencil case, Hal drew a box around the picture he'd sketched of himself and Uncle Nat, sitting in front of the window of the carriage. He put a thought bubble above Uncle Nat, and inside he wrote: *Finally, a train journey with no crime*. He smiled as he added a vertical box to the left of the picture and inserted the caption: *The railway detectives were on The Ghan, travelling to Alice Springs*.

It was funny how drawing a box around a picture and adding a few words made it look like the beginning of a story.



He decided that if Marianne was coming on the Solar Express, he'd draw comics with her. He certainly didn't want to talk about what had happened the last time they'd met.

'Vast, isn't it?' said Uncle Nat, taking a sip from his coffee cup as he stared out of the window at the intensely blue sky. 'Do you know, Australia is wider than the moon.'

Hal's uncle was a travel writer and always had an interesting fact to share.

'Look, it's *Iron Man*.' He pointed to a sculpture beside the tracks.

The train manager's voice came through the speakers, telling them the *Iron Man* was created by the people who laid the one-millionth sleeper of this track, and Hal stared at the giant stick man carrying a concrete sleeper as they passed.

'Are you going to write about the Solar Express?' he asked his uncle.

'Of course! The Solar Express could revolutionize rail travel forever. What kind of a journalist would I be if I didn't write about it?'

'I don't believe it!' a woman exclaimed from a booth across the aisle. 'No one can be that lucky!'

Hal turned and saw a woman with red lipstick and cropped bleach-blonde hair sitting opposite a man in an open-necked, short-sleeved shirt. His tangled blond mop was scraped up in a top knot. A deck of cards lay on the table between them. The woman threw down her hand of cards, exclaiming loudly, 'Kenny Sparks, are you cheating?'

Kenny laughed, holding up his hands, displaying tattooed

biceps, as his female companion playfully grabbed at his shirt, searching for hidden cards. ‘What can I say, Karleen? Lady Luck loves me.’ A roguish grin spread across his stubbly face. ‘Drinks are on you.’

Part of a neck tattoo was visible above Kenny’s collar, and around his neck Hal noticed a gold necklace with a tiny pair of dangling dice. Without thinking, he started sketching the couple.

‘One day your luck will run out,’ Karleen said, shaking her head. Her hair was fixed with so much product it didn’t move. ‘One more hand.’ She had an impish glint in her blue eyes as she gathered up the cards. ‘Double or quits. Winner takes all.’

‘Winner gets a steak dinner?’ Kenny leaned forward with a questioning look.

‘Deal,’ Karleen replied, shuffling the cards.

Picking up his ruler, Hal drew a box around his sketch and, in a speech bubble above Kenny’s head, he wrote: *Lady Luck loves me.*

‘Hal,’ Uncle Nat said. ‘I think those are the MacDonnell Ranges.’ He pointed.

On the horizon, Hal saw that the baked earth, peppered with pale, scrappy shrubs, rose into lumpen rock formations.

‘*Ladies and gentlemen, if you look out your windows,*’ said the train manager over the tannoy, ‘*you’ll see we are about to cross the Finke River on a fifteen-span bridge.*’

Hal stared down at the custard-coloured water as The Ghan rolled over the narrow bridge. Most of the river was dry silt bed. On the far side, telegraph poles rose out of the ground



and a road curved to meet the track, running alongside it.

*'We are now approaching Alice Springs.'*

'We're here!' Hal said to Uncle Nat, who looked just as excited as he was.



## CHAPTER TWO

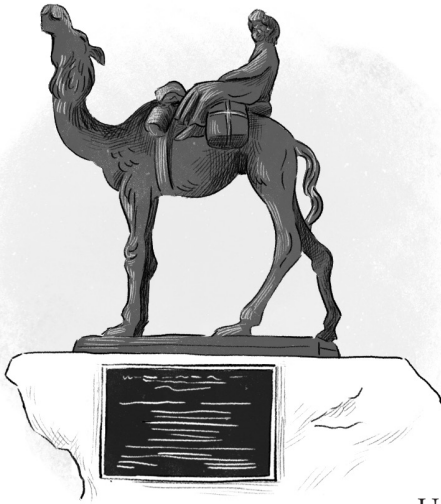
# ARRIVAL

The Ghan rolled into Alice Springs at a walking pace. Two open-topped people carriers scooted out from beside the hangar-like station, one driving towards the front of the train, and the other heading for the rear. A statue of an Afghan driver on a camel stood on the station concourse. A sign beside it read *Welcome to Alice Springs. The Heart. The Soul. The Centre.*

Hal descended the steps to the platform, thanking the attendant Nancy for taking care of them. Leaving the air-conditioned train was like sinking into a bath of hot air. As the powerful midday heat enveloped him, he winced, adjusting to the dazzling sunlight. ‘Can we look at the locomotives now?’ he asked Uncle Nat. ‘I want to draw them in my sketchbook.’

‘Yes. We’ll grab our bags on the way back. The hotel isn’t far from the station.’

They walked briskly beside the train for a long time, eventually passing a car park full of coaches, to reach the spot where the sturdy red locomotives had finally halted.



Hal dropped to the ground, sitting cross-legged in the dust, and set about drawing the face of the train.

He was finishing the outline of the insignia of the camel on the nose of the engine when he heard Uncle Nat suck in a breath of surprise. A black limousine, a Mercedes-Maybach, had stopped several metres away. The number plate said *REZA*.

The rear tinted window lowered, revealing the familiar, haughty face of a girl with a wavy blonde bob. She was wearing sunglasses. ‘Playing in the dirt, Harrison?’ she called out in her mid-Atlantic accent with a French twang. She chuckled. ‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’

Hal jumped to his feet, brushing the dust from his legs. He wanted to reply with a cutting retort, but the heat of the Outback had scorched all clever words from his brain. To his frustration, he found himself giving a half-hearted wave and saying, ‘Hi, Marianne.’

A familiar tall man, whose muscles threatened to bulge out of his grey suit, got out of the passenger seat and checked the area, before nodding and opening the rear door. Hal recognized him as Woody, the Rezas’ bodyguard.

August Reza emerged from the vehicle. He was a wiry

man with a bald head and a hint of stubble. He wore clear-framed glasses, which darkened as he stood in the sunlight, an expensive-looking black T-shirt, and steel-blue suit trousers.

Uncle Nat walked towards the tech billionaire with his hand outstretched in greeting. ‘August, what a pleasure! We weren’t expecting to see you until tomorrow.’

The men greeted each other like old friends.

‘We’re going to meet with the designer of the Solar Express this afternoon,’ said August. ‘When you messaged ahead to say you were arriving today, I thought you might like to join us?’ He looked at Hal. ‘I’m excited for you to meet Boaz



Tudawali, Harrison. I think you'll like him.'

'But our bags . . .' Uncle Nat looked up the platform. 'We need to check into the hotel.'

'All taken care of.' August's fingers made ripples in the air, as if brushing these inconveniences away.

Uncle Nat gave Hal a questioning look, and Hal nodded. He could put up with Marianne's digs if it meant he got to meet the person who designed the Solar Express.

Clambering into the limousine, Hal found that the back of the car was a lounge with four luxury leather armchairs in pairs, facing each other, a miniature drinks tray between them. Marianne, dressed in knee-length shorts and a pale blue T-shirt, was sat in one of the rear chairs. She patted the seat beside her. Reluctantly Hal went and sat down next to her. Her hair had grown since the last time he'd seen her, but she didn't seem to have changed.

Lowering her sunglasses, so he could see her blue eyes, she whispered conspiratorially, 'There's something I need to talk to you about.'

'Me too,' Hal replied brightly, holding up his sketchbook. 'I've been drawing comics.'

'Is Mr Tudawali staying at the hotel?' Uncle Nat asked as he and August climbed in, sitting opposite them.

'No. He lives here,' August replied. 'Outside Alice Springs.'

Woody closed the doors, dropped into the passenger seat, and the limousine moved noiselessly away from the station.

'Is that why you're testing the Solar Express here?' Hal

asked, joining in with the adult conversation to avoid talking to Marianne.

‘We built most of it here. Mr Tudawali is keen that the train serve the people of Australia, as well as America.’

The car turned on to the Stuart Highway, heading south, and the low rooftops of Alice Springs disappeared behind them.

‘You must have had a lot of interesting entries to the competition,’ Uncle Nat said.

‘The prize was large enough to have got the whole world designing trains.’ August shot him a mischievous smile.

‘Any outlandish proposals?’ Uncle Nat asked.

‘Ha! Yes. Abu Dhabi University wanted to make a train with giant solar panels shaped like the sails of a ship. That was surprising. There was a wildly problematic entry from one of your fellow countrymen, a physics professor called Gregory Vulpes, who submitted a design for a nuclear-powered train. And – get this – there was an entry from a team in Denver led by one Gardenia Harmony-Chime that proposed we build a train from hemp and power it with vegetable oil!’

Marianne nudged Hal, trying to get his attention.

‘What made you choose Mr Tudawali’s design?’ Hal asked, leaning forward.

‘He was the obvious winner,’ August replied. ‘When you meet him, you’ll understand why.’

‘Is his train powered by sunlight?’

‘Not quite.’ August’s eyes twinkled. ‘His fuel system is ingenious. I think you’re all going to be impressed.’

Marianne sighed loudly, letting them all know she was bored by their conversation.

‘If you’re not interested,’ Hal said, quietly but curtly, ‘why did you come?’

‘I *am* interested,’ Marianne whispered angrily, pulling off her sunglasses. ‘It’s just that Pop’s being so secretive about this dumb train, and he won’t listen to me.’

‘About what?’

Marianne kept her voice low. ‘Yesterday I landed at Alice Springs Airport, with Woody, and went straight to the hotel. Pop’s got a suite of rooms. Mine is opposite the one he uses for business meetings . . .’ She paused and frowned.

‘What?’

‘Forget it. I can see you’re not interested.’

‘Interested in what?’

She shook her head and looked out the window. ‘It was probably nothing.’

‘If it’s nothing, then just tell me.’

‘If I tell you,’ Marianne said, glancing nervously at her dad and Uncle Nat, who were deep in conversation, ‘you’ve got to hear me out.’

‘OK.’ Hal nodded.

‘Yesterday I was coming out of my hotel room and I saw a hotel porter delivering a package for Pop. He knocked on the door opposite mine. There was no answer because Pop was down in the restaurant waiting for me. The porter put the package on the ground, slipped a card under the door and turned to leave. When he saw me standing in the corridor, he

went stiff. He nodded at me, then hurried away.'

'What was in the package?'

'I brought it down to dinner. Pop opened it at the table. Inside was a detailed model of Stephenson's Rocket made from silver and gold, set on a wooden base with brass rail tracks, and sealed inside a glass case. People at the tables around us gasped at the sight of it. They were all staring. Hal, it's beautiful, like jewellery.'

'Who sent it?'

'That is the mystery.' Marianne leaned closer. 'When we got back to the rooms, Pop opened the card. It said: *Please accept this model of Stephenson's Rocket – the first locomotive – to commemorate your greatest venture, Reza's Rocket, creating the train of the future!*' She glanced at her father. 'He loves it. He did a press conference this morning sitting beside it. He even used the line from the card: *From the first locomotive to the train of the future.*'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Don't you think it's strange to give a valuable present to someone and not sign the card?' She didn't wait for his reply. 'I do. I wanted to know who the gift was from. I went looking for the hotel porter, the one I saw delivering it. When I asked in reception, they said no one matching his description worked for the hotel.' She widened her eyes meaningfully. 'And they said they hadn't received any packages for Mr Reza.'

'What did the porter look like?' Hal asked.

'He was taller than me, but not by much. He was slim, with a beard and there was silver in his hair. I only saw him

for a minute, but I'd say he was about the same age as Pop. He was wearing a maroon porter's jacket.'

'Then he must work for the hotel.'

She gave him a scathing look. 'None of the porters has a beard. I've checked, and they're all much younger.'

'Did you tell your dad?'

'He didn't listen.' Marianne looked down at her hands. 'He loves the Rocket model. He said he didn't have time for my nonsense on this trip.'

Hal turned to look out of the car window, staring at a lone white cloud hovering in the azure sky like a spaceship. He knew Marianne made up stories to get attention. He reminded himself that he was not in Australia to play her games, but to ride on the Solar Express. 'It does sound odd,' he replied. 'But is it possible there's an explanation? Maybe the person who sent it forgot to sign the card and will get in touch.'

Marianne huffed, put her sunglasses back on and folded her arms across her chest.

Occasionally their limousine passed a lorry or a dusty pickup truck, but as crooked trees and weathered rocks came, then slipped by, the road became emptier. Eventually they turned off the highway on to a bumpy track. The car jerked and bounced as it rolled along over the potholes and stones. August put his hand on the drinks tray to stop the glasses rattling. 'We're approaching the Uterne Homestead – where Boaz lives.'

Hal saw a cluster of farm buildings, framed by clumps of twisted trees in the shadow of a high outcrop of rock. Beyond

it was a sweeping plain on which cattle shifted in the distance.

The car pulled up in front of the single-storey house with a wide porch. A boy was sitting on the steps. He stood up. He was taller than Hal, probably a year or two older. He had broad shoulders and a forest of curly black hair fanning out around his brown face. He studied the limo with unreadable chestnut eyes, greeting them with a wry smile as they got out.

‘Hi,’ he said, lifting his chin, as if this visit was utterly unsurprising. Descending the steps, he wiped his palm on his torn blue jeans and extended it to shake August’s hand. ‘Nice to see you again, Mr Reza. Couldn’t wait till tomorrow, eh?’

‘I told your father I’d be dropping by. I hope that’s OK?’ August reached his arm out, indicating Hal and Marianne should come to him. ‘I wanted to introduce you to my daughter, Marianne, and her friend Harrison Beck.’

‘Great to meet ya.’ The boy nodded at each of them.

Marianne replied with a condescending look.

‘Hi.’ Hal smiled, to make it clear that he wasn’t like Marianne.

‘Everyone, this is Boaz Tudawali,’ said August Reza. ‘The inventor of the Solar Express.’