



## CHAPTER ONE

# UP IN THE AIR

Since he'd boarded the plane, Hal had covered three pages in his new sketchbook with portraits and doodles. Drawing helped him think clearly. It was the way he worked through puzzles and solved crimes. Turning to a fresh page, his practised hand conjured the aeroplane aisle onto the paper. His art pen swiftly drew the seats ahead of him and blank profiles for passengers' faces. *I'm making a mountain out of a molehill*, he thought to himself. *It could mean nothing*. He glanced up at the overhead locker where his rucksack was stowed.

On the way to Manchester airport, his mum had received a message from his uncle, asking Hal to bring Yorkshire Gold tea bags to Stockholm. They'd stopped at a supermarket. The box of tea was in his bag.

*Why does Uncle Nat want Yorkshire Gold tea bags?* The question was worrying Hal.

He drew the features of the man sitting in front of him, a short beard, moustache . . .

Hal was about to draw the baseball cap, which was flattening the man's fringe into a straight line above his thick eyebrows, when the passenger took it off. Hal lifted his pen, mildly annoyed that his subject had moved.

The tea bags were an ominous sign. When Hal had travelled across America on the California Comet, Uncle Nat had told him that if he was homesick or upset, he'd have a cup of Yorkshire Gold to make himself feel better. But Uncle Nat couldn't be homesick. He'd only been in Stockholm for three or four days. So, something must have upset him, Hal reasoned. He hoped it wasn't serious. He'd been looking forward to this trip all term. He didn't want anything to ruin it.

The man Hal was drawing leaned forward, pulling headphones from his bag. Hal saw the top of his outer ear was strangely flat. A female passenger was chatting away to him. Hal guessed the man found this annoying because she was still talking when he put the headphones on. She stopped abruptly and scowled. Hal caught her bitter expression with his pen and smiled to himself as he looked down at his drawing. He'd got it just right. The man leaned back and closed his eyes.

'Harrison?'

Hal looked up at the much-too-cheerful face of the flight attendant who'd been appointed his chaperone. He was a gangly young man whose constant smile and blue-checked jacket made him look like an entertainer at a holiday camp.

'We're going to start our descent into Stockholm soon,' he said. 'If you want to go to the toilet, this is your last chance

before the lights go on.’ He tapped the seatbelt sign above Hal’s head.

‘I’m fine, thanks.’

Hal had been excited to fly to Sweden on his own, until he’d discovered that anyone under the age of fourteen had to be chaperoned by an air steward. Hal had protested that he was thirteen, well-travelled, and didn’t need looking after, but apparently it was the rule. The flight attendant was kind but talked to him as if he were very young, and Hal found it annoying.

That was one of the things that made Nathaniel Bradshaw Hal’s favourite uncle. He talked to Hal like he was a person,



not a child. Uncle Nat was a travel writer, and Hal had accompanied him on some amazing railway journeys. This trip, a long weekend away, was a Christmas present. His uncle was already in Stockholm. He'd been attending the Nobel Prize awards as a guest of an old friend. Hal was meeting him in the Swedish capital, and from there they were taking a sleeper train north, into the Arctic Circle, to a village called Abisko and a place called the Aurora Sky Station, to see the Northern Lights. Hal's heart skipped around his chest every time he thought about it. He'd already drawn a map of their route in the front of his sketchbook.

On the tray-table, beside his drawing, was a tin containing twelve squares of coloured paint and a small silver brush. He slid out the brush from its groove, dipped it into the plastic cup of water he'd got from the air steward, mixed a wash of blue in the lid and added colour to the man's denim jacket.

Uncle Nat had warned him he wouldn't be able to draw by daylight when they reached Abisko. The sun set in the Arctic Circle on the tenth of December and wouldn't rise again until January the fourth. Uncle Nat had called it the polar night. And so Hal had thought carefully about which art materials to bring on the trip. In the end, he'd chosen a set of four art pens, to draw the monochrome landscapes, the snow and the mountains, and his tin of watercolours for the Aurora Borealis. Uncle Nat had told him the Northern Lights lit up the skies with fluctuating waves of coloured light. He was going to try and capture the phenomenon with washes of paint.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to begin our descent

into Stockholm. Please make sure your seatbelts are fastened, your baggage is stowed, and that your seats and tray-tables are in the upright position.’

Hal put away his paints, pens and sketchbook, handed the water to the air steward, then fastened his seatbelt.

As the plane dipped its wing, he looked out of the window at the advancing archipelago, stepping stones to the city of Stockholm, glittering like a tangle of Christmas lights on the edge of the Baltic Sea. He smiled. It felt good knowing that his uncle was down there, waiting to meet him in the airport. Whatever had upset Uncle Nat, Hal was certain that with his help, a magical train journey to the Arctic and a comforting cup of tea, everything would be all right.



## CHAPTER TWO

# THE ARLANDA EXPRESS

With his rucksack on his back, Hal followed the flight attendant through airport security, the baggage collection area, past a seven-foot Christmas tree dressed in white lights and giant gold baubles, and through the arrivals gate.

‘There he is,’ Hal said, immediately spotting his uncle at the front of the waiting crowd, dressed in a dinner jacket and bow tie. He waved.

‘Mr Bradshaw?’ the attendant asked as Uncle Nat came forward and hugged Hal. ‘Can I see some identification please?’

‘Of course.’ Uncle Nat withdrew his passport from his inside jacket pocket and Hal saw a flash of turquoise silk lining. ‘Good flight?’ he asked Hal, as the attendant checked his photograph. ‘I hope you’re not too tired. I would have suggested an earlier plane, but the banquet only finished an hour ago.’

‘I’m wide awake,’ Hal assured him. He didn’t mind staying up late one bit.

The flight attendant returned Uncle Nat's passport with a nod. 'I hope you enjoyed flying with us, Harrison,' he said, producing a lollipop from his pocket and handing it to Hal with a professional smile. 'We hope to see you again soon.'

'Um, yes. Thank you,' Hal replied, glancing at Uncle Nat, who suppressed a chuckle as the flight attendant walked away.

'The airport shuttle is this way,' Uncle Nat signalled.

'Mum got your message,' Hal said, dropping the lollipop into the nearest bin. 'About the Yorkshire Gold.' He studied his uncle's face. 'We stopped on the way to the airport, specially. I've got it in my bag.'

'That was very kind of you,' Uncle Nat replied. His face was unreadable. Hal watched him closely as they passed shuttered kiosks and illuminated adverts with Swedish slogans on their way to a bank of lifts. Uncle Nat tapped the call button. 'I could really do with a nice cup of tea when we get to the hotel.'

Stepping inside, Hal felt a sudden lightness as the lift descended quickly. When the doors pinged open, they exited onto an underground railway platform. Hal was amazed to see the dark station was hewn into the rock like a cave.

'How's your mum?' Uncle Nat asked, pausing to purchase Hal a train ticket from a banana-yellow machine.

'Oh, you know,' Hal replied. 'Rushing about getting everything ready for Christmas. Panicking about me going on an adventure with you in case something terrible happens.'

'Nothing terrible is going to happen.' Uncle Nat laughed.

'That's what I said.'

‘And this year you’re all coming to mine and James’s for Christmas Day. We are cooking.’ Uncle Nat peered over the rim of his tortoiseshell glasses as he held out Hal’s ticket. ‘What does that sister of mine have to get ready?’



‘I don’t know.’ Hal shrugged. ‘She’s made an enormous Christmas pudding, and everyone is getting homemade jam and tomato chutney as a present, whether they like it or not. The kitchen’s been off limits for weeks.’

‘Sounds like escaping to the Arctic for a few days is exactly what you need.’

‘Yes.’ Hal beamed. ‘I can’t wait to board the night train to Narvik tomorrow.’

‘I’ll give you a whistle-stop tour of Stockholm in the morning,’ Uncle Nat said, moving down the platform, coming to a standstill beneath a huge circular spotlight. ‘Oh and, I hope you won’t mind, but my friend Morti is travelling on the Narvik train with us as far as Kiruna.’

‘Oh!’ Hal tried to hide his disappointment. He’d been looking forward to spending time alone with his uncle.

‘It’s just for the first night. She has her own compartment, of course. We’ll probably only see her at dinner.’ He looked apologetic. ‘She’s letting us stay the night at her cabin in Kiruna on our way home.’

‘She’s going to be in Kiruna with us?’

‘She wasn’t going to be, but her plans have changed. Oh Hal, I can see you’re disappointed. I’m sorry. I can’t imagine Morti will want to do anything more than eat dinner with us and sleep on the train. She’s had quite a week.’

And there it was: the facial expression that Hal had been watching for. Three horizontal lines in the centre of his uncle’s forehead, created as both eyebrows stooped to meet in concern. There *was* something wrong and it had

something to do with his friend, Morti.

‘Why’s Morti had quite a week?’ Hal asked, keeping his voice light.

‘Mortimer Sorenson won the Nobel Prize for medicine this evening,’ Uncle Nat replied. ‘She’s the one who invited me to Stockholm, to accompany her to the banquet. I thought you knew that?’

‘Mum said your friend had won a Nobel Prize, but I didn’t know their name.’ Hal felt his neck getting hot. ‘I’ve heard of the Nobel Prize, but I don’t really know what it is,’ he admitted.

‘Let’s just say, it’s a big deal.’ Uncle Nat smiled. ‘It’s the biggest prize of its kind in the world.’

The rails began to hum, and a white train with *Arlanda Express* in black along its side eased into the platform.

‘This is us,’ Uncle Nat said, climbing aboard as the doors slid open. ‘The Arlanda Express travels at a hundred and sixty kilometres an hour, taking only eighteen minutes to reach Stockholm Central Station.’ Hal followed his uncle into a spacious carriage and saw wide, brown upholstered seats with wooden arms. A handful of passengers boarded behind them, and Uncle Nat beckoned Hal down the aisle towards the connecting door and an empty carriage. ‘It will only take us ten minutes to get from the station to the hotel, once we’re in Stockholm. With any luck we’ll be there before midnight.’ He sat down.

Hal removed his rucksack, dropping into the seat beside his uncle. The doors hissed shut, and the Arlanda Express accelerated into the tunnel.

‘What did your friend win the Nobel Prize for?’ Hal asked.

‘Mortimer is a specialist in ultrasound, a sonic scientist,’ Uncle Nat replied in a quiet voice. ‘She has discovered a way to disperse tumours in the body using sound waves.’

‘And you are worried about her because . . . ?’ Hal let the question hang.

‘I . . .’ Uncle Nat frowned. ‘Hang on, how do you know that I’m worried about her?’

‘You must be worried about something. You asked me to bring you Yorkshire Gold tea,’ Hal replied, giving him a knowing look.

‘Yes, but . . .’

‘Are you worried about Mort?’ Hal persisted.

‘Yes, I am,’ Uncle Nat admitted. ‘Very . . . but—’

‘Why are you worried?’

‘The Nobel Prize has shone a spotlight on Mortimer’s work.’ Uncle Nat sighed. ‘Ever since it was announced in October, a series of inexplicable things have happened to her.’ He paused. ‘She asked me to accompany her to the awards banquet because she’s scared.’

‘Scared of what?’

‘If only we knew.’ Uncle Nat shook his head.

‘How do you know her?’

‘We met at Cambridge University. Mortimer was studying physics and medicine. We were both members of Footlights, a theatre club, and we’ve been friends ever since. Mortimer and I share a love of music.’ Uncle Nat reached a finger into his collar, unfastening his bow tie.

‘You said inexplicable things have been happening to her?’ Hal leaned close. ‘What kind of things?’

‘Hal, it’s late.’ Uncle Nat looked away. ‘I appreciate your concern, I really do. But I want our journey tomorrow to be the wondrous Christmas treat I intended. This time, I’m going to prove to your mother that we can take a train trip together without encountering crime.’

‘I understand.’ Hal nodded. ‘Although, if we’re travelling on the Narvik train together tomorrow, it’s going to be hard not to ask her about it.’

Uncle Nat shook his head, a thin smile on his lips. ‘You’re incorrigible.’

‘I like solving puzzles and mysteries. Is that so bad?’ Hal asked. ‘I might be able to help your friend if you tell me about it.’

‘How about we let Mortimer decide?’

‘Okay.’ Hal grinned. ‘I can’t wait to meet her.’

‘I left her in the hotel bar when I came to get you. She may still be there.’

Hal leaned back in his seat and found himself beaming at his own reflection in the dark window. He’d missed his uncle. When they were together exciting things always happened.