



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.

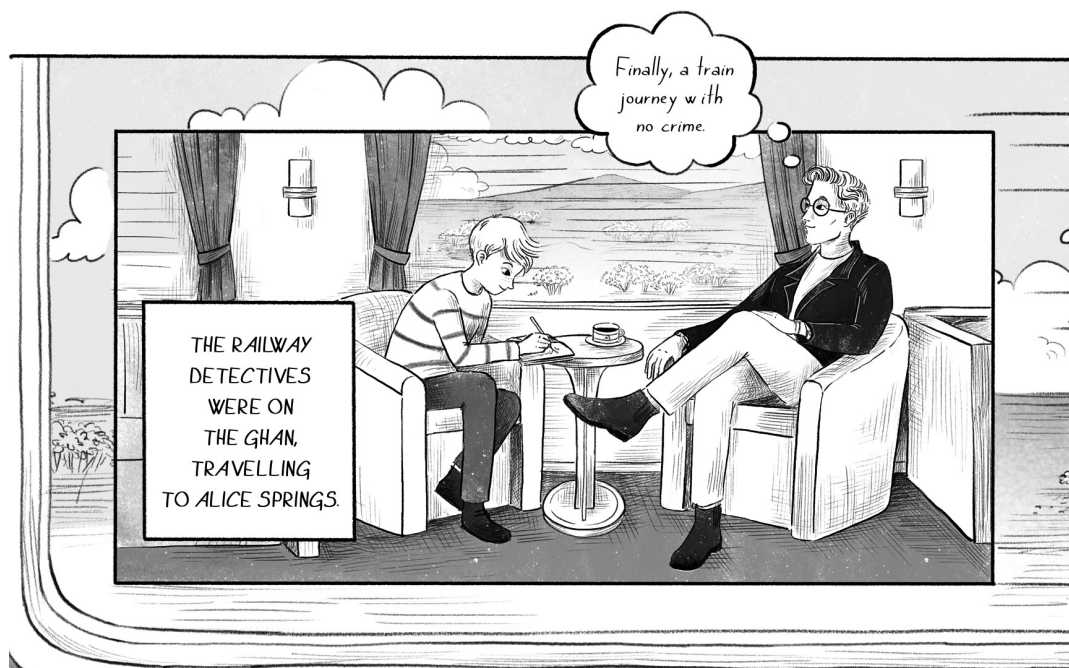
As The Ghan trundled out of Adelaide, buildings became spaced out. Hal spotted some sheep, but then they were gone. The trees thinned, then disappeared altogether. Foliage faded and eventually there were more rocks than plants, and greater and greater expanses of rust-coloured earth. *It looks like Mars*,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

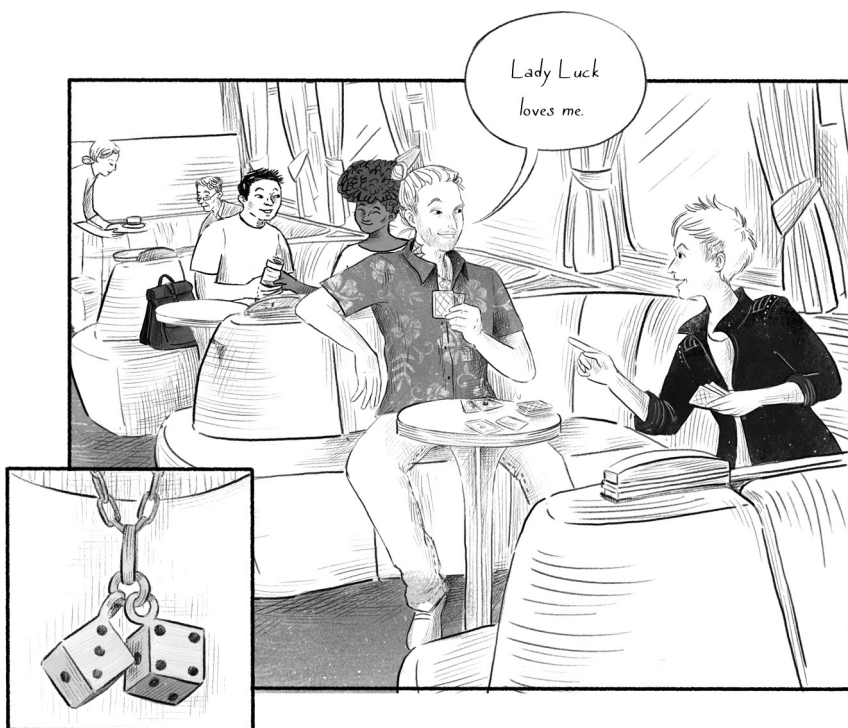
Picking up his ruler, Hal drew a box around his sketch and, in a speech bubble above Kenny's head, he wrote: *Lady Luck loves me.*

'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.