

KIDNAP ON THE CALIFORNIA COMET

Praise for *Adventures on Trains*

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'Ideal for independent readers who enjoy a good old-fashioned mystery' BookTrust



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M. G. LEONARD & SAM SEDGMAN



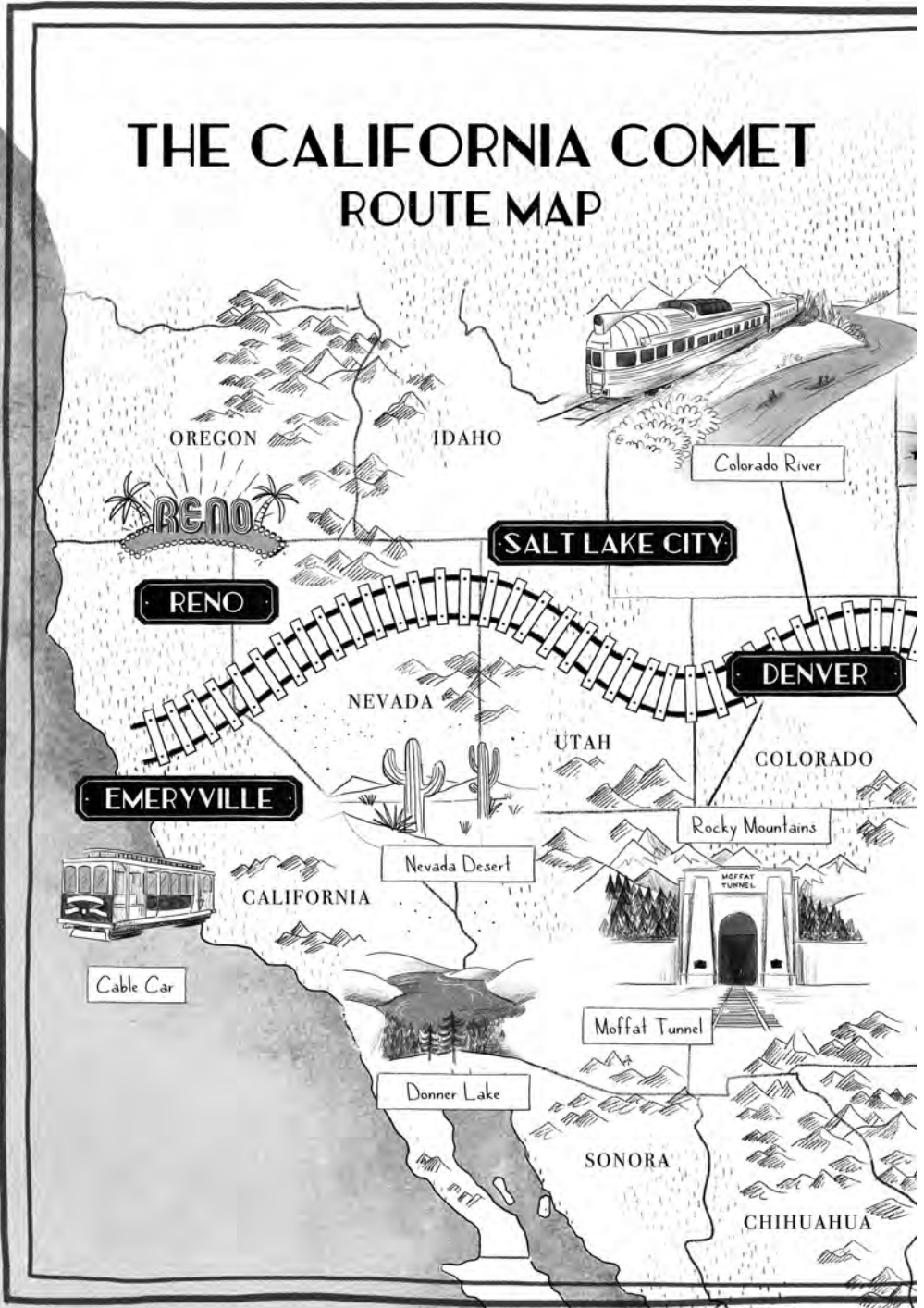
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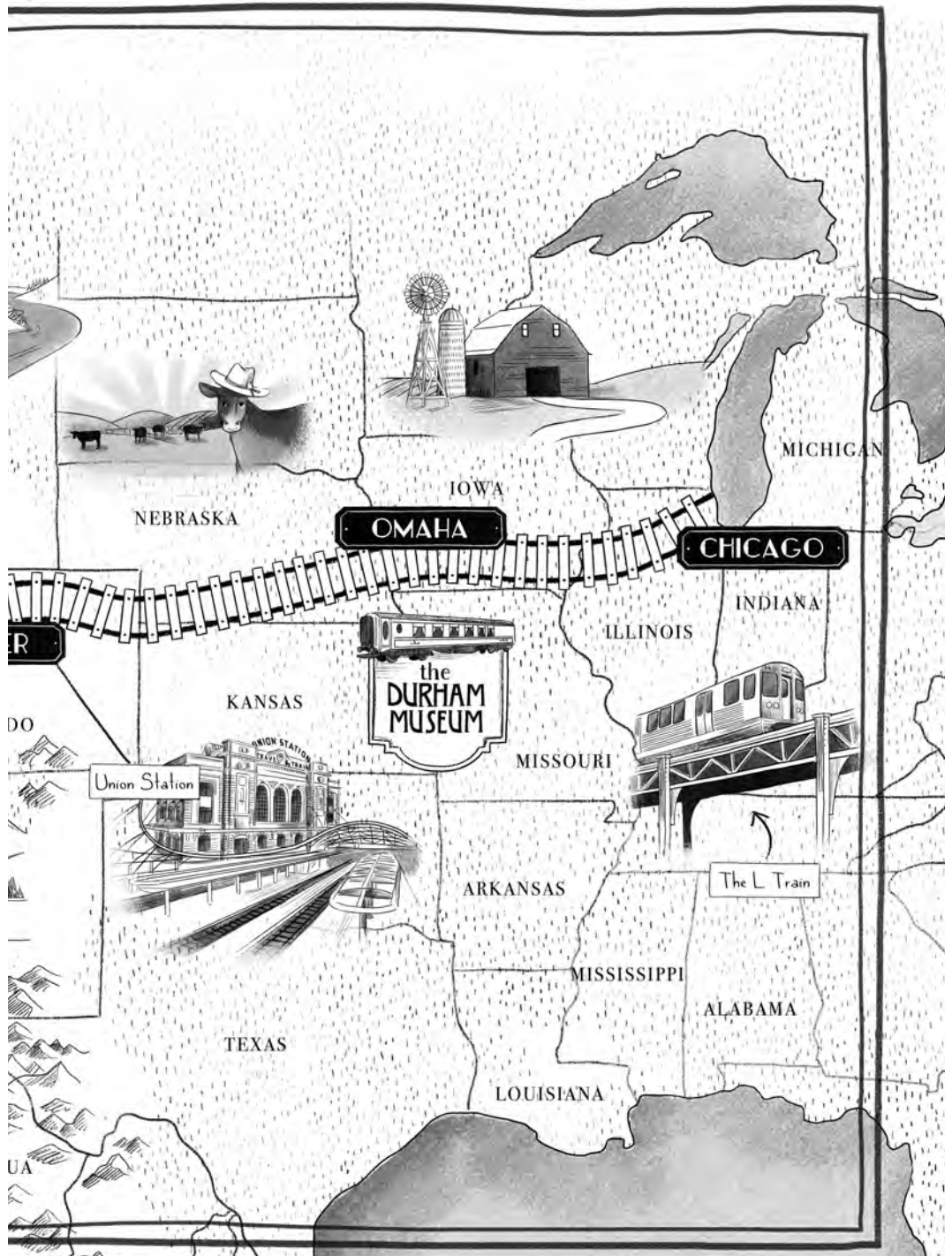


Illustrated by
Elisa Paganelli

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

THE CALIFORNIA COMET ROUTE MAP





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*For my dear friends in America,
Lloydy (aka Dr Simon Jones) and Mike Viola.
I miss you guys.
M. G. Leonard*

*For my nephew, Monty.
I wish you a lifetime of adventure.
Sam Sedgman*

*'Anything is possible on a train: a great meal, a binge,
a visit from card players, an intrigue, a good night's sleep,
and strangers' monologues framed like Russian short stories.'*

Paul Theroux



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.

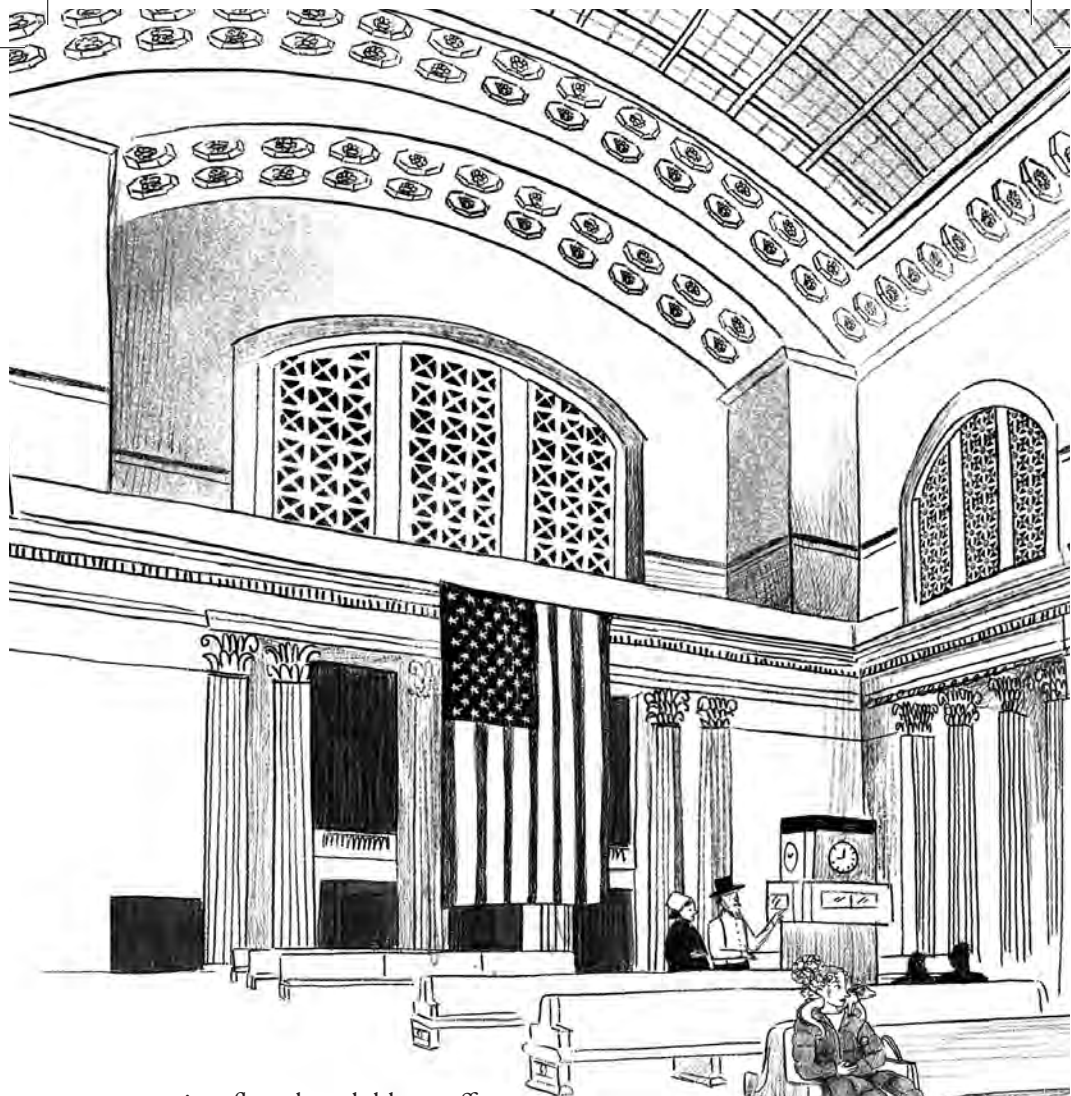
Uncle Nat stopped at the bottom of the station steps, pointing to a distant glass door. 'There's the lounge. I could do with a coffee.'

'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.'

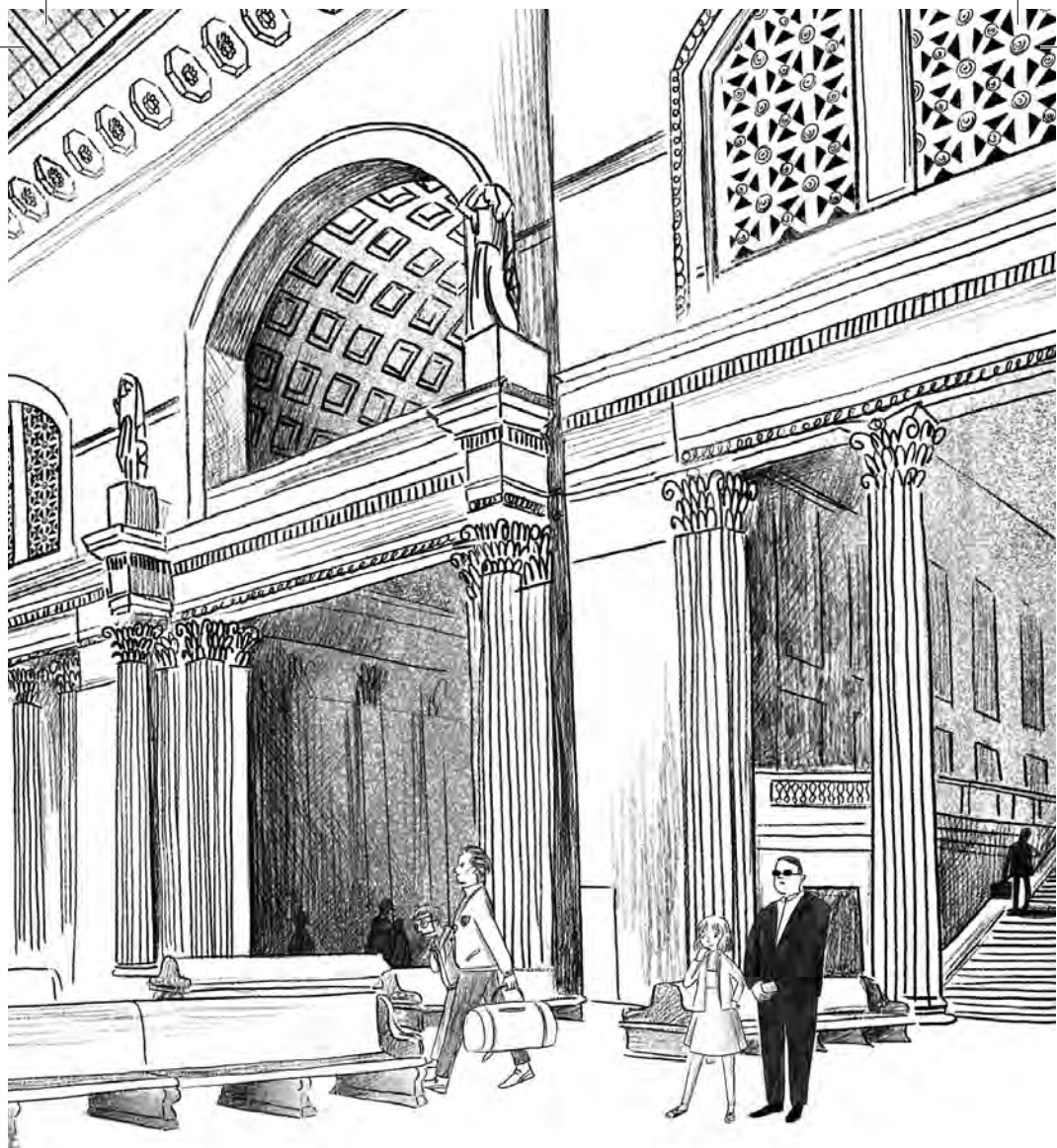
Taking out his sketchbook and a pencil, Hal studied the cavernous room. He drew a drum shape in the middle of the page, making the ticket kiosk the focal point of his picture. Vertical lines either side of it became Corinthian columns, holding up the vaulted ceiling, from which hung the stars and stripes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

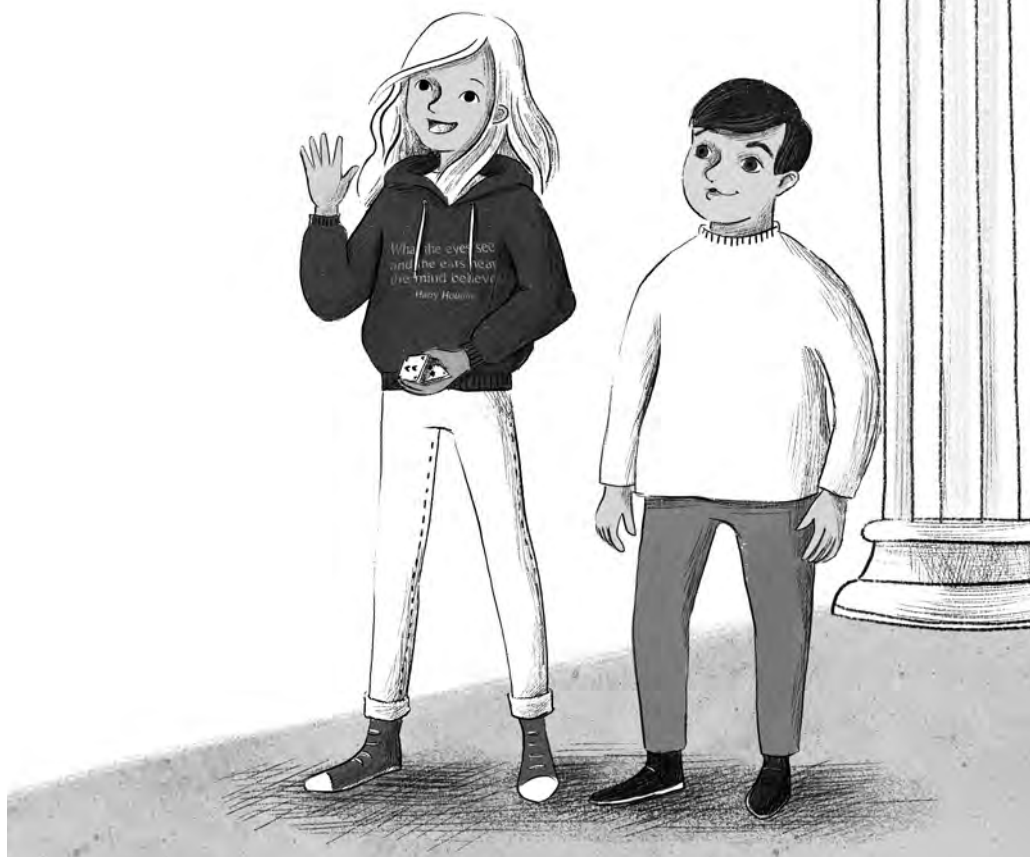
'You call fries *chips*, and chips *crisps*?' Mason shook his head. 'Wild.'

'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.