



CHAPTER ONE

A LETTER ARRIVES

Hal and Ben were the last boys to leave the changing room after football practice. The school team trained in all weathers and, though the relentless rain of the past few days had finally stopped that afternoon, the pitch had been waterlogged and muddy. The freezing March wind had whipped at their bare legs and turned their fingers to icicles. It was so cold that Hal's misty breath had hidden the ball from him. Frostbitten and bruised from a match of sliding tackles, the boys had not been keen to go back outside. They dawdled in the warmth, rehashing the match and teasing each other, until they realized they were alone and it was getting late.

'We should go,' Hal said. 'Mum'll worry if I'm not home soon.' He picked up his bag.

As they walked away from the school building, Ben grabbed Hal's arm to halt him. 'Who's that?' he whispered, pointing through the gloom at the dark silhouette of a man, just beyond the school gates, cloaked in fog, waiting.

Hal caught his breath. He immediately recognized the tall figure in the dark peacoat. He'd drawn countless pictures of him. 'Uncle Nat!' he cried, bursting into a sprint, running to the gates. 'What are you doing here?'

'I've come to see you.' Nathaniel Bradshaw opened his arms wide and hugged his nephew.

'You're Hal's uncle?' Ben studied him with interest. 'The travel-journalist one that takes him on the train adventures?'

'He is.' Hal smiled proudly. 'Uncle Nat, this is Ben. Remember, I told you about him.'

'Yes. You're the young man with a soft spot for Sierra Knight, the movie star.'

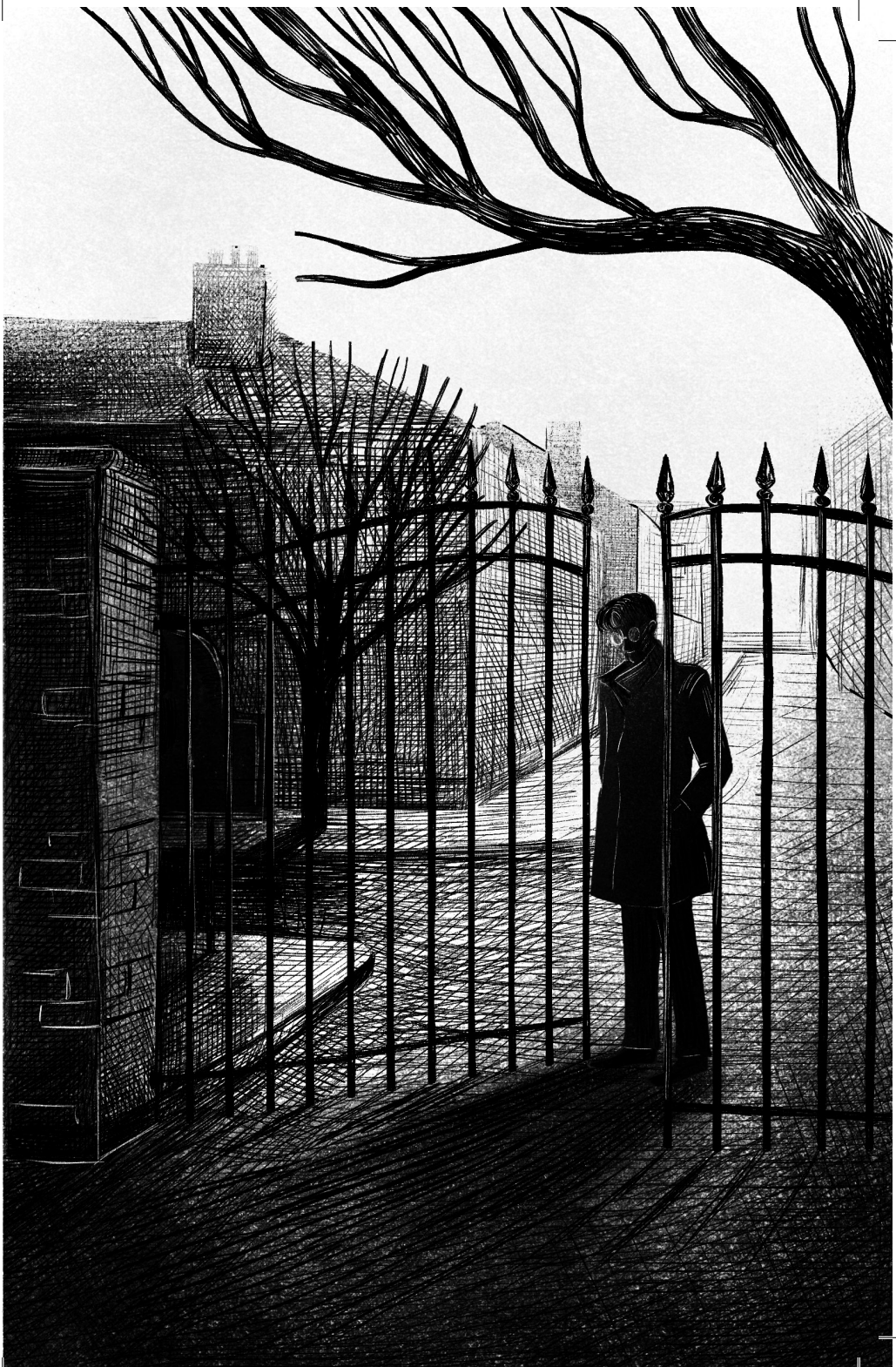
Simultaneously delighted Uncle Nat knew who he was but embarrassed by his crush on the actress, Ben's mouth opened but no words came out.

'I didn't think you were coming till Easter Sunday,' Hal said, curious to know why his uncle was here more than a week early.

'A letter arrived for us this morning,' Uncle Nat said lightly, his voice contradicting his sombre expression as he withdrew an envelope from his coat and handed it to Hal. 'An old friend needs our help.'

'Are you taking Hal away on another adventure, Mr Bradshaw?' Ben asked.

'That depends on what you call an adventure.'



Schloss Kratzenstein
Wernigerode
Saxony-Anhalt
Germany

Nathaniel Bradshaw
The Old Rectory
Lincolnshire
England

23 March

Lieber Nathaniel,

How are you? Well, I hope?

A strange and unsettling matter provokes me to write to you with an unusual request.

Not knowing whom I can trust, I am asking you and your nephew Harrison for help. The matter concerns my wife Alma's side of the family, the Kratzensteins, whose business in railway construction and locomotive manufacture has made them wealthy, powerful and controversial. Three days ago, Alexander Kratzenstein, my wife's cousin, died suddenly at their family home in the Harz mountains.

Growing talk of an old family curse has been stoked by inexplicable events surrounding Alexander's death. The doctor assures us his death was natural, a heart attack, but I have seen the expression on his face.

It was twisted with terror. I believe he died of fright. A ghostly figure has been seen on the mountain. And early this morning, Alma's uncle swears he saw a witch standing on Dead Man's Pass: the stretch of railway line beyond the house.

My little mouse, Alma, is scared for the lives of our children, Oliver and (your friend) Milo, as the curse is said to fall on the sons of Kratzensteins. I am not one to believe in old superstitions, but something sinister is happening here at Schloss Kratzenstein. After a thorough search, it seems that Alexander's will is missing.

As the funeral is to be held next Monday, I am hoping to persuade you and Harrison to attend disguised as distant relatives. I want you to do what you do best: investigate these strange occurrences and discover the truth behind them.

Naturally, you have questions. I enclose two tickets for the Eurostar from London St Pancras and invite you to have lunch with me in Paris, at Le Train Bleu in Gare de Lyon, tomorrow, when I will answer them. Bring an overnight bag for onward travel to Berlin, and speak of this to no one.

Mit herzlichen Grüßen,

Baron Wolfgang Essenbach

‘Tomorrow?’ Hal looked up.

‘Yes. We’ll have to catch the London train.’ Uncle Nat pulled up his sleeve and looked at one of the three wrist watches strapped to it. ‘In an hour and nine minutes, to be precise.’

‘It’s true,’ Ben whispered. ‘You do wear six watches.’

‘Bev told me today was the last day of school before the Easter holiday.’

‘Mum’s going to let me go with you?’ Hal was surprised. His mum had been very upset when she’d heard there’d been a murder on their last train journey.

‘She’s not happy, but I argued that we had nothing to do with the theft, the kidnapping or the murder on our previous journeys.’ He smiled ruefully. ‘Other people’s wrongdoings shouldn’t stop you from seeing the world.’

‘Did you show her the letter?’

Uncle Nat pushed his tortoiseshell glasses up his nose, glancing at Ben who was listening with wide eyes. He chose his words carefully as he replied, ‘I told her that the baron’s an old friend of ours who has invited us to go to Germany, and has a wonderful model railway that you’d love to see. Bev said as long as I get you back before Easter, and there were no murders on our trip, you could come. She’s packing your rucksack right now.’

‘She is?’ Hal felt an uncomfortable prickle in his chest. He didn’t like keeping things from his mum.

‘Hal,’ Uncle Nat said softly, ‘in all the years that I’ve known the baron, he’s never once asked for my help. I . . . I thought

you might want to come, at least to Paris. But if you'd rather not I would understand, and I'm sure the baron would too.'

Ben looked from Uncle Nat to Hal.

Hal stared down at the letter in his hands. A puzzling death. A curse. A missing will. Adopting a disguise. He could feel his heart beating. He handed back the letter. He'd made up his mind. 'Of course I want to come.'

'Has there been a crime?' Ben asked, so curious he looked like he might burst.

'No, not a crime. A mystery,' Uncle Nat replied.

'And we are going to solve it.' Hal looked at his uncle. 'Right?'

'Right,' Uncle Nat agreed.

'I wish I could come,' Ben said.

'You can be our man on the ground, Ben,' Uncle Nat said.

'Really? Great! What do I do?'

'Act like everything is normal and don't breathe a word of our conversation to anyone,' Uncle Nat said, gravely.

'I can do that. You can trust me.'

Hal laughed. 'I'll tell you everything when I get back,' he promised.

'You'd better.'

'We have to go.' Uncle Nat put a hand on Hal's shoulder. 'We've not got much time. We have to make that train. Let's go get your things and say goodbye to your mum.' He looked from Hal to Ben, and back at Hal. 'Remember, this is a trip to see an old friend's model railway, nothing more.'

'Got it,' Hal and Ben replied in unison.



CHAPTER TWO

WANDERLUST

When he got home, Hal had just enough time to change his clothes, hang his silver train whistle round his neck, grab his rucksack, hug his dog, Bailey, and kiss his mum and little sister goodbye before the taxi arrived. He and Uncle Nat hurried into Crewe station, through the barriers, over the footbridge and on to the platform for the London train.

‘Here’s your ticket.’ Uncle Nat thrust the orange card at Hal as a line of green-and-white carriages, stuffed with people, pulled up alongside them. ‘I was too late to reserve seats. Let’s hope we can find two together.’

The carriage doors beeped and opened, releasing a torrent of people who pushed past, barely glancing at them. Hal spotted a pair of empty seats and they dropped into them, putting their bags at their feet.

‘According to the timetable, we arrive in Euston just before 7.30 p.m.,’ Uncle Nat said, unbuttoning his coat. ‘It’s a short walk from there to King’s Cross. I’ve booked us a twin room in the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel, which is directly above