

CHAPTER ONE



THE TRAIN

It really wasn't Joe's fault.

Ma had told him to be helpful, so when the train pulled into a station, he grabbed the empty flask and asked a man in railway uniform how long the train would stop for, and was there a tap? And the railway man looked at the clock and said eleven minutes, and outside the ticket office. Joe couldn't see a tap where the man said, but he found a pump at the horse trough out the front. He filled the flask, had a quick drink, then he pumped some water for a poor spaniel panting with the heat and was back at the train with two whole minutes to spare.

Sal was hanging out the carriage door. "Hurry, Joe. Run!"

He waved to Francie, whose anxious face was pressed to the window.

Then Sal said, "Where's Ma?"

Joe looked around. "What do you mean?"

"You were taking so long," Sal said, "she went to look for you."

"But I never get lost."

“She thought you must have gone exploring.” Sal hovered with one foot on the step and one foot on the platform. “Where is she? Come on, Ma, it’s about to go.”

The train did a sudden jerk and steam swished up from around the wheels.

“It’s going to leave!” She jumped back in.

Joe scrambled in after her and dropped the flask into the picnic basket. In the distance, doors slammed. Still no Ma. “Maybe we should get off?”

“Yes!” Sal’s voice was panicky. “Let’s get off—quick.”

They’d been on the train since yesterday afternoon, and jackets, boots and socks, and bits of breakfast were strewn everywhere. Not to mention Humphrey, who was still fast asleep with his thumb in his mouth, and Carrot the parrot, perched on the luggage rack.

“Hurry, hurry, hurry!” Sal and Francie began to shove things into bags.

“Hurry, hurry,” said Carrot.

Then Joe remembered. “But what about all our stuff in the guard’s van?”

Too late. A whistle blew, someone slammed the door of their compartment, and the station started to move sedately past the window. Joe stuck his head out in case Ma was making a heroic leap for the last carriage, but she wasn’t.

Their mother was left behind.

“No!” Sal flapped her hands. “Do something. Stop the train!”

Joe jumped onto the seat. He could just reach the red emergency handle above the door.

“Stop, wait!” Sal pointed to the words WARNING and PENALTY next to the lever. “What if they say it’s *improper use? Fine: 20 sovereigns*. We haven’t got any money. We might end up in prison.”

She was right.

“What’re we going to do?” She slumped down in a crumpled heap in the corner. “I told her not to go.”

The train picked up speed, rushing them further and further from their mother.

Joe dropped into his seat next to Francie. “She’ll catch us up. She’ll get on the next train.”

“But that could be ages,” Sal wailed.

“Well, maybe she’ll borrow a bicycle or a horse or something. I don’t know. It’ll be fine.”

Francie was clutching her sketchbook to her chest. Joe always knew what his silent twin was feeling, and right now she was sending out waves of worry. He gave her a gentle shove.

“Really, Francie, she’ll get on the next train. We’ll be fine.” Francie shook her head and opened her sketchbook.

Even though they had tried to be quiet, Humphrey woke up, scarlet-cheeked and rumped. “The climbing train! Has it started?”

They had to tell him about Ma and he burst into a flood of snot and tears. Carrot flew down from the luggage rack and perched on his knee and pecked affectionately at his shirt buttons. Humph stroked Carrot’s soft orange wing feathers and gradually calmed down. Sal dug about in Ma’s holdall and found him a handkerchief.

“We’re having an adventure, Humph,” said Joe. “It’ll be exciting.”

“Citing?” Humphrey narrowed his eyes. “Citing? We’ll see about that.” Sometimes Humph seemed to go from being four to sixty-four at the speed of a shooting star.

When the guard came along the corridor Sal slid the door of their compartment open and asked him when the next train went to Grand Prospect.

He leaned in the doorway. “This is just a once-a-week service at the moment, miss. Should be going daily before winter, though.”

They sat like statues until the man had moved away, then they exploded together, *“A week!”*

Humphrey threw himself at Sal and wound his arms around her neck. “I want Maaaaaaa!”

Francie clutched her stomach. “Francie feels a bit sick,” said Joe.

“Me too,” said Sal. “I feel as if I’ve swallowed a mouse and it’s trying to scratch its way out of my tummy.”

“T-r-u-b-l,” said Carrot.

“But Ma probably won’t wait for another train. She’ll get a ride on a cart, or perhaps there’s a stage-coach.” Joe tried to sound as if he believed himself. “It can’t be much further to Grand Prospect.”

The train sped on and on. Francie hunched over her sketchbook and drew pictures of their old home. Humph sucked his thumb and sniffed sadly as tunnels and bridges, fields, farms and forests flashed past the window.

Joe tried to swallow the lump in his throat. “It’s too far, isn’t it?”

He couldn’t imagine what might happen next. None of them had ever spent so much as a night without their mother.

“What about the race?” said Sal quietly. “It’s our last chance.”

They were going to Grand Prospect for the Great Mapmakers’ Race, and their whole future depended on winning. Their mother was a brilliant mapmaker, but no one wanted to employ her without their father, who was an explorer and route-finder. When Pa hadn’t come back from his last expedition, Ma had taken a job cleaning a beer house, but the landlord said her scrubbing wasn’t up to scratch and sacked her. No job meant no money for rent, so at the beginning of summer the Santanders left their house and moved into their tent, which they all preferred anyway, but Ma said winter would be another story.

Joe earned a few coins helping the bee woman move her hives from the orchard to the water meadows, and they all worked for a few days thinning apples, but the money had soon run out. In desperation, Ma spent the last of their savings on the entry fee and supplies for the Great Race to find and map a route over the mountains from Grand Prospect to New Coalhaven. They wouldn’t be a family any more unless they could win a share of the prize money.

The guard walked along the corridor ringing a bell and shouting, “Secure your belongings, sit back in your seats. Ascending the Vertical in five minutes. Five minutes to the Vertical.”

Sal looked stricken. “I’d forgotten about the Vertical.”

They’d all been so excited about going on a climbing train, but now the only feeling they had room for was worry. Sal stood on

the seat and the others passed up their loose belongings to shove behind the net in the luggage rack, then the guard came through again and ordered them to sit tight. He released the latches that unlocked the rear-facing seats so Sal and Humph were tipped backwards and their legs shot up, like being in a dentist's chair. Humph waved his feet at Joe. The train shuddered and clanked. Humph looked worried.

"They'll be taking the engine off," said Sal.

"Where?" asked Humphrey. "Why?"

"They don't need it. The carriages caterpillar up while the engine turns around on the turntable. There'll be another engine waiting at the top. You'll see."

There was a tremendous jolt—and they were off.

Up and down the train people were yelling and screaming as the track got steeper. The Santander family were yelling, too, though they were more exhilarated than scared, and Carrot joined in for an excuse to screech. Francie and Joe, facing forward, could see how steeply the carriage was sloping up; Sal and Humph could mostly only see the ceiling and the sky.

"We're like a fly crawling up a wall," said Joe.

"The train only goes to sixty-seven degrees; walls are ninety." Sal was the sort of person who minded about the difference, but the others couldn't care less about the maths. They were in a climbing train, and for a few minutes the thrill of the Vertical blotted out everything else.

Looking down, Joe could see tiny roofs and treetops—and then suddenly the window was filled with another train, travelling in the opposite direction.

"Counter-balancing," said Sal, with satisfaction.

The people in the other train had their mouths open and looked petrified.

Then it was gone and there was just a glimpse of its guard's van vanishing into the distance far below. Too soon the track levelled out and the carriage went back to its regular angle and slowed to a stop.

"Again!" shouted Humph. "Let's go on it again."

"Poor Ma, she was so looking forward to the Vertical. It won't be nearly as much fun for her on her own," said Sal.

"And Pa," said Joe. "Pa would have loved it."

He tried not to think about Pa too much because he ended up with an ache in his middle, so he made himself think about something else.

"When does the race actually start?" he asked.

Sal unpinned the letter of confirmation from the lining of the picnic basket where Ma had put it for safekeeping. She read: "*All expeditions will depart at 10 am on Saturday the tenth ... Blah blah ... and thereafter ... forfeit entry to the race if not departed by midday. Saturday. Tomorrow. By midday. So that's it.*" She crossed her arms over her chest as if she were trying to hold herself together. "I'll have to be a housemaid. A life of servitude. I knew it."

That made Joe snort with laughter because Sal couldn't toast a piece of bread in front of the fire without burning it, and when she was doing the washing up she'd just let go of the plate she was drying if she had an interesting mathematical thought. Ma usually kept her away from the dishes.

“Well, I’m not going to be a servant,” said Joe. “I’ll be a nomad if I can’t be an explorer. And Francie will be an artist.”

Francie nodded. She never spoke, but Joe and Francie’s thoughts often got mixed together and Joe had spoken for both of them since they were very small. She drew instead of speaking, and she needed a pen or pencil in her hand like other people needed air in their lungs.

Sal bit her lip and stared at the telegraph wires swooping past, with a counting look on her face. Joe nudged her leg with his foot.

“You know what? We can still enter the race. If we set off with the other teams tomorrow, we can stop as soon as we’re outside Grand Prospect and wait for Ma to catch up.”

“What’ll we eat?”

“We’ve got sacks full of food. And it doesn’t all need cooking.”

“Raisins don’t,” said Humph, in a small voice.

“True. Nor does salt.” Sal’s chin wobbled and she looked as though she were going to burst into tears, but she started to laugh instead, and her crazy whooping set Joe and Francie and Humphrey off, too. For a minute, it was just like the old days before Pa disappeared—falling about and laughing together until their sides ached.

No parents, no money, no home—what else could they do?