

CHAPTER ONE

A Very Small Research Trip

Nora had plans for the extra day off. Unfortunately, so did everyone else.

‘Monday,’ her American friend Zoe said, holding the school gate open with one shoe. ‘We could go on Monday.’

‘You said your cousins were coming,’ Nora said.

‘They are. That’s why we should go somewhere,’ Zoe replied.

Behind her, someone called for the gate, and they moved out onto the pavement. Nora shifted her bag to the other shoulder and tugged her blazer straight. All afternoon she had imagined leaving school and finding the whole weekend waiting for her. Now she had left, she could think only of things that would use it up.

‘The river boats will be packed,’ Nora said.

‘Everything will be packed. You’ve given the whole country Monday off,’ Zoe said.

‘I didn’t arrange it,’ Nora replied.

‘Then who did?’ Zoe asked.

‘It’s a bank holiday,’ Nora explained.

Zoe looked back at the school. ‘Why do the banks get to decide when we stay home?’

Nora laughed. ‘It means a public holiday. Most people get a day off, and we don’t have school.’

‘You could have called it that,’ Zoe said.

‘You can suggest it. I’m sure they’ll change all the calendars,’ Nora replied.

They crossed towards the river steps with the rest of the departing crowd. A boy ahead of them was trying to carry a rolled painting without letting it touch anyone. Every time he turned to speak, three people ducked.

‘You could come over,’ Nora said. ‘If we’re home.’

‘Where else would you be?’ Zoe asked.

‘I don’t know yet,’ Nora said.

That was the difficulty. She wanted something to happen, but nothing she suggested seemed quite enough.

Zoe stopped at the steps. ‘Tell me before Sunday. And if your dad cooks, tell me earlier.’

‘You’re very interested in seeing me,’ Nora said.

‘I can be interested in two things,’ Zoe replied.

They parted laughing. Nora took the path along the river, passing a maintenance crew lowering trays of plants from a tower. One tray hung at the height of an upstairs window. A woman inside had stopped watering her own plants to watch.

Along the Thames, the last of the school crowd mixed with people coming out of offices. A river boat drew away from its landing, leaving the water rocking against the steps. Nora could smell something hot and sweet from a stall ahead, and she considered spending the small amount left from lunch before remembering that she had promised herself new pencils. At fourteen, she found that having money of her own chiefly meant choosing which thing she would regret not buying.





London in 2126 offered plenty of things to do with an extra day. The trouble was that Nora had recently been to ancient Rome. She could still remember the heat of a Roman street and the friend she had made there, and an ordinary outing now had to compete with memories she could not explain to Zoe. She missed being able to tell her best stories without first deciding which parts to leave out.

Nora slowed, imagining the drawing: the woman with the little jug, the enormous suspended garden outside. Then someone behind her said, 'Excuse me,' and she moved.

She could draw it another day.

At home, Nora changed out of her uniform before going down to the kitchen.

Dad had occupied the table.

His notes were spread between the fruit bowl and three cups. Nora recognised the blue folder he took to the university, but the loose pages were new. One had escaped beneath a chair.

Mum sat at the clear end of the table, holding her cup above a sheet that had reached her place.

Her name was Sara, and most weekdays she worked as a scientist for the government. At home she had spent years building a machine in the courtyard workshop, until one extraordinary test had made travelling into the past possible. Dad, whose name was Ali, taught history at a university. He had taken the discovery rather personally: there were now people he had spent half his working life reading about whom he might actually meet.

Nora set a fallen page back on the table. She and her parents were Bengali and Muslim, and until the machine worked, their family arguments had mostly concerned such things as homework, cooking and whose work was covering the place where dinner ought to go. The table, at least, had survived the change.

'Is this work,' Nora asked, 'or are we moving?'

Dad looked up. 'I've been thinking about the weekend.'

Mum caught Nora's eye.

'So have we,' Mum said.

Nora took off her bag. 'What's happened?'

'Nothing yet,' Mum said. 'Your dad has a suggestion.'

Dad cleared a place for her by moving two pages onto a third. The result was hardly large enough for a cup, but Nora sat down.

'How would you feel about Córdoba?' Dad asked.

She had expected a museum.

'In Spain?' Nora asked.

'Yes,' Dad said.

'Now?' Nora asked.

'Nine hundred and fifty-five,' Dad replied.

Nora put her bag down properly.

Dad smiled at her expression. 'Approximately. I thought we might give ourselves a little more time than a weekend this time.'

'We had more than a weekend in Rome,' Nora pointed out.

'More time to enjoy ourselves, then,' Dad said.

Mum raised her cup. 'That part needs discussing before we agree to anything.'

Nora leaned across the table. 'Can we?'

'The destination checks are looking good,' Mum said. 'I'm finishing them. But I would like to hear what we're agreeing to do when we get there.'

Dad drew a page towards him.

'I've reached a difficult part of the book,' Dad began.

This was the book he was writing, which had been near enough to finished for as long as Nora could remember. Recently it had begun acquiring new chapters.

'There are accounts of wealthy cities,' Dad went on. 'Visitors describe the buildings, the markets, the things a ruler can afford. Córdoba was the centre of a powerful state. Abd al-Rahman the Third was its ruler—the caliph. He had a palace city built nearby, at Madinat al-Zahra.'

Nora tried the name quietly.

‘You want to see the palace,’ Nora said.

‘Very much. But that isn’t quite the question,’ Dad replied.

Mum set her cup down on a corner he had cleared.

‘Tell her the question, Ali. You’ve been practising it on me all week,’ Mum said.

Dad accepted this without protest.

‘How do you know whether a rich capital means that the country around it is doing well?’ Dad asked.

Nora looked out through the kitchen window. Between their courtyard wall and the roofs beyond, she could see the top of a planted tower.

‘You go somewhere else?’ Nora suggested.

‘That would help. You could talk to people who grow food, or carry goods, or pay taxes. You could ask what has become easier for them, and what hasn’t,’ Dad said.

‘Then why do you want to see the caliph?’ Nora asked.

‘Because I’d like to know how he finds those things out. A ruler can’t go everywhere himself. He has officials who bring him reports. But what if the report leaves out the thing he most needs to know?’ Dad explained.

Nora considered that. ‘Like when school says everyone liked the new lunches.’

Mum’s mouth moved behind her cup.

‘Did everyone?’ Dad asked.

‘They asked whether we wanted more choice. We said yes. Then they counted that as liking the lunches,’ Nora said.

‘That,’ Dad said, ‘is exactly the sort of problem I mean.’

Nora sat back, pleased. She had understood his difficult chapter before he had finished explaining it.

‘So you want to go back and ask him,’ Nora said.

‘If we can find a way to be received, yes. I can’t promise that. We would need someone to introduce us, and a reason for him to spare the time,’ Dad replied.

Mum folded her arms.

‘You’ve spent months reading accounts and disagreeing with other historians. Now you’re going to ask the man himself. That feels like cheating,’ Mum said.

Dad laughed. ‘He might disagree with me too.’

‘And then?’ Mum asked. ‘Would meeting him make his version more reliable than everybody else’s?’

‘No,’ Dad replied. He looked down at the page before him. ‘Though I should have to remind myself of that. I’d be delighted simply to be in the room. It might take me a while to notice that he hadn’t answered what I asked.’

‘We could notice for you,’ Nora offered.

‘I hoped you might,’ Dad said. ‘You needn’t share all my interests to help me see what I’ve missed.’

Mum set down her cup. ‘That sounds more like a holiday I’d come on. But we do get to leave the room eventually.’

‘Certainly,’ Dad replied. ‘I should have something interesting to write.’

He turned the page. There was another page underneath it.

‘You said two questions,’ Nora said.

‘Two main questions,’ Dad said.

Mum drew the pile towards her and lifted one corner. ‘And several small questions living underneath them.’

Dad kept a finger on his place.

Nora could already imagine him at a palace door, explaining that he needed only a moment while Mum tried to pull him away.

‘How many days?’ Nora asked.

‘Nine there,’ Mum said. ‘Home on Monday evening. The return will be set before we leave.’

Nora’s weekend expanded so suddenly that she forgot the school gate, the river boats and the message she needed to send.



‘Nine whole days?’ Nora exclaimed.

‘You’ll live all nine of them. Including the walking, washing and looking for something you packed in the wrong bag,’ Mum said.

‘And we’ll still be back before school?’ Nora asked.

‘Monday evening,’ Mum repeated.

Dad began gathering the loose sheets.

‘There would be a great deal to see besides the palace. The city, the markets—’ Dad began.

‘And somewhere to sit down,’ Mum said.

‘Certainly,’ Dad said.

‘For longer than it takes you to ask someone a question,’ Mum added.

Nora laughed, but Mum was looking at Dad quite seriously.

‘I want to come, Ali. I would like a holiday with both of you. I’d also like to spend time with people who make things,’ Mum said.

‘What sort of things?’ Nora asked.

‘Pots, perhaps. Cloth. Whatever we find. I spend enough time getting results from instruments. I’d enjoy trying something where I have to learn what to do with my hands,’ Mum replied.

‘You made the time machine,’ Nora said.

‘And I still can’t make a bowl with an even rim,’ Mum replied.

Dad put his notes aside.

‘Then we’ll find a potter,’ Dad said. ‘You could spend a morning there while I make my enquiries. Nora could choose which of us to go with.’

Mum looked at him over the table. ‘I don’t want us to divide up every morning, Ali. I’d like you to come sometimes too. You might enjoy doing something you don’t have notes about.’

‘I enjoy your experiments.’

‘You enjoy asking when they will be finished.’

Dad laughed, then laid his notes face down. 'All right. I would like to come. We'll ask whether a potter has time to teach us, and I'll try not to arrange the rest of the day while we're there.'

Nora reached for an unused sheet.

'We need a plan,' Nora said.

Dad looked delighted. 'I have—'

'Our plan,' Nora insisted.

She wrote *Nine days* at the top.

'Some days together,' Nora said. 'Some time for your questions. Some for Mum. And I want to look round without stopping at every building because somebody important once stood beside it.'

'Some of the buildings are interesting in themselves,' Dad said.

'Then you can show us those,' Nora replied.

She wrote *Explore*.

There had been moments in Rome when Nora had wished an adult would tell her exactly what to do, and others when she had been thoroughly annoyed that one was telling her. This time she wanted to be useful sooner. She could carry her own things, remember a route and talk to people without waiting for Dad to begin every conversation. Nine days seemed enough time to become the sort of visitor who knew where she was going.

'What does that include?' Mum asked.

Nora thought about Rome: how quickly a place had become more interesting once there was someone to show her what people actually did there.

'Meeting people. Finding places we like. Trying food we haven't had before,' Nora said.

'That can go on my list too,' Dad said.

'You'll ask how they made it,' Nora said.

'I might,' Dad admitted.

'And then we'll be standing there until dinner,' Nora said.

He took the pencil from her and added *Eat it while it is hot*.

Mum laughed.

For a while they bent over the same sheet, adding and crossing out. Dad wanted to leave room for a visit they could not arrange in advance. Mum refused to call all the remaining time 'flexible', because she knew who would fill it. Nora wanted a day with no appointment at all.

They settled on shared plans, room for invitations, and asking each other before turning one person's interest into everyone's afternoon.

When they had finished, Dad put their single page on top of his pile.

'A very small research trip,' Dad said.

'With a holiday attached,' Mum told him.

Nora went upstairs to find her drawing things.

* * *

By Saturday morning, she had packed too much.

She discovered this when she put the strap over her shoulder and the bag pulled her sideways.

Mum watched from the bedroom doorway.

'Try walking to the stairs,' Mum said.

'I can walk,' Nora protested.

'Try enjoying it,' Mum replied.

Nora took out the large sketchbook.

That helped, although she resented it. There was a clean page in it she had been saving for a view worth the trouble.

She chose a smaller book of plain paper instead, with a soft cover that would fit inside the leather pouch. Two pencils slipped into the narrow space beside it. She added a piece of cloth to wrap them in, then took them out again and sharpened both.

Downstairs, Dad was attempting to fold his notes small enough for the bag he had chosen.

Mum had left the middle of the kitchen table clear for the water flasks and a first-aid pouch. The clothes they were taking lay over the backs of the chairs.

Nora lifted her teal tunic and held it against herself. It reached almost to the floor.

‘That’s going to make stairs interesting,’ Nora said.

‘Try it with the shoes before you decide,’ Mum said.

A few minutes later, Nora came back wearing it over the pale underlayer. She had tied the cord at her waist, but one sleeve was caught inside itself.

Mum freed it while Nora bent to settle the heel of a leather shoe.

The clothes changed the way she moved. She could not take the kitchen steps two at a time without thinking about the hem. On the other hand, the soft pouch rested comfortably at her hip, and she could reach the little drawing book without taking it off.

She practised once.

‘You’ll wear a hole in it before we leave,’ Dad said.

He was in the ochre tunic, with pale trousers beneath it. His square glasses made the unfamiliar clothes look unexpectedly like something he might wear to give a lecture.

Mum’s long plum dress brushed the chair as she turned. She had arranged her cream scarf close enough to stay clear of the bags.

Nora put the spare wraps beside the folded clothes for the smarter visit Dad hoped they would make.

‘These go underneath,’ Mum said, indicating one bundle. ‘Things we need on the journey stay at the top.’

‘Water on top too?’ Nora asked.

‘Where each of us can reach our own,’ Mum replied.

Nora took responsibility for the flasks. She filled them, checked the lids and put one with each person’s things. Dad tried to add another sheaf of notes while her back was turned.

‘That’s the water space,’ Nora told Dad.

‘I was seeing whether it fitted,’ Dad said.

‘It doesn’t,’ Nora replied.

He withdrew the pages.



Nora felt pleased with the arrangement. She knew how this worked now: the right clothes, the small bags, the ordinary things that mattered once there were no shops selling exactly what she had forgotten. Last time, every item had made the journey seem less possible. This time she wanted them to finish packing.

Mum checked the little earpiece behind her ear, then the speaking clasp fixed near her neckline.

‘Test?’ Mum asked.

Nora listened to the short recording. The translated words came clearly.

‘It’s working,’ Nora said.

‘And if someone hands you a notice?’ Mum asked.

‘I’ll need someone to read it. It translates what I hear,’ Nora replied.

Mum nodded and moved on to Dad.

Before she put away her wrist screen, Nora sent Zoe a message.

Away with Mum and Dad. Back Monday evening. Tuesday lunch?

The reply arrived while she was fastening the pouch.

Bring something good to tell me.

Nora smiled and tucked the screen out of sight.

Dad carried the first bag into the courtyard. Mum went after him, then came back for the sheet they had made together.

Nora expected her to fold it into Dad’s notes.

Instead she gave it to him.

‘Keep this one where you can find it,’ Mum said.

He looked at their additions and put it in the front of his bag.

In the workshop, the frame waited above the three familiar floor marks. The room smelled faintly of warm metal. Nora stood on hers while Mum checked the return setting.

Monday. Six in the evening.

Nora had learnt to separate the time on that display from the days they would actually live. They would leave London on Saturday, spend nine days in Córdoba and come home on Monday. They could not use another crossing to go back over time they had already lived; whatever they chose to do in those nine days would stay done. Mum had made them explain the arrangements back to her before she trusted them with the little return units.

‘Nine days,’ Nora said.

‘Nine,’ Mum agreed.

‘And if Dad thinks of a third main question?’ Nora asked.

‘He’ll have to bring it home,’ Mum replied.

Dad closed the courtyard door.

Mum asked Nora to show her the return control. Nora did, explaining the sequence without touching it. Dad checked his own unit. Then Mum put away the display and looked at them both.

‘Ready?’ Mum asked.

Nora adjusted the strap so it lay flat on her shoulder. Her drawing book pressed lightly against her hip.

‘Ready,’ Nora said.

The frame gave its low note.

She looked once at the workshop window, at the narrow strip of London sky above the courtyard wall. Then the window stretched sideways, and she tightened her hand around Mum’s.

The three of them left together.