



THE
GREAT
BRAIN
ROBBERY

To Théo, who loves stories.
I hope this one does the trick.



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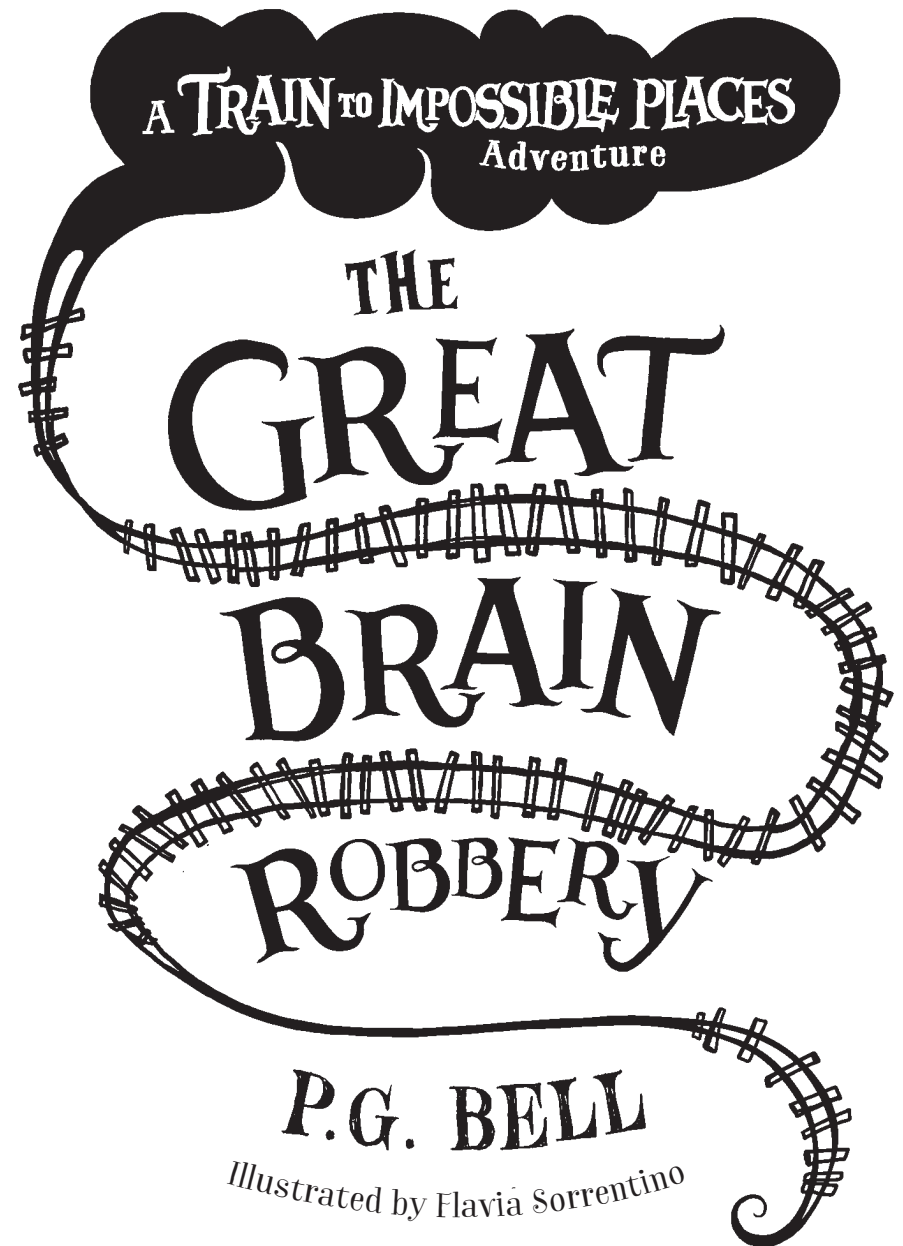
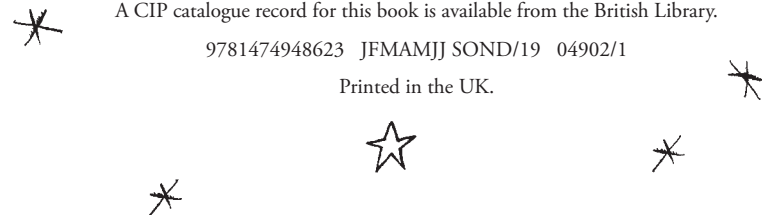
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COUNTDOWN

Suzy sat at the kitchen table, too nervous and excited to eat. Instead, she pushed her dinner around the plate with her fork and stole a glance at the clock for what felt like the hundredth time that evening. To her surprise, it was five to seven already. Only five minutes left.

“...which is why I’ve decided to send an email to the school,” said her mother, who was sitting beside her. She had a piece of broccoli on the end of her fork, and jabbed the air with it as she spoke. “I’ve never seen such behaviour. And from a teacher!”

“Hmmmph.” Suzy’s father nodded emphatically. He had a mouth full of chicken, and his plate was almost clean already.

"I mean, singling Suzy out like that," her mother continued. "It's no better than bullying. And I'm going to tell them so."

"Mum, please," groaned Suzy. "Just leave it."

"No, I will not leave it, Suzy," said her mother, turning the broccoli on her. "And neither should you. You have to stand up to people like that, or they'll walk all over you."

People like that in this case meant Mr Marchwood, the physics teacher at Suzy's school.

Physics was Suzy's passion, and she was never happier than when she was using it to unlock the possibilities of the world. But lately she had come to realize that the world was far stranger than she had ever dreamed of, and her schoolwork had taken a slightly more creative turn as a result. Mr Marchwood did not approve of this development and had called Suzy in for a "little chat". He had also summoned Suzy's mother, tired and impatient at the end of a long shift at the hospital. That was probably his first mistake, Suzy reflected.

"I don't understand what's happening to your work, Suzy," Mr Marchwood had said, propping his elbows on his desk. His office, squeezed into the corner of one of the school's laboratory storerooms, smelled of glue and formaldehyde, and Suzy did her best to breathe through her mouth. "It always used to be flawless, but this term it's been going completely off the rails. I'm extremely disappointed in you." He let these last words land heavily. Suzy gazed back at him, untroubled.

"But my calculations are all correct, sir," she said. "I double-checked them."

"It doesn't matter if they're correct or not," Mr Marchwood said, "if the concepts you're trying to calculate are all wrong. And by 'wrong', I mean 'impossible'."

Suzy's mother had looked between them, clearly lost. "Excuse me, Mr Marchwood, but I'm not sure what you mean."

"I mean you can't reliably measure the velocity of a moving car if you decide to change the direction of gravity halfway through the exercise," Mr Marchwood said. "Gravity doesn't work like that."

"But what if it did?" said Suzy.

"It doesn't. It can't." Mr Marchwood was starting to look a little red in the face. "Just like you can't cut the journey time to zero by freezing time itself. It's preposterous."

"But are my answers wrong?" Suzy asked, quite calmly.

Mr Marchwood was clearly about to dismiss the question, when Suzy's mother spoke up. "Well, Mr Marchwood? It's a fair question. Are they wrong or not?"

His face reddened a little more. "Maybe not," he said. Then, almost spitting the words, "As a matter of fact, no, the calculations themselves appear to be perfectly sound, but—"

"Then what's the problem?" said Suzy's mother. "If the answers aren't wrong, why are we here?"

"Because...because..." Mr Marchwood's face was darkening

from red to purple, and fat beads of sweat had sprung up on his forehead. “Because she isn’t solving the problems *properly*.”

“I am, sir,” said Suzy. “I’m just trying to find a better way to do it. Wouldn’t it be easier not to have gravity slowing your car down? Or to get where you’re going at the same time as you left?”

“No!” he spat. “I mean, yes, of course. But physics has laws! You can’t just go around breaking them!”

“I’m not really breaking them, sir,” said Suzy. “I’m just rearranging them a bit. It’s more fun.”

At that point, Mr Marchwood’s right eye had started twitching, and she and her mother had finally left, with the understanding that Suzy would keep the fun out of physics in future.

Suzy looked at the clock again. Three minutes to go.

She couldn’t really blame Mr Marchwood for getting angry – she knew it wasn’t very nice having one’s perfectly sensible view of the world overturned. After all, that was exactly what had happened to her two months ago, when she had woken in the night to find a troll building a railway through her house. The railway was a shortcut for the Impossible Postal Express – a high-speed mail train delivering packages throughout the Union of Impossible Places, a collection of fantastical realms that enjoyed only the most fleeting acquaintance with the laws of normality, as Suzy came to learn.

She had been positively offended by the train’s existence at first, but as she rode it from the frozen desert of the Crepusculan Wastes to the haunted depths of the Topaz Narrows and onward to the very heart of the moon, she had learned to adjust her expectations. The laws of physics weren’t *wrong* – far from it, they had helped her and the train’s crew escape disaster (not to mention an army of living statues) – but they weren’t the neat little answer to all life’s questions that she had once thought they were.

Which was why she couldn’t help wishing that Mr Marchwood would show just a little bit of imagination; she was sure they would both be a lot happier for it.

“I’ll send the headmistress an email as soon as we’ve finished dinner,” Suzy’s mother said, finally taking a bite of the broccoli. “Her teachers are out of control. She needs to enforce some order.”

“Please, Mum,” said Suzy. “You’ll just annoy her.”

Suzy’s father swallowed his last mouthful, pushed his plate aside, and started drumming his fingertips together. Suzy recognized the gesture – it meant he was going to try and calm Mum down. On a good day, he could do it without her even realizing it had happened. On a bad day, however, he only made things worse. Suzy braced herself.

“I think the most important thing to remember,” said her father, “is how Suzy feels about all this.” He turned his long,

pale face towards her. “Suzy? How do you feel about all this?”

“I’m fine, Dad. Really.”

Two minutes left!

He nodded, wanting to show that he was listening and understood. “And you’d tell us if anything at school was weighing on your mind?”

“You know I would,” she said, happy that she hadn’t had to lie. The thing that was weighing on her mind had nothing to do with school.

“Of course it’s on her mind,” said her mother. “Can’t you see how distracted she’s been lately? Look, she’s hardly eaten a thing.” She glared accusingly at Suzy’s plate, as if the food was somehow complicit in the situation. Suzy speared a bit of chicken with her fork and set about eating it, but her mind was on the time, and she hardly tasted anything.

Because today, after two months of waiting and hoping, she was going back to the Union of Impossible Places. And according to the gold-edged invitation she had hidden away in her bedroom, she was to be “ready for collection” at seven o’clock sharp. She had no idea who was going to collect her, or how they were going to do it, but she couldn’t wait to find out.

One minute!

She was so excited that her hands were shaking, and she set

her fork down again. Luckily, her mother was too distracted to notice.

“Physics has always been Suzy’s best subject,” she went on. “So why have her grades been slipping these past couple of months? None of her other subjects are affected. I refuse to believe it’s a coincidence.”

Her father continued to drum his fingertips together. “Maybe she’s looking for a creative outlet.” He turned back to Suzy. “Is that it, darling? Do you feel restricted at school?”

“Hmmm?” said Suzy, not really listening. “Yeah, sure. Probably.”

Thirty seconds...

“There you are, you see?” said her father. “I told you we shouldn’t have let her give up the violin.”

“The neighbours moved to Gdansk to get away from that violin,” her mother snapped. “And anyway, that was when she was six. She’s eleven now.”

Ten, nine, eight...

Suzy’s mother skewered another piece of broccoli. “No, Calum,” she said. “I know it might sound crazy, but there’s something funny going on. I can feel it.”

Suzy’s father opened his mouth to reply, but all that came out was a tremendous yawn. Without another word, he slumped forward onto the table, fast asleep. Suzy and her mother both gasped in shock, but while Suzy jumped to her feet, her mother

swayed in her chair. Her fork slipped from her hand, and Suzy just had time to pull her plate out of the way before she, too, toppled forward onto the table. Within seconds, both Suzy's parents were snoring loudly.

"Wow," said Suzy. "That was fast."

"D'you like it?" came a gruff voice from behind her. "We upgraded the sleepin' spells. Got a bit more kick to 'em now."

Suzy turned as a small brown knobby creature ambled into the kitchen from the hall. It had bat-like ears, an enormous nose, and was wearing grubby overalls. It stopped in front of Suzy and peered up at her. "Were you always this tall, or 'ave you grown?" it said.

Suzy burst into a huge grin and threw her arms around the creature. "Fletch!" she said, picking him up and squeezing him. "I missed you."

"Gerroff," he muttered, but made no move to dislodge her. She finally set him back on his feet. "Are all humans this touchy-feely?"

"Only when we're very pleased to see someone," she said.

"Bah!" Fletch exclaimed. "Makes me glad I'm a troll." He sniffed. "You ready?"

"Almost," she said. "I just need to get changed. I couldn't do it while Mum and Dad were awake. They would have asked too many questions."

"Hurry up then," said Fletch. "We can't afford to be late."

She took a few steps to the door, but a twinge of guilt made her hesitate.

"What you doin'?" said Fletch as she hurried back to the table.

"Just saying goodbye," said Suzy, bending to plant a quick kiss on first her mother's and then her father's forehead. "I know they'll be fine, but it doesn't really seem fair to leave them like this."

"Well, I'm not taking 'em with us," said Fletch, helping himself to a chicken drumstick from her mother's plate. "I'll wake 'em up as soon as we get back. Now get on with you. It's not every day we get invited to a royal reception. We don't want to keep His Majesty waitin'."

That was enough to put the smile back on Suzy's face, and she dashed out of the kitchen.



Her rucksack was packed and ready, and hidden under her bed. She pulled it out and hurriedly double-checked the contents. She had a water bottle, a notebook and pen, and a small first-aid kit. But, most importantly, she had a large book bound in dark-red leather.

Its cover was scarred and pitted, with several deep slashes running across it, but the title, embossed in gold, was

still legible: *The Knowledge: An Instructional Handbook for Impossible Postal Operatives*. She pulled it out and flipped it open to the handwritten dedication on the title page:

Dear Suzy,

No one ever became a Postie without a copy of *The Knowledge* in hand, so I've sent you mine. Take its words to heart and they won't let you down. It's also thick enough to use as a shield against angry Thrippian bowmen (in case you were wondering about the state of the cover). See you soon!

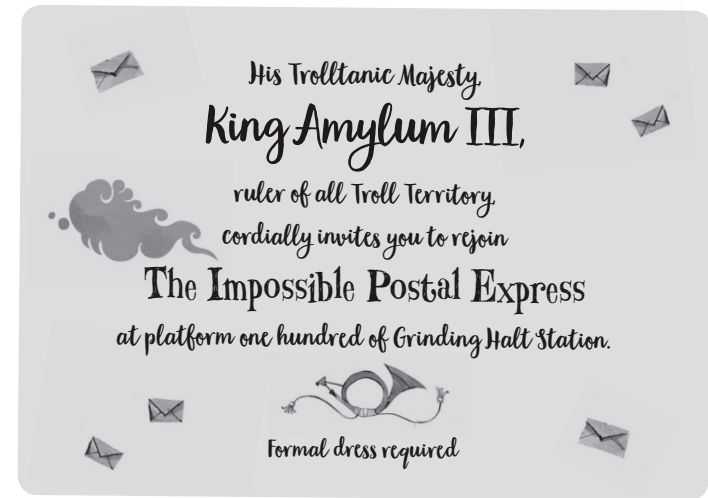
Sincerely,

Wilmot

As always, Suzy smiled at the words. Like Fletch, Wilmot was a troll. He was also her boss – the Postmaster of the Impossible Postal Express – and her best friend, and she had missed him more than anyone else these past two months. The book, like all her correspondence with the Impossible Places, had magically appeared on the doorstep one morning, probably via a remote spell of some sort. She knew it couldn't have been delivered by hand, as the Express was out of action. But all that was about to change...

She flipped through the book until she found her invitation, kept flat between the central pages. It was printed on thick,

cream-coloured paper, and in elaborate, looping handwriting it read:



She replaced both the invitation and the book in her bag and hurried to her wardrobe, throwing the doors wide.

It was stuffed full of winter coats, old sweaters and shoes, but she reached through them, feeling for the secret hanger she had suspended from a nail right at the back. She found it, and pulled out a uniform of smart red felt and glimmering gold brocade. She paused to pick a bit of fluff off the sleeve of its long coat and run her thumb over the lettering of the badge pinned to its lapel:

The Impossible Postal Express
 Deputy Postal Operative

She changed quickly and took a moment to soak up the feeling of finally being in her official postal uniform. It felt very good indeed – the uniform consisted of black trousers with gold piping down the seams, a white shirt with a red waistcoat, and a red greatcoat that fell to her knees. The coat had the same gold piping as the trousers, large circular gold buttons embossed with the Impossible Postal Service crest, and satisfyingly large pockets. There was also a red cap with a black peak and, last of all, black boots. After a moment's thought, she left the boots in the wardrobe and instead pulled on her trainers, which were bright red, and so at least matched the jacket. They were more comfortable than the boots, and on her last visit to the Impossible Places she had done a lot of running, mostly for her life, so she thought they might be a good idea.

It certainly beats pyjamas and slippers, she thought, looking in the mirror.

Suzy had barely laced up her shoes when there was a knock on the door, and Fletch let himself in without waiting to be asked.

“Ready to go and be a postie?” he said.

Suzy shouldered her rucksack and gave him an enormous grin. “Absolutely,” she said.



Suzy could feel the excitement running through her as she followed Fletch downstairs and along the hall...to the cupboard under the stairs.

“Here we go,” he said.

“What, in there?” she asked, surprised. The cupboard was small and crammed full of cleaning equipment and spiders. At least, it *had* been – because when Fletch opened the door, she saw a dark and cavernous space, as big as her school assembly hall. It was lit by a lamp standing on an old-fashioned pump cart – a simple rectangular platform on wheels, powered by a large see-saw handle mounted in the middle – which in turn stood on a pair of tracks that ran to the dark opening of a tunnel mouth ahead of them.

“I made a few adjustments,” said Fletch, starting towards the pump cart. “You know how it is.”

As an interdimensional engineer for the troll railways, it was Fletch's job to lay new tracks as they were needed. Sometimes that meant squeezing them, and the trains they carried, into spaces that were never designed to take them. In those cases, a little stretching of the local dimensions was called for.

This was all possible thanks to fuzzics, the strange collision of science and magic that lay at the heart of most troll technology.

“At least you didn't take over the whole hallway this time,” she said, climbing up onto the pump cart with him.

“Yeah, well,” he said, “I'm being discreet.” He released the

brake and the cart began rolling towards the tunnel mouth. "Next stop, Trollville," he said, giving her a wink.

Suzy trembled with excitement from her cap to her trainers. After two months, she was finally heading back to the Union of Impossible Places. The Express, and her friends, were waiting.



GRINDING HALT

Cold wind howled through the darkness of the tunnel, pulling at Suzy's hair and coaxing tears from her eyes.

It was hard work powering the pump cart. Suzy and Fletch stood at opposite ends of the small rectangular vehicle, facing each other over the see-saw-like handle mounted in the middle. Suzy was riding backwards, but kept looking over her shoulder to see where they were going.

"C'mon," Fletch called over the howl of the tunnel. "Put a bit of effort into it!"

"I am!" Suzy shouted back.

Whenever Fletch pulled down on his side of the pump, her side rose up, and she had to lift both feet off the floor and apply all her weight to force it back down again. It was tough going,