DELIVERY TO THE LOST CITY

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A TRAIN TO IMPOSSIBLE PLACES Adventure

DELIVERY TO THE LOST CITY

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USBORNE

For Anna, for everything

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1

THAT FRIDAY FEELING

It was Friday afternoon and school had just finished, but Suzy couldn't muster any excitement for the weekend that lay ahead. Instead, she was sandwiched between a dozen other pupils in the dilapidated bus shelter outside the school gates, watching the rain hammer down, and worrying.

The bus was late.

This wouldn't usually bother her, but today was different. Today was *important*, and she had to make sure she got home on time. So it should have been a relief to see her parents' car race into view around the corner, but Suzy just let out a groan.

"Oh no," she muttered. "Not this again."

The car accelerated towards the shelter, then screeched

to a stop at the last second, ejecting a wave of dirty water from the gutter. Suzy just had time to shield her face with her backpack before the wave broke, drenching everyone in the shelter. There was a collective cry of shock and dismay from her schoolmates.

The passenger-side window wound down, and Suzy peered through her dripping hair to see her mother at the wheel. She was a small, dark-skinned woman with a round face and red-tinted braids. She must have just finished her shift at the hospital, because she was still wearing her scrubs.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "Hurry up and get in."

Suzy's soaking clothes did nothing to dampen the hot prickle of embarrassment she felt as the other pupils turned, as one, to glare at her.

"Mum!" she hissed. "Look what you've done!"

Her mother looked confused. "I told you I was going to pick you up."

"And I told you not to," Suzy said, a moment before someone shoved her hard in the back, and she went reeling out into the rain. She turned to see who might have done it, but the group had already closed ranks and she was faced with a wall of carefully neutral expressions. She sighed, and turned back to her mum. "Fine," she said shortly. "Let's go."

She climbed into the passenger seat, wound the window back up, and tried not to feel the sting of all those eyes on her as they pulled away.

"I told you to take an umbrella this morning," said her mother as the school faded from view behind them. "Now look at you. You're soaked."

Suzy briefly considered responding to this, but settled for trying to make herself comfortable, despite her clinging cold uniform. "You and Dad can't keep doing this," she said. "You never used to drive me everywhere. I can take the bus like everyone else."

She watched doubt and worry chase each other across her mother's face for a moment, before she finally got them under control.

"I know," her mother said. "But we're your parents. We enjoy doing these little things to take care of you."

"Is that why you've started phoning the school every day to check up on me?" she asked.

Her mother's expression slipped a little, confirming Suzy's suspicion that she hadn't been meant to know about the phone calls.

"I think *every* day is a bit of an exaggeration."

"Every day for the past three weeks, and twice this morning," said Suzy. "The school secretary called me into his office to complain about it. He says he's going to block

your number if it carries on."

Her mother drummed her fingers on the steering wheel in annoyance as she negotiated the traffic. "I knew I should have gone straight to the headmistress."

"You just need to stop worrying about me," said Suzy. "I'm fine!"

"But we can't stop worrying about you, darling," her mother said. "You gave your father and me such a shock."

Suzy rolled her eyes. "I know, and I'm sorry. But that was three weeks ago. I thought you'd be over it by now."

"Over it?" Her mother gave a strange, humourless laugh. "We discover that you've been sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night with a bunch of ogres—"

"Trolls," Suzy corrected her.

"—to deliver mail to other planets—"

"Other *worlds*, Mum. They're called the Impossible Places."

"—filled with witches and dragons and heaven knows what else…"

"A lot of them are friendly."

"And that your *life* has been in danger!" her mother continued. "You were in a train crash! And an earthquake! That's not the sort of thing your father and I are going to just 'get over'."

Suzy folded her arms and sank down in the seat. "I'm starting to wish I'd never told you about it."

"Thank goodness you did," said her mother. "Otherwise we wouldn't be able to protect you at all."

"You weren't supposed to protect me," Suzy muttered. "You were supposed to understand." But buried deep within her resentment was a sickly twist of guilt. Her first adventure to the Impossible Places might have been largely accidental, but her second had been deliberate. She had chosen to leave her parents behind, under the influence of a sleeping spell, while she faced danger and excitement in some of the stranger corners of reality. It hadn't been fair on them. But that was exactly why she had decided to tell them the truth. She had expected a little shock and disbelief at first, but she hadn't expected them to panic. And then to keep panicking for three weeks solid.

They had confiscated her postal uniform, her delivery satchel, and her copy of *The Knowledge* – the encyclopaedic handbook for all Impossible Postal Operatives. And when an invitation to rejoin the crew on their delivery rounds had appeared last week via remote spell, her parents had refused to let Suzy reply. They hardly let her out of their sight any more, except to go to school. For the first time in her life, Suzy was grounded. She hated it.

Why couldn't she make them understand? Yes, the Impossible Places were bizarre and sometimes dangerous, but they were also wonderful. She had experienced things there that she wouldn't have been able to imagine just a few months ago. She had befriended ghosts, met a king, battled a giant robot, and saved an entire city from destruction. And she hadn't done any of it alone, because she was part of a crew now – the crew of the Impossible Postal Express, the fastest troll train in existence. She had saved their lives and they had saved hers, several times over. They were her friends, and she missed them. The possibility that she might never be allowed to rejoin them filled her with dread.

Which was why, the day before yesterday, she had proposed a plan she hoped would fix everything. With her parents' permission, she had returned the crew's invitation with one of her own: an invitation to dinner.

She still didn't think her parents were entirely persuaded by the idea, but she had successfully argued that they couldn't reasonably ban her from seeing friends they had never met. This was the perfect opportunity for them to get to know the crew and learn more about being a Postie. She was sure that, once they really understood what she had been trying to tell them, they would drop their objections. At the very least, they might finally learn

the difference between trolls and ogres.

But that meant that tonight had to go perfectly. It was her best, and possibly last, chance to change their minds. If she failed, she might never see the Impossible Places again.

Her father was waiting for them in the front doorway when they finally pulled up outside the house. He was tall and pale, with a long face and a mop of ginger curls. He was drying his hands on a dishcloth and had already changed into his best shirt.

"What took you so long?" he said as Suzy and her mother hurried out of the car. "They'll be here soon!"

"I know," said Suzy's mother, planting a distracted little kiss on his cheek as she brushed past him. "I just need to shower and get changed." She dropped her bag in the hall and pounded upstairs.

"Hello, sweetheart," said Suzy's father as she hopped in through the door. "How was school?"

"Fine, thanks," said Suzy, dumping her bag next to her mother's. "Is everything ready?" She didn't wait for an answer but raced down the hallway and into the kitchen.

The whole room sparkled – she had never seen it so clean, and all the usual detritus that cluttered up the

worktops was absent, replaced with a few small vases of flowers and a scattering of tea lights in jars. The kitchen table was covered with a white cloth that Suzy hadn't realized they even owned, and that in turn was almost lost beneath a small mountain of food. There was a bowl of baked potatoes, three types of cheese, sliced ham, roast beef, chicken wings, steamed peas, carrot sticks, bread rolls, vegetarian pizza, pasta salad, Caesar salad, burgers, sausage rolls and a large pot of her mum's octopus curry.

"Wow, Dad. This looks incredible."

"I should hope so," said her father. "I took the afternoon off work to get it all ready."

"Really?"

He smiled. "I'm treating it as a diplomatic summit," he said. "A first contact between two peoples."

"And a bear," said Suzy.

Her father nodded. "Hence the salmon, as per your instructions." He pointed to the huge baking tray in the centre of the table, from which the somewhat surprised-looking head of a whole roast salmon stared out of a tinfoil nest.

"Brilliant," said Suzy. Bears liked salmon. She had looked it up online.

Her father tousled her hair. "You're not the only one

taking this dinner seriously," he said. "In fact, I think it might be one of your better ideas."

"Thank you." Suzy leaned into him. "I'm sure they're going to love it. And you and Mum are going to love *them*, too. I promise." She pulled him into a soggy hug.

"Hey, mind the shirt," he said. "You'd better get dried and dressed. Your friends will be here soon."

"Right," she said. She let him go, but had only taken one step towards the door when the whole house began to shake.

"What's happening?" said her father, lunging to steady a pile of buttered bread rolls before they tipped onto the floor.

Suzy heard her mother shriek, and a moment later, she reeled into the kitchen, still soaking wet from the shower and fastening the cord of her fluffy pink dressing gown. "Is it an earthquake?"

Suzy grabbed the worktop for balance. "No," she said, a smile spreading across her face. "It's a train!"

There was a tortured screech of brakes, and then the fridge door was blasted wide open, hurling a carton of milk and half a dozen eggs across the room to decorate the opposite wall. A cloud of yellow steam billowed out from inside, filling the room and making the three of them choke.

"What was that?" Suzy's father's voice came from somewhere in the middle of the fog. "And why can I smell bananas?"

"It's the Express!" said Suzy, trying to dispel the steam with a wave of her hand. "They're here!"

2

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER

The clouds of yellow steam filling the kitchen began to dissipate, and Suzy was finally able to fight her way through them to the fridge. She steadied herself in the puddle of orange juice that was pooling in front of it, and looked inside.

She was only a little surprised to discover that the shelves and most of their contents had vanished, and the interior of the fridge had expanded to form a shining white space the size of an aircraft hangar. A set of train tracks ran from a dark tunnel mouth in the rear wall, almost up to the fridge door. And standing on the tracks was a huge old steam train. Not a normal steam train, though – its locomotive, the *Belle de Loin*, was oversized and misshapen, as though it had been put together out of