

JACK HEATH

**COUNTDOWN TO
DANGER**
CHOOSE YOUR OWN ENDING!



BULLET TRAIN DISASTER

Scholastic Canada Ltd.

Toronto New York London Auckland Sydney
Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong Buenos Aires

30:00

It doesn't look like any train you've ever seen.

It has the usual parts — sliding doors, plastic windows, massive, grinding wheels — but it's facing *up*. The mountain is so steep that the rails are almost vertical. How is that supposed to work? It's only one car long, but still. Can trains even go uphill?

Despite the strangeness, it seems familiar. As if you have taken a ride on it before. Unsettled, you glance at your watch. Wasn't the train supposed to depart an hour ago?

The other passengers seem as baffled as you feel. They all look as though they've just woken up and are surprised to find themselves here. Everyone except Pigeon.

"This is going to be awesome," Pigeon says, hopping from foot to foot on the platform. Her brown boots are too big for her and her woollen jacket is inside out, showing off the cool patterns in the lining. Her purple-streaked hair sticks out in tufts from under her tuque.

Her real name is Paige, but everyone calls her Pigeon because she's curious about *everything*. You've been friends with her forever. When you won the ticket — "You and a friend can be first to ride the new bullet train up



Mount Grave!” — it only took two seconds to decide who to invite.

“You reckon it’s safe?” you ask.

“Of course! They wouldn’t be letting people on if it wasn’t.”

You’re not so sure. The website looked very professional, with pictures of everything from the train conductor’s controls to the lookout on the mountaintop. But now that you’re here, you see that the staff bustling back and forth all wear running shoes. The security guards have bloodshot eyes and rumpled uniforms. The signs on the walls have spelling mistakes. And Mount Grave looks really, really high. Black clouds coil around the peak like smoke. The cliffs are leopard-spotted with snow. In the stunted trees halfway up, crows dart from one withered branch to another.

“The train has never had a single crash,” Pigeon adds.

“This is the first trip,” you say.

“You know what I mean. They’ve tested it.”

You’re not sure how she knows that, but you say nothing.

“All aboard!” the conductor yells, his black cap low over his eyes, a manic grin on his round face. He sounds like he’s been looking forward to saying those words.

A dark rumbling fills the air. The platform vibrates beneath your feet. Maybe it’s the engine of the train warming up. Maybe not.



Pigeon joins the queue of passengers. “Are you coming, or what?”

“I’m coming,” you say.

Go to the next page.



28:15

You line up behind Pigeon. Ahead of you, an old woman glares at the train and tightens a silk scarf over her drooping mouth. A lanky man in a broad-brimmed hat fiddles with a bulky video camera. A boy about your age is bundled up in ski gear and carrying a snowboard. Ice clogs the creases of his outfit, as though this is his second trip up the mountain today.

Pigeon seems more excited than any of the other passengers. When the train gets to the top, she plans to search for some super-rare — and super-deadly — giant ticks that supposedly live up there. She thinks she'll be famous if she can prove they exist.

A burly security guard glowers at you from a distance, one hand on his earpiece. You look around, but no one is behind you. It's definitely you the guard is looking at. Why? You haven't done anything.

You nudge Pigeon. "See that guy?"

"What guy?" she asks, too loudly.

"Shh. The security guard."

By the time Pigeon looks, the guard has already turned away. "What about him?"

"He was looking at us."

She grins. "What did you steal?"



“Nothing!”

“I’m kidding.” She elbows your ribs. “Relax. Soon you’ll be on top of the tallest mountain in the world. He won’t be able to see you from up there.”

You frown. “Isn’t Mount Everest taller?”

“Depends how you measure it. Everest is higher above sea level.”

“How do *you* measure it?”

She flashes a wicked grin. “By how long it takes to hit the ground if you fall off the top.”

Another guard — a beak-nosed woman with watery eyes — takes Pigeon’s ticket and says, “Thank you, Miss Nguyen. Your seat is by the window, five rows up on your left.”

Pigeon steps into the car and disappears around the corner.

You reach into your pocket for your ticket.

A hand grabs your arm. It’s the beefy security guard who was staring at you before.

“Are you Taylor?” he asks.

If you say, “Neil Taylor, that’s me,” go to the next page.

If you tell him, “No, I’m Shelley Black,” go to page 8.



26:50

“Neil Taylor, that’s me,” you say. “What can I do for you?”

The guard sighs. “No, I’m looking for Taylor Morton. Do you know him?”

You shake your head and glance at the rest of the queue. “What does he look like?”

“I’m not sure,” the guard admits.

He says something else, but you’re distracted. A man in a brown golf cap is skulking around the platform. Could he be a passenger? If so, why isn’t he getting on board?

The man sees you looking and walks briskly away.

“Who is this Taylor Morton?” you ask. “And why is there so much security?”

“Because of the bandits,” the guard says. “This train is made from valuable metals. In fact—” A nervous look crosses his face, as if he knows he’s said too much. “Just get on board, Mr. Taylor. You’re holding up the line.”

You shuffle up the stairs into the car. The inside is completely bizarre. The slope is so steep that there are stairs instead of an aisle. The seats have complicated harnesses, like you’d expect to see on a rocket ship. Passengers are throwing gear into overhead lockers,



where it won't bounce around while the train is moving. The whole car smells like bleach. You wonder if one of the test operators threw up and the floor needed to be cleaned. Climbing the stair-aisle feels the same as approaching the top of a waterslide.

You find Pigeon about halfway up the car, fiddling with her harness. "Stupid seatbelt," she mutters. "Why does it need so many buckles?"

"Because the train goes at three hundred kilometres per hour," you say.

She jumps. "Neil! Don't sneak up on me like that."

"It's true — I'm a ninja."

She glances at her watch. "Pretty slow, for a ninja. What took you so long?"

Turn to page 10.



26:50

“No,” you tell the guard. “I’m Shelley Black.”

“Oh.” He releases your arm. “Sorry, Miss Black. May I see your ticket?”

You hand it over. He inspects it.

“That person you were with . . .”

“She isn’t Taylor either,” you say. Clearly he’s looking for someone he’s never met.

The guard looks at the ticket checker. She confirms this with a nod.

“Who’s Taylor?” you ask the guard. “Why are you looking for her?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I just got a message: *Tell Taylor Morton not to get on the train.* But none of the female passengers are named Taylor.” He frowns. “Taylor is a girl’s name, right?”

“Not always,” you say.

He groans and gives your ticket back. “Never mind. Have a safe journey.”

He walks away, shaking his head.

“Why is there so much security?” you ask the ticket checker.

“Defence department restrictions,” she says.

You look around. You don’t see anyone who looks



military. “What does the defence department have to do with this train?”

“That’s classified.” The ticket checker waves you onto the train.

The inside of the car is surreal. The slope is so steep that there are stairs instead of an aisle. Lighting strips line the ceiling, like on an airplane. You can smell rocket fuel sizzling in the engine. Heating vents drone above the seats.

You’re winded by the time you’ve climbed the stairs up to your row, where Pigeon is fiddling with her five-point harness. “Stupid seatbelt,” she mutters. “Why does it need so many straps?”

“I think we’re about to find out,” you say.

She jumps. “Shelley! Where have you been?”

Go to the next page.



24:03

“That security guard I told you about,” you say. “He wanted to ask me a question.”

“What question?”

You’re about to respond when the conductor’s voice crackles over the PA. “We’re almost ready to get underway,” he says. “In tests, this train was able to accelerate to its full speed in thirty-six seconds, but we’ll take four minutes instead to minimize the risk of, uh . . .” He mumbles something.

“Did he just say ‘broken neck?’” Pigeon whispers.

“Or ‘smoking wreck’—” A roar drowns out the rest of your reply as the train lurches into motion. The force pushes you down into your chair. Other passengers scream. Now you know why they call it a bullet train — it feels as if the car has been fired from a gun. You’re hurtling up the mountain at a dangerous speed.

The platform vanishes from the windows. A dramatic skyline swooshes into view, littered with the spikes of other brutal mountains. It feels like your stomach has been crushed into a tiny ball.

You think you see something between the trees. A dark shape against the snow. A person — no. Too tall, too wide to be a person.



The figure is gone before you can get a better look.

“We’re going really fast!” Pigeon yells over the thundering wheels.

“I noticed,” you shout.

The train swerves left up a bend in the tracks. Some commotion up the front of the car catches your eye. The kid wearing ski clothes evidently wasn’t buckled in properly. The turn has knocked him out of his chair, and now he’s clinging to the seatback as the train goes faster and faster. His eyes are wide with terror. If he loses his grip, he’ll go flying through the car.

“Help!” he screams.

One of his hands slips off the chair. He’s going to fall.

The guy seated next to him grabs for the boy’s hand, but the angle isn’t right. He can’t quite reach with his seatbelt fastened, and he isn’t willing to release it.

You could catch the boy as he hurtles past but you’d have to unbuckle your own seatbelt to stretch out far enough. What do you do?

If you release your buckle to catch the falling boy, go to page 14.

If you stay belted in while you reach for him, go to page 17.

