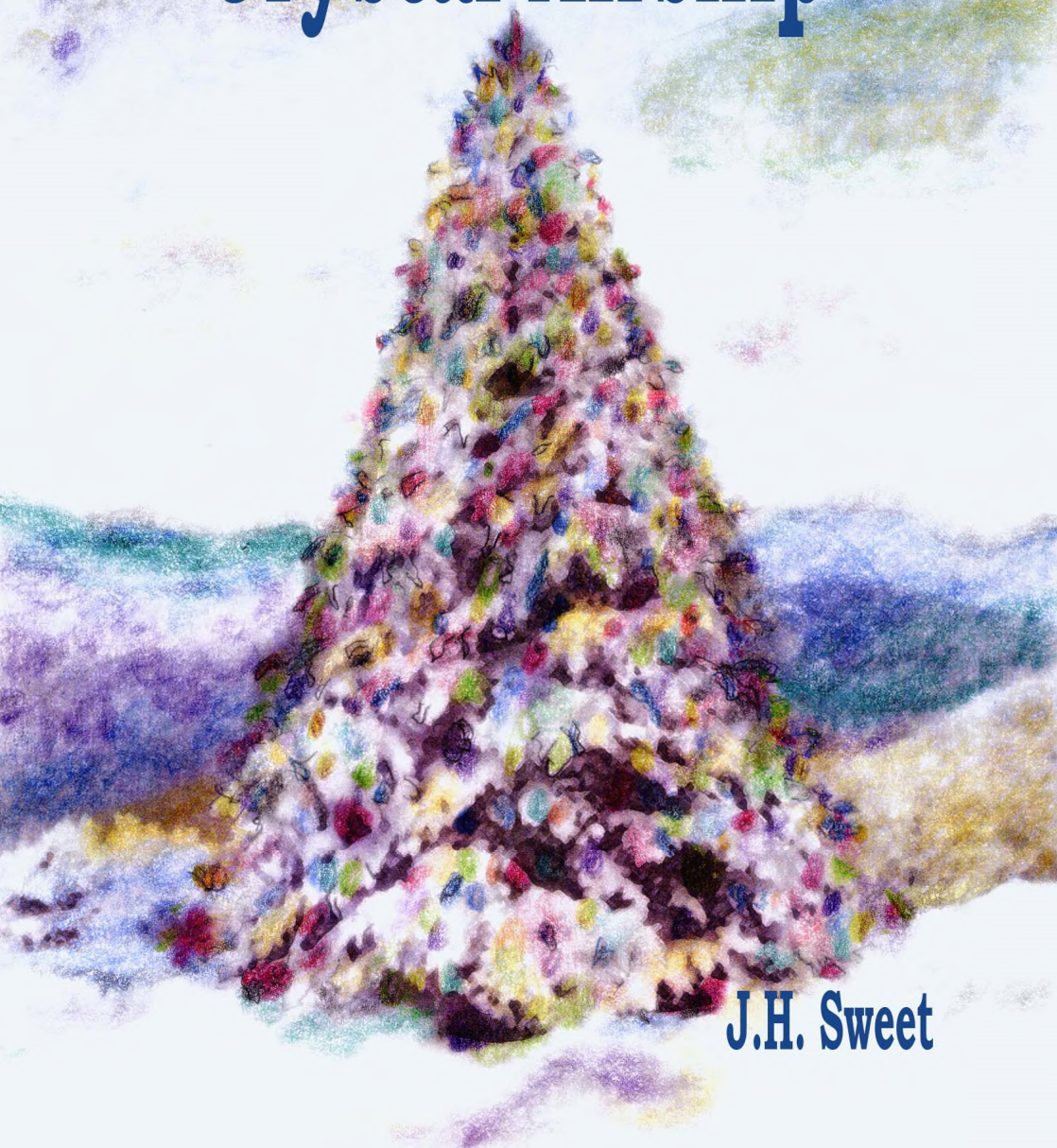


Juan Noel's

Crystal Airship



J.H. Sweet

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*To hopes and dreams come true,
the power of legends,
and the magic of Christmas*

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Chapter One

The Old Man of the Mountain

In the freshly fallen snow, two sets of footprints wound their way through the trees and around clumps of bushes. The brother and sister approached the cabin at the foot of the mountain rather slowly. Katie had always been a little afraid of the Old Man of the Mountain. But the children had promised their parents they would stop by today to see if the man was well. Mark held Katie's hand as they neared the house.

As usual, despite the coldness in the air, the Old Man was sitting in the rocker on his porch, looking like an overdressed grizzly bear. He smiled as he

watched the lanky, dark-haired boy lead his tiny sister up the snowy gravel path to his front door.

The Old Man of the Mountain was a rather mysterious character in these parts. Nobody knew his real name, not even the postman. Mail delivered to the cabin was simply addressed to, *Old Man of the Mountain*.

The man was bundled well on this frosty afternoon in a thick coat with a plaid flannel blanket wrapped about his shoulders. The children were less well-bundled. Though Mark's jacket was very large, being a hand-me-down from his father, the coat was worn and thin. But he did have a knitted orange muffler to help keep him warm. Katie's coat was too small, which was to be expected since she had worn it for nearly two years. Even though she was rather small herself, the sleeves had grown a good deal too short. She didn't have a muffler, but she did have an old beanie that was currently pulled down as far over her dark curls as possible to keep her ears warm. Katie also wore gloves, which warmed her fingers despite several holes.

The children were on their way home from cleaning a house. They had also filled a woodbin and shoveled snow during the afternoon. Mark and Katie had been performing chores such as these for

most of the month of December in order to earn money to buy Christmas presents for their parents.

The Old Man's warm voice rumbled deeply as they neared his porch. "Hello, there. What have you two been up to on this chilly afternoon?"

"We cleaned Mrs. Preston's house and garage," replied Mark, as he led Katie up the creaking steps to stand before the gentleman.

The Old Man was clutching something tightly in his left hand, but they couldn't quite see the object. "Did you do a good job with that old garage?" the man asked.

Mark smiled and nodded.

"And did she pay you?" asked the Old Man, his dark eyes twinkling merrily.

"Yes," answered Mark.

"We're on our way to the store to buy presents for our parents," said Katie, finally getting over some of her shyness around the Old Man. There was no mistaking the glow of excitement in her eyes. She was very happy they were going to be able to buy something nice for their parents for Christmas.

"Well, you best get a move on," the Old Man said. "It'll be dark soon, and I believe there's a storm rolling in."

“I think you’re right,” said Mark, glancing up at the gathering clouds.

“A little early in the season for a Tennessee snowstorm,” the man said. “But we can’t control the weather, and Christmas Eve is traditionally a time for snow. It’s also my favorite day of the year,” he added. “I’ve been waiting all year for Christmas Eve.”

“Not Christmas Day itself?” asked Katie, very puzzled.

“No,” the man answered, smiling. “Christmas Eve is definitely my favorite day.” As he said this, the Old Man shifted the small object he was holding from his left hand to his right; but they still couldn’t make out what it was. Then he fished in the left pocket of his coat and produced two candy bars as gifts for his visitors.

Katie smiled as she took the treat, and Mark thanked the Old Man.

“You best get going now,” the man said, “so you won’t freeze and so your parents won’t get worried.”

“They’re both working and won’t be home ‘til late,” said Mark.

“Still,” replied the Old Man, “it’s already starting to get dark. I’d take the shortcut if I were you,” he rumbled, “through the back of Marion Farm. That’ll

get you to the store quickest, and you'll need to be quick to beat the storm."

Slipping the candy bars into their pockets and waving goodbye to the Old Man, the two sped down the steps of the porch and were soon on their way.



Chapter Two

An Unexpected Rescue

As they raced along, the snow clouds blocked out the very last bit of sun left in the day, and it almost looked like nighttime. Past the frozen pond and through the blanketed beech grove, the two had almost made it to Farmer Marion's old hay barn when the storm hit.

In the driving wind and snow, Mark held Katie's hand so tightly, it actually hurt her. But he couldn't let go or loosen his grip. He was afraid to. He didn't want to lose her in the storm.

Making it to the barn, which was really only half a barn with less than half a roof because the structure hadn't been used or maintained for nearly

twenty years, they stopped for a rest and some slight protection from the snow and cold.

Huddled into the one corner of the barn that still had its roof, Katie began crying. But her red face and tears weren't from fear or cold. "It's gone!" she gasped. "The money I had in my pocket. It's gone! It must have fallen out in the snow."

Mark quickly felt in his jeans pocket. "Don't worry," he said. "I still have mine."

"But we won't be able to buy both of the things we wanted to," said Katie, her face still very red, tears still slipping down her cheeks.

"We can pick out something else for them," Mark said determinedly. "But we can't right now anyway, because we have to get home somehow."

Katie nodded. She knew this too. They couldn't stay in the barn during the storm because they would eventually freeze. They would have to find better shelter.

Home wasn't much farther than the trek all the way up to Mr. Marion's farmhouse would have been, so the children decided to try for home instead.

Pulling Katie's beanie down as tightly as possible, Mark again securely took her hand. As the two braced themselves and plunged out of the barn

into the driving snow, the storm quieted ever so slightly, as though attempting to make the swirling, icy world a somewhat safer place for them.

They hadn't even traveled twenty feet when a strange and brilliant transformation came upon the field in which they stood. From a source somewhere above, gold and purple lights suddenly flooded the entire area. Mark briefly thought they were being visited by an alien spaceship; but in looking up, he immediately recognized the source of the light.

"It's a dirigible!" he shouted, over the roar of the storm. "A big airship!"

They could see the ship clearly even through the billowing snow because it was so brightly lit, with glossy engines positioned on either side of the nose of the hanging gondola. The large traveling compartment was attached to the giant, colorfully-lit balloon above by thick, shiny silver cables.

A man visible in the open side door of the gondola lowered a rope ladder and called to them with a warm, rumbling voice. "Climb up out of the storm! Climb up! Come on now, so you don't freeze! It's plenty warm up here!"

The two wasted no time. Mark quickly hoisted his little sister up to the first rung of the ladder and helped her as she climbed.

The man who greeted them at the top was tall with very short, dark curly hair and a pencil-thin moustache. “I am Juan Noel,” he said with a little bow. “Welcome to the Crystal Airship!”

As they stepped inside, with Mr. Noel closing the door behind them, the two were speechless for some moments, taking it all in.

The traveling compartment of the airship had a glass ceiling, so they could clearly see the giant balloon bubble above them, which looked to be made of stained glass with intricate pictures formed of the colored glass panes. In just a quick glance upwards, they saw purple and blue stars of many shapes and sizes, a golden tree, a turtledove perched in a holly bush, poinsettias, silver and green roses, doves resting in the branches of an olive tree, and one huge gold star at the highest point of the balloon’s ceiling.

Though they were only just inside the door, they could also see a lot of the furniture in the traveling compartment. Some of it was plain, and some fancy. The collection looked to be of mixed-up styles that included a papasan chair, an oriental rug,

a hammock, several shag rugs, a Victorian settee, various armchairs, and a four-high bunkbed in one corner. There was even a foosball table between the bunkbed and an enormous fireplace.

After securing the door, Mr. Noel moved around to stand in front of them. Directly behind him, on a fat purple couch, sat two other children—a tall blond girl and a boy about Mark’s age with short dark hair. The girl waved to them and the boy smiled. There were other passengers in various parts of the traveling compartment, but the newcomers couldn’t quite make them out yet as far as details.

Mr. Noel wore a dark blue suit with small silver buttons. He didn’t have a collared shirt and tie. Instead, he wore a dark green pullover sweater that was very stylish looking. He also wore dark red shoes and a slim woolen muffler that matched his shoes.

“Are you the pilot of this airship?” asked Mark, finally able to speak.

“No,” answered Mr. Noel. “That honor belongs to Calhoun and his co-pilot, Mr. Maverick. But I am the manager,” he added with a brilliant smile. His smile seemed nearly as bright as the sparkling glass balloon of the Crystal Airship; and in that moment, Katie thought that if they happened to get caught in

a fog, they wouldn't even need Rudolph's nose to guide them because Mr. Noel's smile could pretty much light the way.

The manager's dark eyes twinkled at them, as he said, "Well now, I must ask if you would be willing to go on a journey to help us make a few Christmas Eve deliveries. I promise to have you home by midnight. It's just after six now," he added, consulting a platinum watch under the left sleeve of his suit jacket. "If you don't want to, I'll take you straight home; but I think you might enjoy the ride."

As Mr. Noel paused and looked at them expectantly, the blond girl urged, "Oh, please come with us."

Mark and Katie immediately agreed. Their dad's seasonal work and their mom's job at a local diner often kept their parents out late, so they wouldn't even be missed at home until around midnight.

At this point, Mark and Katie gave their names and shook Mr. Noel's hand, who then introduced them to Alicia and Nathan on the purple couch. The Crystal Airship had picked them up on the roof of their New York City apartment building. The children from New York didn't appear any more warmly dressed than the two from Tennessee. Under his thin jacket, Nathan wore a sweater that

was ragged at the bottom. Alicia didn't even have a coat and was wearing two sweatshirts over a t-shirt.

They didn't have time to get further acquainted because Mr. Noel announced, "To the cockpit, you four! Time to meet the pilots."

The children noticed that Juan Noel had some kind of lovely accent when he spoke. Many people in both Tennessee and New York had accents, but they couldn't recognize Mr. Noel's. They suspected he had traveled many places and had been amongst many peoples in his lifetime. Perhaps Mr. Noel had lived all over the world. It was also hard to tell how old he was, though he looked more around the age of a father, rather than a grandfather.

As they moved to the front of the airship, Mark and Katie were able to see the other passengers more closely.

A shabbily dressed, ultra-thin man was sitting in an armchair by the fire.

A bride, fully bedecked in bridal finery, was looking out of a window. She smiled at them, but only briefly, before turning her gaze once more to the window while lightly fingering her red and white rose bouquet.

Very near the bride, a rather large lady sat lounging on a huge, gold and green satin divan. She

was totally dressed in pink from head to toe, and looked much like a giant clump of bubble gum wrapped in cotton candy. The lady waved at them as they passed. Even her hair was pink. It was a little hard for Katie not to stare.

In the farthest corner of the airship, a teenage girl was sitting in a fat red chair. She glanced over at Katie and Mark, but looked away quickly as they made eye contact, at which point, Nathan whispered, “We tried to talk to her, but she just wants to be left alone.”

As they crowded into the warm cockpit, the children were exuberantly greeted by the pilots. Mr. Maverick was tall and lean, and Calhoun was squat and fat. Like many successful teams, they complemented one another perfectly since Mr. Maverick could reach the higher controls without over-stretching himself, and Calhoun didn’t have far to bend whenever either of them happened to drop something.

After the quick introductions, the group headed back to the traveling compartment to let the pilots do their work.

As Mr. Noel went to check on something in the rear cargo hold, the children sat together on a gold shag rug in front of the purple couch to talk.

“My grandma was sleeping and Nathan’s parents were working, so we went up to the roof,” said Alicia.

“We live next door to each other,” Nathan explained, adding, “It was starting to get dark, so we went to the roof to look for stars. It’s not always easy to see the stars in such a bright city.”

Since the nighttime sky above their part of Tennessee was nearly always filled with stars, Katie and Mark thought this was very strange.

“We saw plenty of stars on the way here though,” Alicia said happily.

Mark was about to say something when a glowing lump of coal in the fireplace suddenly danced across the grate and burst into song. The coal had a tenor’s voice. Both Mark and Katie stared at the fire, wide-eyed.

“He’s a magical coal,” said Nathan, with Alicia nodding. “And somewhat loud,” Nathan added quietly. Evidently, they had already become acquainted with the musically gifted lump of coal.

“He likes to sing Irish lullabies and love songs,” said Alicia.

“I would have thought he’d be singing Christmas carols, since this is such a Christmassy aircraft,” said Mark. “And because it’s Christmas Eve.”

Nathan shrugged and laughed, as he said, “I guess not.”



Chapter Three

Beginning the Deliveries

Mr. Noel shortly returned from his duties in the cargo compartment, and in a booming voice, loudly announced, “We’re off to make the deliveries!”

No sooner had he said this than the Crystal Airship began rocking and lurching, back and forth, as though in deep ocean waters. However, the craft was obviously sailing on air currents, instead of waves.

Alicia, suddenly very pale, grabbed a pillow from the couch and held it to her stomach. Mr. Noel quickly handed her a small mint. The candy must have been somewhat magical because the moment it touched her tongue, the motion sickness went away

and she got her color back. The ship stopped lurching in less than a minute, and they air-sailed more smoothly from that point forth.

As they traveled, Mr. Noel sat near the fire in a comfortable armchair upholstered in soft, harvest gold velvet. He read a small book of poetry, as the children ran around the airship looking out the windows at the clouds and scattered clumps of lights from cities far below.

Less than ten minutes later, Mr. Noel rose and announced, “We’re almost there, our first destination—an uncharted island just North of the Galapagos.

“But how could we have gotten all the way to the Galapagos this quickly?” Mark asked.

“This is a magical airship, Mark,” Katie answered, looking at her brother as though she couldn’t believe he had missed something so obvious.

“Oh, of course,” Mark said, smiling.

“And this is our delivery,” said Mr. Noel, removing a tiny bell from a small blue box he had retrieved from a bookshelf.

“This bell rings in Christmas cheer and prosperity for the New Year,” said Mr. Noel softly.

Holding the thin wooden handle of the bell between two fingers, like a pinch, and with his pinky extended, Juan Noel rang the tiny golden bell. Immediately, as the lump of coal stopped singing, the ring of the bell filled the Crystal Airship, sounding much like scores of songbirds twittering a chorus of *Ave Maria* mixed with *Auld Lang Syne*.

The airship sank very low over a glowing green island, and Mr. Noel descended the rope ladder, quickly delivering the bell in the blue box to a man in a tiny cottage.

When he returned, the Crystal Airship again rose and moved on, passing low over a neighboring red island that was completely covered by a sea of glowing poinsettias. The red island stood out brilliantly against the dark of the ocean waters like a fabulous jewel.

As the ship gained altitude, Mr. Noel, standing by one of the windows, smiled and said, “We’re on a pretty tight schedule, but I’m afraid I can’t resist.” He was pointing out the window at an illuminated, colorful cloud in the distance.

The Crystal Airship sailed into the cloud and docked at a small platform next to what looked like a fancy rollercoaster floating in mid-air. The skycoaster was not constructed of clanking metal

like most rollercoasters, but looked to be made of giant colorful ribbons and strong rubber bands. And the seats in the cars were very soft, like puffy pillows and chair cushions.

Pulling Katie to his side and sizing her up next to his elbow, Mr. Noel frowned and said, “Let’s see, you’re not quite tall enough.” Katie was only briefly disappointed because Mr. Noel added, “So I guess you’ll just have to ride in the extra-padded car with me.” At that moment, Katie’s smile was nearly as big and bright as Juan Noel’s.

Bustling out of the cockpit, with Mr. Maverick in tow, the jolly Calhoun announced excitedly, “She’s parked!” Evidently, the pilots were going for a coaster ride too.

Nathan, Alicia, and Mark rode in the first car together. Mr. Noel and Katie occupied the second, extra-padded one. And the pilots squeezed into the third. None of the other passengers wanted to ride. Actually, the bride wanted to; but she couldn’t because didn’t want to wrinkle or otherwise muss her wedding dress.

The skycoaster ride was very smooth, and though it was exhilarating, with breathtaking speeds and turns, the scrolling trip through the clouds was not at all windy. The journey made them feel as though

they were sliding on silky, curly ribbons that were floating and dancing in the warm heavens.

After numerous loop de loops, spirals, dips, and swerves, they came to stop again at the platform. The children quickly decided that this was the best ride they had ever been on, and they hadn't even had to wait in line.

While preparing to reboard the Crystal Airship, Mark and Katie got a better view of the enormous craft than when they had first seen it. The balloon was sparkling brightly, as though made of jewels, with the gold star on the top glinting spectacularly in the moonlight and starlight.

As they reboarded, Mark caught a glimpse of a small, engraved brass plaque mounted next to the door. The words of the engraving read,

Crystal Airship
a.k.a. Polaris
a.k.a. North Star

This was very puzzling. But their Christmas Eve journey so far was really too exciting to worry long over small puzzles.



Chapter Four

A Giant, an Ornament, a Gingersnap, and a Wedding

Upon shuttling everyone inside, Calhoun and Mr. Maverick swiftly returned to the cockpit to continue to pilot their journey.

Katie's cheeks were very flushed as she plopped down next to Alicia on the purple couch.

After what seemed like less five minutes later, Mr. Noel, rubbing his hands together briskly, stated, "We're just coming up on the Rocky Mountains."

Scuttling to the windows, the children watched as the Crystal Airship wound its way through beautiful, snowy mountain peaks that looked like pointy cakes, decorated with fluffy frosting. Tucked into a deep

valley of the mountain, a tiny pocket of lights from a small town glowed softly in the darkness.

As the airship dropped down to a point just above the valley floor, Mr. Noel opened the door of the cargo compartment and disappeared inside. Looking inside, to the very back of the hold, the children saw Mr. Noel make his way around an enormous silver Christmas ornament to the rear door, which he opened.

The size of the ornament was surprising enough; however, the children were even more surprised to see a giant swiftly approaching the rear of the ship.

“You’re just in time!” shouted the giant, his voice shaking the glass of the airship. He grabbed the giant silver ornament from the cargo hold and bounded across the base of the mountain, wedging the ornament between two of the lower mountain peaks to stop the snow of a cascading avalanche. The force of the snow crushed the ornament somewhat; but the barrier completely stopped the slide, preventing the avalanche from reaching the houses and other buildings in the valley below.

Mr. Noel was very pleased to have delivered the ornament just in the nick of time.

The giant shook snow from his blond curls as he again approached the airship to stop with his

shoulders just next to the door where Mr. Noel was standing.

For some reason, Mr. Noel didn't particularly look small next to the giant.

"I'm sorry about your ornament," Mr. Noel said.

"That's okay," the giant replied. "Just put in an order for another one for next year, please."

"Will do," said Mr. Noel, pulling a small notebook from his pocket and making the note.

"One more thing..." the giant added, fishing very gently in his pocket. He withdrew a small puppy that looked like a very shaggy version of an apricot poodle. As the giant handed the tiny ball of fur to Mr. Noel, he said, "Read the tag on the collar. She's a long way from home."

Mr. Noel did so, and looks of both confusion and surprise came over his face. "Now how did you end up all the way up here, Gingersnap?" he mused.

"Would you mind taking her home?" the giant asked.

"Not at all," answered Mr. Noel, carefully cradling the puppy as he said goodbye to the giant and closed the rear cargo hold door.

As they were leaving, the children waved to the giant from the airship windows. He smiled and waved in return.

They took turns petting Gingersnap, who got over her shyness right away. After allowing each of the children to pet her, she headed straight for a dish of water the thin man was setting out for her. After taking a long drink, she jumped into the shabby man's lap in the armchair by the fire and curled up for a nap.

"That was nice of the giant to use his ornament to help the people of the village," remarked Nathan, who was sitting on the purple couch beside Mr. Noel.

Mr. Noel agreed. "He is very nice, and helpful, and kind. He is not a selfish giant at all." With a soft smile, Mr. Noel squeezed Nathan's shoulder as he rose from the couch and moved to one of the windows to talk to the bride.

On the way to their next destination, the Crystal Airship voyagers ladled hot apple cider out of a punchbowl with a little dipper, and enjoyed a platter of white chocolate peppermint cookies, both delivered by Mr. Maverick from the cockpit. Funny, they hadn't noticed a kitchen in the small control room.

Alicia brought the pink lady, who was reading a pink magazine, a cup of cider; and the pink lady

gave Alicia a box of creamy pink bonbons to pass around to everyone.

The ship was quieter than before because the singing coal was currently sleeping.

While munching cookies, Nathan and Katie looked out the windows at the clouds and stars. Katie was perched on her knees on a chair to be able to see out better.

Mr. Noel soon left the traveling compartment to visit with the pilots, at which point, Alicia told Mark, “I think Mr. Noel is about as tall as my father was. But I don’t really remember him. It’s just me and my grandma. But she’s not home much.”

Mark responded, “Our parents aren’t home much either lately. They both work a lot trying to keep up with the bills.”

“Nathan’s parents are gone a lot too,” said Alicia quietly. “When they aren’t working, they are at the hospital visiting his little brother. His brother is really sick, and his parents work extra jobs to try to pay the medical bills. That’s why Nathan has dinner with us, usually on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I make dinner sometimes. My grandma sleeps a lot when she’s home because she is tired from working and commuting. Her job is pretty far from our apartment building.”

On the other side of the gondola, Nathan and Katie were talking too.

“Wow!” said Katie, after Nathan told her when airships were first invented, and about the terrible accident of the Hindenburg.

“The balloon of the airship is filled with a kind of gas called helium to keep us afloat,” said Nathan. Katie was happy to learn as much as she could about airships, having not even known they existed until this very night.

The two window gazers soon rejoined their friends on the purple couch, at which point, the bride finally decided to sit down for a few moments and came to join them. She ate a pink bonbon and let Katie hold her bouquet.

“Do you want to know a secret about the man by the fire?” the bride asked in a whisper, her eyes sparkling mischievously. “He’s a philanthropist. That means he’s rich, but he likes to give away his money to help other people.”

The bride next told them, “I get off at the next stop. But if the Crystal Airship hadn’t picked me up, I would have missed my own wedding because ice storms wouldn’t let any planes fly. My whole family is celebrating Christmas this year at our

wedding ceremony. They are going to stay for the week after Christmas too.”

“We celebrate both Christmas and Kwanzaa at our house,” said Nathan. “My aunt, uncle, and cousins are all coming this year after Christmas to celebrate with us.”

“Argentina!” boomed Mr. Noel, coming out of the control room and startling everyone. Then he grabbed the hand of the pink lady, and the two of them danced a short tango, while lovely music of the Argentine wafted down from the ceiling of the airship.

After the dance, the bride, all of a sudden extremely nervous, gave each of the children a tiny white rosebud from her bouquet. She then presented Mr. Noel with a red one for his buttonhole. As the pilots came out of the nose of the gondola to say goodbye and wish her well, the bride gave Calhoun and Mr. Maverick kisses upon their cheeks. Calhoun blushed deep red upon receiving his kiss, before bustling back to the cockpit to navigate.

As the airship pulled up to a large, brightly lit gazebo on a hill, the bride hugged the children goodbye. Mr. Noel then carefully helped her step from the airship to the gazebo, handing her off to her fiancé.

The Crystal Airship then moved away, but only a short distance so the passengers could watch the wedding. Mr. Maverick propped open one of the large windows so they could have a better view.

As they watched, Juan Noel told the children why this particular wedding was extremely important. “That is a magic gazebo, and it produces love for the whole world if a marriage takes place on Christmas Eve.” The children were happy to hear this and were thrilled to witness the ceremony.

“It’s good luck to see a bride on her wedding day,” said Mr. Maverick, wistfully. “We should all have very good luck because of this.”

As the wedding quickly wrapped up, and the bride and groom were kissing, the airship passengers threw birdseed, which was a good idea this time of year because the birds had a little less to eat.

With a sniffle, Mr. Maverick returned to his duties, and the Crystal Airship soon departed to continue her journey.

Next, stepping out onto a small, railed balcony, Mr. Noel, Katie, Mark, Nathan, and Alicia all flew glittering ice-kites. The magical kites were light as paper and didn’t melt at all, even though the air around Argentina was warmer than it had been in the Colorado Rockies.

Gingersnap was making a bit of a fuss at not being allowed out onto the platform, but it just wasn't safe for her to be on a balcony this high up because she could have easily slipped through the rails, particularly because she was such a squirmy little thing.

Coming back inside with rosy cheeks, the group next enjoyed grape snowcones from an ice-shaving machine that had somehow appeared next to the foosball table. The cones turned their tongues bright purple, and Mr. Noel's tongue was the purpliest of them all.

The girl in the red chair still didn't seem to want to talk to anyone. She was currently curled up in an afghan with a plate of cookies and a glass of milk that had been brought to her by the philanthropist who was now holding Gingersnap in his lap again.

When the snowcones were completely consumed, Mr. Noel announced, "Now nobody has to brush their teeth tonight, but you can if you want to." He led the way to a long sink with five faucets conveniently tucked into a niche by the cargo hold door. Above the sink was a row of what looked like about a hundred new toothbrushes.

Mr. Noel made funny faces at them while he brushed his teeth. Though not as magical as flying

ice-kites, this was quite a fun activity, brushing vigorously with minty yellow paste that became bright green and frothy, but somehow managed to turn their purple tongues back to pink again. After the teeth-brushing, they all tucked their toothbrushes into their pockets to take home, while pausing to admire each other's brilliant smiles.

As they moved away from the sink, the pink lady made her way to the niche to brush her teeth as well.

Returning to the shaggy rug in front of the purple couch, the children noticed that the philanthropist was napping again, which was somewhat hard to believe because the musical coal, currently in the height of his musicality, was singing very loudly



Chapter Five

Santa's Helpers

The Crystal Airship was just nearing its next destination when Nathan noticed something very odd outside one of the larger windows of the gondola. The children all rushed to have a closer look at a pale, bluish-green ghost floating by. But he seemed more to be skiing because he was wearing cross-country skis to help him glide over the clouds as though they were snow mounds. As they waved to him, the ghost fluttered a wispy hand back at them.

“Canada!” announced Juan Noel from the other side of the traveling compartment. “Saskatchewan, to be exact,” he added.

As he made his way to the door of the cargo hold, Mr. Noel said, “We are going to deliver a few presents to help Santa.” He then pulled an enormous bag, and two slightly smaller ones, from the cargo hold, while telling them, “It’s a little hard to describe, and nearly impossible to understand, but Santa Claus follows a crazy kind of flying pattern that is something like a string art picture—or maybe a *Spirograph* drawing—because that’s how the reindeer like to fly, zipping back and forth, instead of some kind of normal, more efficient pattern. But for some reason, three streets of this small town always seem to get passed over. It’s just not on that crazy grid they follow,” Mr. Noel added. “Before, Santa always had to make a separate trip here after his main run; so I like to help him out.”

Just before the airship dropped down into the town square, the passengers saw several shooting stars to make wishes upon.

Again, Gingersnap was a little too excitable to be going outside the airship with them. They were afraid she might run off and get lost in the vastness of Canada. So Mr. Maverick took her to the cockpit to keep her safe.

Mr. Noel nimbly climbed down the rope ladder carrying the largest bag of presents. Mark and

Nathan followed with the two, slightly smaller sacks. And Alicia helped Katie to climb down last. A large bicycle and two tandem bicycles awaited them in the tree-filled town square. With the present-filled sack slung over his shoulder, Mr. Noel mounted the large bicycle. Nathan and Mark climbed onto the rear seats of the bicycles-built-for-two with their bags of gifts. Katie and Alicia took the front seats of the tandems. *And they were off!*

Traveling quiet streets, the team of Santa's helpers made deliveries to Joy Avenue, Peppermint Boulevard, and Peace Lane. They placed the sacks of gifts on three specific front porches lit with blue lights shaped like ice cream cones.

As they deposited the final sack, Mr. Noel stated with satisfaction, "There! We've done our part. Now, other helpers will get these presents properly distributed."

On the bicycle trip back to the town square, they came upon a small bear, with a rather long tail, munching on crunchy winterberries. He was a mighty bear in his heart, even though some might have considered him a lesser bear because of his small size.

Juan Noel stopped to pet the bear, and he bid the children to do so as well, if they wanted to. Of

course they all wanted to. They scratched his soft nose, petted his large ears, and buried their hands into his shaggy warm fur. However, Mr. Noel warned them, “Now this is okay right now because it’s Christmas Eve and because you are with me. But promise me you won’t ever try to pet a bear any other time. Bears are best left alone.”

They all promised. However, Alicia and Nathan, who spent all of their time in a big city, were wondering when they were ever going to come across another bear, to be able to keep their promises. A minute later, the bear, having had enough petting and scratching for now, lumbered off through the trees.

When they had pedaled back to the town square, Alicia, in the lead, gasped. An enormous snowshoe hare, nearly the size of a huge hog, was sniffing around the base of one of the maple trees and nibbling a few winter grasses. So, of course, they had to pause to pet the hare too.

Then they just had time to make five perfect snow angels before reboarding the Crystal Airship to be on their way.

Upon returning to the ship, and while beginning their ascent, the airship passengers enjoyed chocolate malts, followed by eggnog shakes. While

sipping their shakes through star-shaped straws, they observed two flying reindeer leap by the windows.

“I didn’t think reindeer could really fly!” exclaimed Alicia.

“Of course reindeer can fly!” stated Katie. “How could you *not* know that?”

“I just never saw one,” Alicia said, looking sideways at Mark and Nathan.

Suddenly fretting, and looking very worried, Katie then said, “We don’t have any apples to put out with Santa’s cookies and milk, for his reindeer.”

Alicia quickly told her, “Don’t worry, we have apples at home. I’ll be sure to put them out for the reindeer before I go to bed.” This made Katie feel better with no more fret.

As the conversation about reindeer and apples ended, Mr. Noel came to stand before them. He was smiling softly. With a strange glow in his dark eyes, he slowly reached into his pockets. When he withdrew his hands, a fat and smiling peapod was sitting on each of his palms. The shiny pods were midnight blue in color and sparkled brightly. Three, glittering gold peas rested inside each pod, and looked like stars winking at them from a smile in the heavens.

After handing the first two peapods to Katie and Alicia, he reached into his pockets and produced two more, which, when offered to Nathan and Mark, were very carefully accepted.

In almost a whisper, Mr. Noel said, “Take very good care of these. Each peapod can grant one wish per year, but only on Christmas Eve.”

Holding the treasures very close, the children thanked him. Mr. Noel winked at them as he moved off to say something to the philanthropist who had awakened from another nap and was now petting Gingersnap again.

After taking a deep breath and closing his eyes for about three seconds, Nathan opened his eyes and told his friends, “I already made my wish for the year.”

The others wanted to think about their wishes for a while, since there were still over three hours left before midnight.



Chapter Six

Tree Mountain and Other Treasures

The Crystal Airship arrived at its next destination fairly quickly, and Mr. Noel told them, “This is a secret location.”

They were hovering next to a very steep and pointed mountain with an enormous pine tree growing directly on top. The Crystal Airship was bringing lights to the King of Tree Mountain to help decorate the beautiful tree.

The ship pulled up next to the flat top of a cliff just below the tree, and the King stoically greeted the visitors as they unloaded boxes containing strings of lights from the cargo hold.

Dressed in soft blue robes, and wearing laurel leaves for a crown, the King looked very regal.

Under the King's direction, Mr. Noel and the children helped about fifty of the King's subjects string the lights on the enormous tree. However, only the most acrobatic of the King's tree decorators were allowed to climb the one-hundred-and-five-foot ladder to string the topmost parts of the tree. The children and Mr. Noel all stayed much closer to the ground.

Once the lights were in place, ornaments were added. At one point, two other children, a boy and his little sister, came to stand next to Mark and Katie as they were hanging ornaments. Mark noticed that they were even less warmly dressed than any of the airship travelers. As the boy smiled and handed him an icicle ornament, Mark pulled the candy bar he had been saving out of his pocket and gave it to the boy. Katie noticed this and gave her candy bar to the boy's little sister, who was just about her age. The boy and his sister were very surprised, and thankful, to receive the unexpected gifts.

A few moments later, as they continued decorating, Mark had another impulse and was able to slip the money he had been carrying in his jeans into the boy's shirt pocket without the boy noticing. For some reason, he felt the money would help this boy and his family more than it would buying a gift

for their parents, especially since part of their money had been lost in the snowstorm, and they weren't going to be able to get what they intended anyway. He and Katie could always do extra chores to earn more money to buy their parents gifts sometime after the holidays.

Unknown to Mark, the King had observed his actions. As the decorating was wrapping up, and many of the people were leaving the area, the King said in a very deep voice, "Come here, young man."

Mark briefly thought he was in trouble because the King's tone was so serious. However, the King didn't scold or even say anything else to him. Instead, the regal gentleman reached into the pockets of his robes to retrieve a man's gold wristwatch, which he presented to Mark. The watch was too large for him, but would fit his father perfectly.

Thanking the King, who was now smiling, Mark carefully stowed the treasure in his jeans pocket. He couldn't believe he had gotten an even better gift for his father than he could have bought with the money he just gave away.

Though most of the adults had left, several children still lingered around the tree, admiring the lights and ornaments. The King, sitting on a tree stump, gathered the children around him. They sat

in the snow by his feet as he said, “Let me tell you a little something about Tree Mountain.

“The tree was planted on purpose, long ago. Its job is to bring light to the world. The tree also guides Santa’s journey. He has to have guidance and reference points such as this because he travels so fast.” The children all smiled at one another as the King next handed each of them an orange from a small box resting by his feet. “Now off you go,” he added. “Get to bed now, so Santa can come. He can’t come until you are in bed.”

Mark, Katie, Nathan, and Alicia all waved goodbye, as the other children set off to their beds.

Then the King asked Mr. Noel, “You’re not leaving without taking a ride, are you?”

Mr. Noel responded immediately. “Of course not.”

He winked at the children who followed as he beckoned. They waved goodbye to the King, as Mr. Noel led them to the opposite side of the tree and down into a small valley that contained a beautifully lit carousel.

The ride on the horses began as many carousel rides do, with carnival music and gentle ups and downs. However, like many of their experiences on this magical Christmas Eve, the children were in for

something really extraordinary. After only five traditional rotations, the horses suddenly came to life and jumped from the confines of the carousel. And the poles the riders had been holding onto became leather reins, since they were now atop real horses.

“Hang on!” yelled Mr. Noel, who was riding next to Katie to make sure she stayed safe on the galloping steed. As they raced along, sparkling magical light trailed the horses’ paths and settled in their snowy hoof-prints.

The horses left the valley and rounded Tree Mountain, heading directly for the Crystal Airship whose gondola had sunk nearly to the ground. Seconds later, the breathless passengers were delivered to the side door.

The sudden arrival of the snorting, neighing horses frightened Gingersnap who was peeking out the door at the exact moment the five galloped up to the side of the ship. She gave a short yip and scurried back to the protective lap of the philanthropist.

The pink lady smiled at them as they entered. She was filing her nails and eating a pear. The girl in the red chair also smiled, but she looked away again when she noticed Nathan smiling back at her.

However, she didn't seem to mind having a visitor a few minutes later, when Gingersnap left the philanthropist's lap and decided to occupy hers for a while instead.

Next, the airship travelers enjoyed green bean burritos and red smashed potatoes with butter and gravy. Calhoun and Mr. Maverick had evidently whipped up these delicious dishes in the control room somehow.

While they were eating, Mark told Nathan, "I'm sorry the King didn't give you a watch too."

"My dad already has a watch," replied Nathan. "And I already have what I want this year," he added, feeling the peapod in his pocket. At that moment, he couldn't say anything more because there was a huge lump in his throat, and because he was desperately hoping this whole thing wasn't a dream and that the peapod really could grant his wish. He was also hoping that he hadn't made the wish too late.

A few minutes later, Mr. Noel, looking out of a window, turned smiling and said, "Wow! Oregon is really pretty this time of year."

They all headed to the windows to look out at the Christmas lights, and the glints of thousands of stars,

as the Crystal Airship set down in a hilly field next to a farmhouse.

The girl in the red chair hurriedly placed Gingersnap on the floor and made her way to the door of the gondola.

Taking a deep breath, she smiled a shy smile and waved to everyone as she left the ship. Mr. Noel helped her climb down the ladder, where she quickly gave him a hug and ran into the house.

When he had climbed back up to the ship, Mr. Noel told them, “She ran away from home. Then, when she wanted to go back, she didn’t have a way to get there.”



Chapter Seven

Overheard Conversations

While Gingersnap was running in circles, barking, and chasing her short tail, the children played foosball in teams. None of them had ever played foosball before, but it wasn't a hard game to figure out. Katie was a little too short, so Nathan got a small wooden crate for her to stand on.

After the first game, which Nathan and Alicia won, Alicia wanted to pair up with Katie. Alicia was better at this game than even the boys, and she wanted to help Katie win. The girls did win the next three games, which might have made the boys feel badly, except that they knew Katie was having so

much fun winning. As little as she was, she didn't win very many games played with bigger children.

After the games, they had hot chocolate with huge, star-shaped marshmallows as they sat talking together by the fire.

They spoke quietly because they didn't want to disturb the philanthropist who was again napping in his chair on the other side of the fireplace. The singing coal had stopped singing for a while and appeared to be sleeping, and Mr. Noel was in the control room with Mr. Maverick and Calhoun.

Since it was Christmas Eve, the conversation eventually turned to a discussion about their Christmas wish lists.

"What was on your list this year?" Alicia asked Mark.

Mark quietly answered, "Shoes, socks, and a shirt."

Katie went next. "Coal, so we can be warm, and a book."

Shaking her head, Alicia said, "You actually wished for coal? That's going to confuse Santa."

Katie shrugged.

Nathan shared his list next. "Shoes, jeans, a coat, and a couple of books."

“A coat and some candy,” said Alicia. “I wanted to be practical and wish for something Grandma could afford because I don’t think Santa makes it to our apartment every year. Maybe we’re not on his grid either.”

“But what did you really want?” Nathan asked Alicia.

Alicia smiled as she answered. “A basketball, new tennis shoes, and for my grandma not to have to commute so far to work.”

Nathan smiled too and told Katie and Mark, “As far as basketball, she’s really good, better than a lot of the boys in the neighborhood.” Mark could definitely believe this. Having been so thoroughly trounced by Alicia at foosball, he could imagine she was probably very good at many sports.

“And what about you?” Alicia asked Mark. “What did you really want?”

“I want my dad to have a permanent job,” he answered, “so he can be home more and not worry so much. And I could use some new jeans.”

Next, Katie told them, “I want a doll and a new coat and a hat and a muffler.”

Nathan went last and softly said, “I just want my brother to get well.” Then he added, “But I know that’s not the kind of present Santa can usually

bring.” Mark and Alicia nodded slightly, thinking that their wishes were not exactly right for Christmas lists either, because Santa probably couldn’t do anything about changes in jobs.

At this point, the philanthropist got up from his chair and headed to the cockpit. Since he been asleep, the children hoped their talking hadn’t disturbed him.

Their journey so far, though exciting, had also been somewhat tiring, so the children decided to take a nap in the four-high bunkbed. The pink lady was also napping, and lightly snoring, stretched out on the gold and green divan.

Gingersnap was tired too, so they tucked her into a box with a flannel blanket, and she quickly dozed off.

The philanthropist returned to his chair by the fire just as they were getting settled.

Alicia, Mark, and Katie were all glad to have some quiet time to think about and make their peapod wishes.

Katie was all smiles, and flushed, as she snuggled up happily in the blanket and pillow for her rest, thinking about her wish coming true.

For some reason, Mark, on the bottom of the bunkbed, couldn’t sleep. Since he didn’t want his

tossing and turning to disturb his friends, he quietly got out of bed and wandered up to the control room. The door was slightly ajar and he could see Mr. Noel, his back turned, holding an old-fashioned phone receiver to his ear. The wooden box of the phone was mounted on the wall in front of him. The phone was bright red, and the mouthpiece and bells were made of shiny brass.

Mr. Noel sighed and shook his head. He was obviously either listening or waiting, since he wasn't speaking at the moment.

"But isn't that supposed to be his direct line?" Mark heard Mr. Maverick say.

"Yes," answered Mr. Noel. "He's out, of course. But they should be able to get a message to him." Mr. Noel shook his head once more as he added, "I can't believe they put me on hold again. I don't think elves use the phone very often."

Elves! thought Mark. *Why would Mr. Noel be talking to elves?*

After a few moments, Mr. Noel said, "Yes, I'm still here. Yes, I know those things weren't on their lists, but they need to be added." Then he sighed deeply again and said rather exasperatedly, "I know she asked for coal and a book, but she also wants a doll, a coat, a hat, and a muffler.

“Yes, that’s the last one,” he added a few seconds later. “Okay, thank you.”

As Mr. Noel hung up the receiver and turned to say something to Calhoun, Mark quickly snuck back to the bunkbed. He couldn’t believe what he had just heard. Evidently, Mr. Noel had some sort of direct line to Santa Claus.



Chapter Eight

More than Pink

About twenty minutes later, Mr. Noel entered the traveling compartment again and woke them with, “We’re high over Japan!”

Jumping out of bed, they all ran to the windows. They couldn’t see the land below because of a bit of fog, but they could see an amazing sight in the sky. A vast assortment of blue, green, gold, and purple clouds in the shapes of animals, cars, birds, turtles, books, and such like floated all around the ship.

The Crystal Airship was on course, heading toward an enormous cloud city, lit spectacularly by the light of the currently huge moon. The city was

multi-colored, much as the cloud shapes they were passing through, but was heavily pink in theme.

As they approached the city, the airship pulled alongside a cloud shaped like a train depot platform. A cloud elevator sat in the center of the platform, and the shaft of the conveyance led upwards into more clouds and other levels of the city. Mr. Noel, the children, and the pink lady disembarked via an extendable gangplank from the side of the airship. Good thing for the gangplank because there really wouldn't have been any way the robust lady could have climbed down the rope ladder safely. And even though Mr. Noel was a very strong man, the children doubted he could have actually carried her.

Mark was in the front of the group. At the end of the plank, he hesitated in stepping off onto the platform that looked as though it were made entirely of clouds. Mr. Noel was directly behind him, holding Katie's hand. "It's safe," he said. "Don't worry." At this point, Alicia grabbed Katie's free hand, and the two bounded forward onto the platform, pulling the laughing Mr. Noel along with them. Nathan, Mark, and the pink lady followed.

The elevator was rather large, thank goodness, to fit all of them. They rode the cloud conveyance up

seven levels with pastel-colored cloud confetti sprinkling down upon them the whole time.

When the door opened at the top, the group was met by a woman who looked much like the pink lady. The woman was rather large too, and her hair looked like curly pink cotton balls. She wore a velvet and tulle gown that was nearly as pink as her hair.

“I am the Mayoress of Mallow City,” stated the woman, somewhat formally. However, as the pink lady in the elevator rushed forward to hug the woman, the two burst into tears of joy; and the Mayoress, her voice now sounding a bit like pink marshmallows, added, “Thank you for bringing my sister home to me, Mr. Noel.” After many years of separation, the two were finally together again, and this was cause for celebration.

The visitors were able to stay for a short while, during which time they enjoyed strawberry parfaits and cherry vanilla ice cream sodas.

As they were leaving, the Mayoress approached Alicia and Katie with a folded-up garment in her hands, and said in a sugary tone, “I was keeping this cashmere sweater for my sister. But she is a little larger than I remembered, and it won’t fit her. The sweater is too big for either of you,” she went on

sweetly, “but maybe you know someone who would like it.”

“Oh, my mother would love this sweater!” Katie exclaimed, glancing hesitantly at Alicia.

Alicia smiled and said, “You take it. My grandma doesn’t wear pink much. She’s more of a blue person.”

Katie carefully took the soft treasure and held it close, happily thinking about giving it to her mother.

After returning to the airship, they reached the next destination just a few minutes later, which was a bustling city in Panama. This was Gingersnap’s home. Before departing, the tiny poodle ran around the airship giving everyone wet goodbye kisses. After descending the ladder and quickly depositing the wriggling Gingersnap into the arms of an overjoyed boy of about age seven, Mr. Noel returned to the ship and they again ascended, with many people from the town below waving to them.

They soon discovered why the city was bustling so late in the evening. Many of the residents were heading down the streets toward a large stadium. A night tennis match was in progress, and the airship passengers got to see a few exciting points being played as they passed over.

Next, they enjoyed hot, buttery-tasting, roasted chestnuts while watching Calhoun and Mr. Maverick perform a brief puppet show in a small theatre that suddenly and mysteriously appeared in the traveling compartment, just as the snowcone machine had.

However, after the puppet show, while Mr. Noel and the children were gazing out the windows, transfixed by the sight of a cloud of giant snowflakes, each about the size of a picnic blanket, a very scary thing happened. The Crystal Airship nearly collided with a cloud iceberg. A huge chunk of the suspended, frozen cloud had broken off and caused the berg to lurch away from its normal position. Mr. Maverick and Calhoun had some difficulty in swerving the ship away from the massive cloud, but they did just manage to miss it.

Mr. Noel was very relieved, and the gathering soon returned to merry with his laughter and the pilots' smiles of relief.

Before continuing their journey, Mr. Noel and the children decided to have a skate on one of the flatter surfaces of the cloudberg; and believe it or not, the philanthropist joined them. He was very graceful on skates and cut lovely figures in the ice, all with his hands clasped behind his back.

Just as they were leaving, two ice sculptures on the very topmost peak of the cloudberg suddenly came to life and began to dance a waltz to the sound of *The Blue Danube*, which was issuing from a nearby, glowing blue, ribbon-like cloud. The musical coal hummed along as the ship again continued its journey.

Their next stop was Reykjavik, the capital and largest city of Iceland, where Mr. Noel carefully delivered a magic wishbone to a fishing boat anchored in a harbor. A small blond woman came out of the cabin of the boat and gently took the precious object into safekeeping, giving Mr. Noel a short nod as he departed.

When he returned to the ship, Mr. Noel softly told them, “We don’t know much about that wishbone, but it is somehow related to Peace on Earth.”

A large city in Switzerland was the final destination of the Crystal Airship. They dropped the philanthropist off in front of a tall bank building, and the gentleman shook hands with everyone as he departed.

After the man left, Mr. Noel said, “He comes to this bank every year on Christmas Eve to transfer his money to a lot of worthy charities. He can’t do it

ahead of time because one year, swindlers stole it all.” Mr. Noel smiled as he added, “That gentleman helps to feed thousands of hungry people every year, and he keeps them warm in the winter.”

Mr. Noel next retrieved boxes, fancy paper, tape, and bows from a high shelf in the traveling compartment, so that Katie and Mark could wrap up the presents for their parents. Alicia helped Katie wrap the sweater, and Nathan picked out the bow for the package containing the watch. When they finished, they carefully placed the gifts on a small table beside the purple couch.

As they were moving on, Mr. Noel pointed out something dazzling, just off the balcony side of the airship. A flying golden seal was swishing gently through the air in the distance. The seal glinted so brightly in the starlight, they almost had to look away. According to Mr. Noel, a flying golden seal was an incredibly rare sight to see.



Chapter Nine

The Journey Home

Mr. Noel and the pilots felt like celebrating. They had managed to accomplish all of their deliveries in less than six hours, which was pretty amazing even for a magical airship.

Calhoun popped out of the cockpit with a platter of hot dogs for them to roast on sticks by the fire. The singing coal was softly humming.

After the hot dogs, the children sucked on ribbon candy and looked out at the stars on their way back to their homes.

Nathan and Alicia were dropped off first to the roof of their apartment building.

Just before they left, Mr. Maverick gave Nathan two wrapped presents that felt like books, one for Nathan and one for his little brother. And Calhoun presented Alicia with a quilt he had been piecing all year to give to her grandmother. The soft blue quilt was tucked into a silver bag decorated with a bright red bow.

Mark and Katie, who had been feeling somewhat guilty about taking the watch and sweater, felt very happy that their new friends also received special gifts.

The girls hugged each other goodbye, and the boys shook hands. Alicia also hugged Mr. Noel and the pilots, while Nathan shook their hands.

As the airship rose, Katie and Mark, who had never seen New York before, couldn't believe how beautiful the city was, especially at night. The Empire State Building was spectacularly lit with red and green lights; and the Statue of Liberty looked exactly like a giant, lighted ice sculpture. The children never thought they would get to see anything like this, and their faces were shining nearly as brightly as the Christmassy lights of the city.

After traveling for only a few more minutes, the Crystal Airship dropped down among the trees in front of Mark and Katie's house.

"As promised," said Mr. Noel, "home before midnight—*eleven forty-two* to be exact."

The children picked up the presents for their parents and said goodbye to Calhoun and Mr. Maverick, Katie with hugs and Mark with handshakes.

Mr. Noel helped Katie climb down the ladder. When he bent down to hug her goodbye, he wrapped his warm red muffler around her neck.

Mark shook hands with Mr. Noel, but then had to hug him too. Mr. Noel laughed and, with his brown eyes twinkling, gave Mark a big bear hug back.

"You best get going now," said Mr. Noel, "so you won't freeze and so your parents won't get worried.

"Merry Christmas, you two," he called from the ladder as the ship was rising.

Their parents wouldn't have any time to get worried. Having just arrived home, they were both standing on the front porch, silently staring at the scene in front of them as their children raced toward the house. Their father was the first to be able to speak. "The Crystal Airship!"

And their mother responded in barely more than a whisper. “All these years, I thought it was just a legend.”

“You know about the Crystal Airship?” Mark and Katie both asked at once.

The children were quickly ushered into the house, as their mom said, “Come inside to get warmed up.”

Just as their father was closing the front door, Katie and Mark looked back and saw the Crystal Airship disappearing in the distance like a faraway jewel in the sky.

Their mother had brought a pie home from the diner, but Mark and Katie were too full to have any, so they decided to save it for a Christmas Day treat.

Sitting down to have hot chocolate together, the children were full of questions, anxious to find out what their parents knew about the Crystal Airship.

“I heard the legend when I was just a girl,” their mother told them. “But I never thought it was real.”

“I thought it was just a folktale too,” said their father. He smiled as he told his children, “The Crystal Airship is actually the North Star.”

“Yes,” said their mother. “The North Star has the power to transform into the Crystal Airship one night per year, on Christmas Eve. Then the ship

travels the earth making important deliveries to help keep people's hopes and dreams alive. According to the legend, the Crystal Airship delivers things like love, happiness, warmth, peace, and good cheer."

Though it was late, Mark and Katie couldn't go to sleep until they had told their parents at least a little something about their Christmas Eve adventure.

"The airship saved us from the storm, and we took a trip to help make the deliveries," said Mark.

Then Katie added, "And we were with Mr. Noel, and two kids from New York, and the pilots, and a girl who wouldn't speak, and a bride, and a pink lady, and a nice rich man. And we flew ice-kites, and went to Canada, and met a King, and brushed our teeth."

"Save the rest 'til morning," her mother told her, as Katie took a breath. "You need to get to sleep so Santa can come. He can't come until you are in bed."

"But we got to ride a skycoaster, and a magic carousel, and a cloud elevator, and a two-seater bicycle."

Katie tried to say something else, but suddenly found she was just too tired, and only managed a yawn as her dad picked her up to take her to bed.

“I’ll put out the milk and cookies,” Mark told Katie, so she wouldn’t fret.

In the final few minutes before midnight, Mr. Noel sat on the purple couch, pondering something very deeply.

As the keeper and distributor of the magical peapods, he was always aware of the nature of the wishes. Of course, he never disclosed the information to anyone, just as those making the wishes almost always kept them a secret from others. However, something had happened this year that had never happened before. Something quite unusual. Two of the children had made exactly the same wish.

None of them had wished anything for themselves, which was not at all unusual, since the children chosen to ride on the Crystal Airship were generally caring and unselfish people. But two making the same wish was very surprising.

Mr. Noel smiled and shook his head, as tears slipped gently down his cheeks. Having managed the yearly voyage of the Crystal Airship for many years, he was amazed that the children of the world still had the power to surprise him.



Chapter Ten

Christmas Wishes

Early Christmas morning in New York, Alicia presented her grandmother with the lovely quilt. Under the tree, were all of the things Alicia had wished for, from both of her lists. She sat happily by the tree, wearing her new coat and holding the basketball in her lap. And her grandmother gave her an even better present when she announced that she had somehow been transferred to a job very close to their apartment. They both joyously celebrated this news.

Next door, Nathan had received everything he wanted too. In fact, his parents were rushing him through breakfast because they were all going to the

hospital. Somehow, by what could only be described as a genuine Christmas miracle, Nathan's brother was completely well and was ready to come home. Soon after breakfast, Nathan bundled up in his new warm coat and happily headed out the door with his parents.

Back in Tennessee, the coal bin at Mark and Katie's house was completely full. The children also received all of the other items from their wish lists as well. Katie laughed as she held her doll tightly, while wrapping her new blue muffler around her neck and admiring her new coat with its plenty-long sleeves. Their Christmas stockings were filled with apples, oranges, and nuts, along with warm gloves for each of them. Mark also received a new coat, from Santa, even though he hadn't wished for one. Their parents were very happily surprised to receive the sweater and wristwatch, and were extremely touched by the unexpected presents.

The phone rang during breakfast, and their father went to answer it. He returned to the table a few moments later, speechless. After a long pause, with his family looking at him expectantly, he said, "They just called me. I have a permanent job starting just after New Years. How did this happen?"

Since Katie now had two mufflers, Mark asked her, “What are you going to do with the extra one?”

“I have a good idea,” she answered, with her eyes twinkling.

Shortly after breakfast, Katie and Mark made their way through the woods to bring the Old Man of the Mountain a plate of biscuits and gravy, and a bag of coal for his fire.

The man was asleep in his rocking chair and softly snoring like a bear in hibernation. Katie placed the plate on the table next to his chair, and Mark quietly set the bag of coal on the porch.

As Katie gently wrapped the warm red muffler around the Old Man’s neck, she noticed a small object resting in his lap, and she gasped. *It was a dark blue peapod with three gold peas inside!*

“Mark, look!” she exclaimed.

Her words woke the Old Man who yawned and said, “Good morning, you two. Merry Christmas.”

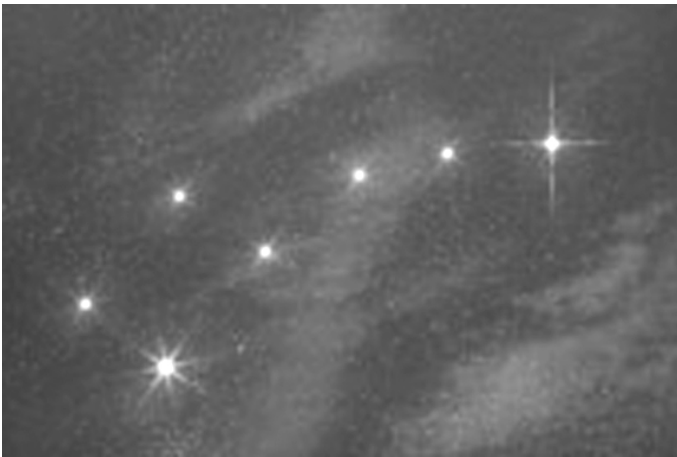
“You went on the Crystal Airship when you were a kid too, didn’t you?” asked Mark.

Smiling, with her cheeks rosier than ever, Katie asked the Old Man, “What did you wish for yesterday?”

“Katie, that’s not polite to ask,” said Mark.

The Old Man of the Mountain didn't seem to mind. But he didn't answer right away. Instead, with his dark eyes twinkling, he smiled, a smile that lit up Christmas morning more than the brilliant, pure white snow surrounding his cabin. He leaned forward in his rocker and gave Katie a big bear hug. Then he spoke with a rumbling laugh. "It is actually hard for me to remember what I wished for, since that was yesterday, but I'm pretty sure I wished for this red muffler."

As they were leaving on the path through the trees, Mark and Katie were pretty sure they heard an Irish lullaby wafting down the lane from the Old Man's cabin.



About the Author

J.H. Sweet is the author of *The Fairy Chronicles*, *Foo and Friends*, *The Time Entity Trilogy*, *Juan Noel's Crystal Airship*, *Cassie Kingston Mysteries*, and *The Heaviest Things*. She lives in South Texas and has a degree in English from Texas State University.

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