



THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 2

The Marshmallow Mines

A story where YOU choose the way

STORYBRANCH

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

Meet Your Fellow Travelers

Every journey on the Night Train is better with friends. Here's who is riding with you tonight — and how each one sounds when you read them aloud:

Rowan — The hero of every journey — curious, brave, and wearing the orange coat. Rowan's choices belong to YOU.

The Conductor — Keeper of the timetable and the wisdom. Read him slow as syrup, in your deepest, sleepiest rumble.

Tick the Ticket Mouse — Punches the tickets, panics the loudest. Read him fast-fast-FAST, squeaky and tremendously official — and tonight, very sticky.

Forewoman Burrow — Boss of the Marshmallow Mines, with a heart as big as her shovel. Read her BOOMING and hearty, like a cheerful drum with a helmet on.

Maple — The littlest miner, whose helmet doesn't fit yet. Read her tiny and brave — and when she taps, tap along on the book: tap... tap-tap!





The Night Train never knocks. It never toots. It just—poof!—appears. One second the valley outside Rowan's window was all moonlight and sleepy grass. The next second, there it was: a long green train, puffing silver steam like a dragon blowing bubbles.

But tonight something else came with it. A smell! It wiggled under the window, tiptoed across the floor, and climbed right into Rowan's nose. Warm. Sweet. Toasty. Like a campfire that had eaten a whole bag of sugar.

“Alllll aboard,” came the Conductor's slow, syrupy voice from the platform below. “No hurry... no hurry at all... but there's been a cave-in at the Marshmallow Mines, and some very small miners are stuck behind a very BIG squish.”

Rowan was down the stairs with one boot on and one boot in hand before the Conductor had even finished saying the word marshmallow. Would you have waited for the second boot? Rowan didn't!

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



The Marshmallow Mines smelled exactly like the inside of a birthday party. Red-and-white candy-cane beams held up the whole mountain, and out of the tunnel bustled a stout little mole in a brass helmet, wringing her big digging paws.

“Forewoman Burrow!” she boomed, shaking Rowan's hand up and down like a pump. “And am I GLAD to see you! The Great Squish let go tonight—WHOOMPH!—and sealed up the Deep Gallery with my whole night crew inside. Nine miners! Including little Maple, and her helmet doesn't even fit yet!”

From deep, deep inside the mountain came a tiny sound. Tap... tap-tap. The miners were alive! And they were waiting.

“Here's the tricky part,” said Burrow, pointing at the sky. “When the morning sun peeks over that ridge, it toasts the Squish hard as armor. We've got until sunrise. Not one scoop longer.” Tick fainted a little. Then he got back up, because he had a ticket to punch.

★ How should Rowan start the rescue?

- **Head to the Plan Room with Burrow:** *If you choose the plan room, the great tunnel map could show how to take the Squish apart piece by piece — but planning takes precious minutes, and the sky is already thinking about morning. → turn to page 5*
- **Follow Maple's taps through the side tunnels:** *If you choose the tunnels, the taps could lead you right to the trapped miners' back wall — but the side ways are sticky, twisty, and full of echoes that don't always tell the truth. → turn to page 19*
- **Climb to the old mining machines:** *If you choose the machines, the great Scooper could move more marshmallow in an hour than fifty paws in a night — but the machines are old, cranky, and haven't scooped in years. → turn to page 33*



The Plan Room was a warm, chalk-dusty cave with the whole mine drawn across one wall—every tunnel, every gallery, every candy-cane beam, in careful white lines. Tick sneezed. A tiny cloud of chalk went ACHOO! with him.

And there, scribbled in worried red chalk, was the problem: the Great Squish. It filled the main tunnel like a giant sock stuffed in a bottle. It was enormous. It was ENORMOUS! Looking at the whole thing at once made Rowan's tummy feel enormous too.

“Aye, that's the trick of big problems,” said Burrow, climbing onto her stool with a grunt. “Stare at ALL of it, and your courage runs straight out the door. But a mountain is only a pile of pebbles holding hands.” She held out a stick of chalk in one paw and a spoon-shovel in the other.

“So, traveler,” she said, grinning. “How do we eat THIS sandwich?”

★ How should the digging begin?

- **Grid the wall into small numbered scoops:** *If you choose the grid, every miner gets one small square that a single team can truly finish — but drawing lines while friends are trapped inside takes a steady, patient heart. → turn to page 9*
- **Grab shovels and dig the big middle right now:** *If you choose to dig at once, you'll be moving marshmallow in half a minute and it will feel wonderful — but a squish this size has its own ideas about being pushed in the middle. → turn to page 7*



— The Big Gulp —

It felt WONDERFUL—for about half a minute.

Everybody dug in the very same spot, as deep and as fast as paws and spoons could go. Dig-dig-dig! The hole grew huge. It grew glorious! It grew... it grew...

It GROANED.

Uh-oh. The Great Squish leaned into the empty space the way a tired grown-up flops onto a sofa. The ceiling sagged. The walls slumped. And the great big hole they'd dug swallowed itself shut—GLOMP!—along with four shovels, one lantern, and Burrow's second-best helmet.

They were standing exactly where they'd started. Minus the shovels. Plus a coat of marshmallow from ears to boots. Tick looked like a very small, very sticky snowman. “I'm FINE,” he said, and fell over sideways.

“Aye,” panted Burrow, pulling a miner out of the goo by his overall straps. “That's what the middle of a big problem does when you charge at all of it at once. It GULPS. Small bites, traveler. Small bites.”

↻ **Go back to page 6 and choose again.**



Rowan picked up the chalk and drew lines. Straight down. Straight across. Down, across, down, across—until that terrifying red blob on the map turned into a grid of little white squares, each one hardly bigger than a pillow.

And a funny thing happened. The Squish stopped looking impossible! Nobody can dig out a whole mountain of marshmallow. But square number fourteen? Anybody can dig square fourteen. You could dig square fourteen!

“Teams of three!” Burrow bellowed, suddenly looking twice as tall as her boots. “One square each, corners first, and NOBODY touches the middle till the edges are gone! Grab your numbers!”

Mole miners streamed past, each one snatching a numbered card, each one grinning at how small—how wonderfully, possibly small—their piece of the enormous problem was.

Tick took card number one and held it up like a knight's shield. “For MAPLE!” he squeaked, and marched off with his tail held high.

Dig, team, dig! Turn the page.



Square by square, scoop by scoop, the Great Squish came apart. Piles of marshmallow stacked up in the side gallery like snowballs, like clouds, like a hundred soft white hats.

Then trouble drifted in. A sweet pink steam came curling out of the warm heart of the Squish. It smelled like naptime. And it WORKED like naptime, too! Rowan watched the strongest digger in the whole mine yawn... wobble... and lie down in his own scoop pile, snoring like a tiny tractor. Ten seconds flat.

“Oh no you don't,” said Rowan. The sleepy steam couldn't be dug and it couldn't be plugged. But it could be outsmarted—the same way as the wall. In pieces!

“Short shifts!” Rowan called out. “Dig ten minutes, breathe outside ten minutes! Nobody stays till they're sleepy!” In went the fresh teams. Out came the yawning ones. In, out, in, out, like a great big marshmallow carousel—and the digging never stopped even once.

Even the sneaky parts of a problem, it turns out, can be cut into smaller pieces.

The wall grows thin. Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Will the miners get out?

You've reached the end of the free pages, and the biggest choice of the night is waiting on the very next page.

Chose "Follow Maple's taps through the side tunnels" or "Climb to the old mining machines" on page 4? Those paths are in the full book too: 9 choices, 3 friendly dead ends and 7 different endings, so it's a new adventure every time you read it.

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Next in this file: The Grown-Up's Ticket, your parent guide to Book 2.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

WHOOMPH! The Great Squish has sealed the Marshmallow Mines — nine miners trapped inside, and little Maple's helmet doesn't even fit yet.

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Chop the giant wall into a hundred small scoops? Follow Maple's tap-tap code through the sticky tunnels? Wake up the great old digging machines? The sun is coming — and when it tops the ridge, the marshmallow toasts hard as armor.

Storybranch books are parent-guided choose-your-own-adventure-style stories for kids 3–8, made to be read together. You read, they choose — and every fork in the story builds the core skills of smart thinkers for the next AI revolution.

- ★ Read together · ages 3–8
- ★ 9 choices · 7 endings · a new adventure every night
- ★ Book 2 of 30 in The Night Train to Anywhere series

THE SKILLS IN THIS BOOK

Every Storybranch adventure practices two of the seven skills of smart thinkers. This book builds Break Big Problems Down — the Great Squish falls one small scoop at a time — and Weigh the Trade-offs — fast-but-risky or slow-but-sure, every path has a price and a prize.

Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

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★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Marshmallow Mines* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at the Marshmallow Mines, where a squishy cave-in has trapped the miners — and no amount of heroic, all-at-once digging will get them out. The only way through is one careful scoop at a time. Your child — as Rowan — is about to discover the great secret of every big problem: it's really just a pile of small problems, and small problems can be beaten.

And here's the fun part: **your job isn't to teach.** You're the Conductor — you set the pace, do the voices, and ask one good question at the forks. Your child drives. This guide gives you everything you need: the two skills hiding inside the story, two signature "parent moves," a few tricks for making every choice feel like an event, a tracker for the nights ahead, and an observation log for noticing how the thinking grows.

★ PRIMARY SKILL

Break big problems down

Turning one daunting, impossible-looking challenge into ordered, bite-sized steps — the executive-function habit behind every project your child will ever run, with or without AI.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Weigh the trade-offs

Naming what each path gains *and* gives up before choosing. Anything can generate ten options in a second — choosing well among them is the human job, and it starts here.

9

CHOICES TO MAKE

7

DIFFERENT ENDINGS

3

FRIENDLY DEAD ENDS

∞

WAYS TO READ IT AGAIN

★ **The one golden rule: never pick for them.** Ask, then wait — even when the silence stretches, even when they're clearly about to pick the "wrong" one. The pause is where the thinking happens, and the wrong turns are where the learning happens. Everything in this book is safe to get wrong.



PRIMARY

Break big problems down

The habit: no problem gets solved in one move — find the first small scoop.

Grand goals are never won in one heroic leap; they're won in ordered, checkable steps. That's the executive-function muscle behind every project your child will ever run — and in a world where machines happily hand over ten-step plans, the child who can *build* a plan still owns it. In this story, every good path clears the cave-in scoop by scoop, and every dead end is what happens when the whole job gets attempted in one giant bite — then loops back so your child can choose again. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: naming the steps out loud, doing first things first, and noticing when a step has a step hiding inside it.

PARENT MOVE №1

The Backwards Map

When the big goal appears, **start from the ending and walk backwards**. Ask: "**We need to reach the trapped miners. What would have to be true FIRST? ... And what gets us that?**" Each answer becomes a step; count the steps on your fingers as they name them. Working backwards turns one big impossible wish into a little checkable plan — and fingers make the plan visible. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

"Whoa, that looks HUGE. What's the smallest scoop we could start with?"

"What has to be true before that part can work?"

"Which steps have we finished? Show me on your fingers."

✗ INSTEAD OF

"Okay, here's the plan: first this, then this." (you just did the thinking for them)

"No, that step comes later."

"Hurry — we're almost there!" (rushing erases the list)

SECONDARY

Weigh the trade-offs

The habit: every choice buys something and costs something.

Trade-offs are the engine of every fork in this mine: the wide tunnel is faster *but* wobblier; sharing the marshmallow scoops means slower digging *but* stronger helpers. There is almost never a choice that costs nothing — and pretending otherwise is how tunnels sag. A child who can say out loud what each path **gains** and what it **gives up** is doing something most grown-ups skip. And when a trade goes badly? Grin, don't groan — this book's three dead ends warmly loop back so the next trade can be smarter.

PARENT MOVE №2

The 15-Second Trade-Off Scan

At a fork, before choosing, run the scan — one gain and one give-up per option, out loud: "**This way is fast, but the tunnel wobbles. That way is safe, but sunrise is coming. Which trade are we more willing to make?**" Fifteen seconds, no lecture. The magic word is "**but**" — once your child starts adding it to options unprompted, this skill has moved in for good.

Showtime: making every choice a moment

THE GROWN-UP'S TICKET

A choice page is a tiny stage play, and you're the stage manager. You don't need all six of these — pick two that fit your kid and make them *yours*. Rituals are the point: by Book 3, your child will be doing them to *you*.

1 The Conductor's Whistle

When a choice is coming, give a long, low, sleepy "**whooooo...**" — the signal that a Big Decision is pulling into the station. Slow everything down. Decisions get drama; page turns don't.

2 The Finger Hover

One finger hovers over each option while you think out loud together — but **no touching until the choice is made**. The hover makes the pause physical (and very hard to rush).

3 The Ticket Punch

Decision made? Your child "punches the ticket": two firm taps on the chosen option and a squeaky "**Tickets, please!**" No punch, no page turn — Tick the Ticket Mouse insists.

4 Freeze the Picture

On each full-page painting, stop before reading on: "**What do you see? What's about to happen?**" Predict, then read, then check. Wrong guesses are cheered — that's a scientist at work.

5 Ask the Cast

Stuck between options? "**What would the Conductor do? What would Forewoman Burrow do?**" (Burrow's answer is always the same: "*A mountain is only pebbles standing together — so which pebble first?*") Which is exactly why it's useful. Even a 3-year-old can pick a pebble.)

6 Swap the Chooser

On re-reads, flip the roles: you choose, your child holds **veto power** — but a veto must come with a reason. Or let a stuffed animal choose, and audit its judgment together. (Be a deliciously bad chooser. Getting overruled is the goal.)

THE VOICES — YOUR FIVE-MEMBER CAST

Rowan

Warm and wondering — but mostly, Rowan speaks with your child's voice. When Rowan decides, hand the line over: "*what do we do?*"

The Conductor

Slow as syrup, deep and sleepy, with looong pauses. The easiest voice in children's literature — and the one they'll beg for. "*No hurry... no hurry at all...*"

Tick the Ticket Mouse

Fast-fast-FAST, squeaky, tremendously official. Sit up straight when he speaks. He is very busy and everything is an emergency.

Forewoman Burrow

Boss of the Marshmallow Mines, a stout mole in a brass helmet with a heart as big as her shovel. Read her booming and hearty, like a cheerful drum — every order starts with a big "**Aye!**"

Maple

The littlest miner, whose helmet doesn't fit yet — trapped behind the Squish and tapping to say she's there. Read her tiny and brave, and when she taps, tap along: *tap ... tap-tap!*

Performance note: you need exactly *one* voice you love — the Conductor is the beginner's choice — and the Train needs no voice at all: whistles, hums and rumbles are your child's job. Consistency beats talent. Nobody is grading you, and the reviews in that bedroom are already five stars.

Punch your ticket: the re-read tracker

THE GROWN-UP'S TICKET

One night is one path — but this station holds **seven endings and three secret dead ends**, and no single read finds them all. Keep this page by the bed. After each ride, check off where you landed and give the ending a name of your own invention. Completing the whole card usually takes a week or two of bedtimes ... which is rather the idea.

★ THE SEVEN ENDINGS

☐ Ending 1 _____	☐ Ending 2 _____
☐ Ending 3 _____	☐ Ending 4 _____
☐ Ending 5 _____	☐ Ending 6 _____
☐ Ending 7 _____	

Write the name YOU gave each ending on the line.

• THE THREE DEAD ENDS — A BADGE OF HONOR, NOT A RECORD OF FAILURE

☐ Wrong turn 1 _____	☐ Wrong turn 2 _____
☐ Wrong turn 3 _____	

What did each one teach you? Jot the lesson.

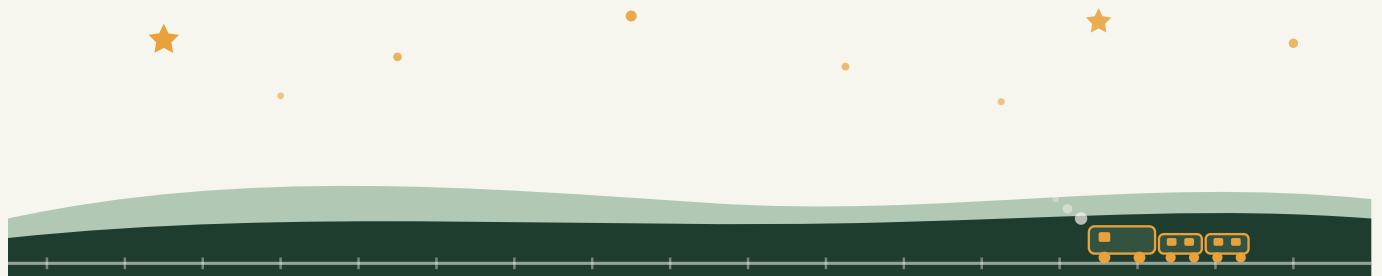
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "What big problem did we break into little scoops — and which scoop came first?"
3. "Was there a moment we gave something up to get something better? Was it worth it?"

Sixty seconds, lights low, no quiz energy. If you only have time for one, ask the second — it's the whole book in a single question.

Same station, different night.

Every reader who boards makes different choices — which means the book your child read tonight isn't quite the book they'll read tomorrow. When you've collected every ending, leave the card in the book: it's the story of how your child learned to think, one fork at a time. Next month, a new station.



The observation log: what you noticed tonight

THE GROWN-UP'S
TICKET

Page 4 tracks **where the story went**. This page tracks **how your child thought** along the way — the part that carries over to homework, playgrounds and every station still to come. After each read, take a quiet minute to score the six behaviors below. It isn't a test, and "not yet" is honest, useful information: over a few weeks, the *pattern* is what matters.

0 Not yet tonight 1 With a nudge from you 2 On their own *Write the date in the top box of each read.*

WHAT TO WATCH FOR	READ 1	READ 2	READ 3	READ 4	READ 5	READ 6
DATE						
Paused before choosing Waited, thought, or offered an idea before picking an option.						
Went back after a dead end Chose to return to the fork and try a different path.						
Named what went wrong Could say, in their own words, why a wrong turn was wrong.						
Accepted an outcome they didn't want Stayed with the story after a disappointing turn, without a meltdown or a demand to undo it.						
Kept track across pages Remembered something from earlier in the story and used it at a choice.						
Stayed with the story Attention held from the first page to the ending, without needing a break.						
Found choosing stressful tonight Tick if the forks felt like pressure rather than fun. If this gets ticked often, read one path straight through and choose only at the final fork — fewer decisions, same story.						

NOTES — ONE LINE PER NIGHT

READ 1

READ 2

READ 3

READ 4

READ 5

READ 6

Scores aren't grades, and no single night means much. What you're collecting is a picture of a growing mind at work — the same six behaviors, book after book, station after station. Keep the page with the book and compare it to next month's.

