



THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 20

The Tumbledown Castle

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, sleepest rumble.

Tick the Ticket Mouse — Punches the tickets, panics the loudest. Read him fast-fast-FAST, squeaky and tremendously official — and tonight, flinching at every thump.

Grandmother Mortar — Keeper of Tumbledown Castle — an old armadillo in a leather apron with a ring of keys and a trowel, who has patched these walls for a hundred years and knows what every one of them is holding up. Read her low, gravelly and patient, like stone settling, with a pause before the thing that matters.

Dot — A small young pigeon with a speckled chest who is certain the tallest, shiniest tower is the one worth saving. Read her quick, bright and breathless — “THAT one!” — and let her go thoughtful, and a little bit quiet, when she learns what a beam costs.





The Night Train came on a night full of small thumps. Rowan lay in bed and counted them—thump, pause, thump—like somebody far away dropping shoes, one at a time, off a very tall shelf.

Rowan opened the window. Beyond the train rose a grassy hill, and on the hill stood a castle of honey-colored stone, with round towers and one tall thin fancy one, and every bit of it was LEANING. As Rowan watched, a stone let go from a wall and rolled down the hill. THUMP!

“Alllll aboard,” said the Conductor. “No hurry. But that’s Tumbledown Castle, and once every hundred years its stones get sleepy and let go. By sunrise, any wall that isn’t propped will lie down. There are seven beams to prop with. There are rather more than seven walls.”

A castle that’s going to sleep! Rowan pulled on the orange coat, and the boots, and did not stop to count the walls from the window, because there wasn’t time.

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



In the courtyard, beside a stack of long wooden beams, stood an old armadillo in a leather apron with a ring of keys and a trowel. Jingle. “Grandmother Mortar,” she said. “I keep the castle. Tonight the castle isn't keeping.”

A small grey pigeon with a speckled chest landed on the beams. “Dot!” she said. “I know EXACTLY which wall to save. The tall one! The tower with the golden weathervane! It's the best one, everybody says!”

Grandmother Mortar looked at the beams, and at the walls, and at Rowan. “Seven beams,” she said. “Kitchen, gatehouse, great hall, library, pigeon loft, well roof, three towers, and the wall by the stairs. You can't save it all, dear. The question isn't which wall is BEST. It's which walls you can't do without.”

Somewhere above, a stone let go. THUMP. Tick flinched so hard his ticket punch fell out of his pocket.

★ **Seven beams, more walls than that, and one night! Where does Rowan start?**

- **Start with the towers — they're the tallest and they fall the farthest:** *If you choose the towers, the fanciest one is right there — and Dot has opinions.* → **turn to page 5**
- **Prop the gatehouse first, so nobody is trapped inside:** *If you choose the gatehouse, the way out is safe — and the first beam will teach you how the rest go.* → **turn to page 19**
- **Get everyone out to the meadow first, then decide:** *If you choose the meadow, everyone's safe — and the castle waits for nobody.* → **turn to page 33**



From the battlements the fancy tower leaned over them like a tall person listening. The golden weathervane at its top glinted. It really WAS the best-looking thing in the castle.

“THAT one,” said Dot, hopping. “Prop THAT one. Imagine if it fell! Everyone would be so sad!”

Tick said it certainly was the most important-looking tower he had ever seen.

Rowan looked at the tower, and then down into the courtyard, where the kitchen chimney was smoking and somebody inside was singing over a pot. Nobody lived in the fancy tower. Rowan wasn't sure that mattered. Rowan wasn't sure it didn't!

★ The fancy tower — or a walk round first?

- **Prop the fancy tower — it's the one everyone loves:** *If you choose the tower, it's the beam everybody would cheer for — and a beam used is a beam gone. → turn to page 7*
- **Walk the walls first and see who's under each one:** *If you choose to walk, you'll lose ten minutes — and find out what each wall is actually holding up. → turn to page 9*



— The Golden Weathervane —

They propped it. It took the biggest beam and both of them pushing. HNNNNGH! And when it was done the fancy tower stood straight and proud and Dot did three loops round the weathervane.

Then, across the courtyard, the kitchen wall lay down.

It didn't crash. It SIGHED—a long slow slump of stones onto three enormous copper soup pots, and soup went up like a fountain, SPLOOSH, and Cook Podge, a large calm capybara, came out of the steam holding one ladle and wearing most of the breakfast.

“The tower,” said Grandmother Mortar quietly, “has nobody in it. The kitchen had breakfast for forty. You propped the one that looked best, dear. Not the one that mattered most.”

Rowan looked at the beam under the empty tower, and at the soup, and thought: I never asked what was UNDER each wall. “Go back,” said Podge kindly. “I'll make more soup. Somewhere.”

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



Rowan walked the walls with a lantern, and Grandmother Mortar walked beside, and at each wall Rowan asked the same thing: “What's under this one?”

The kitchen: Cook Podge, a large calm capybara, and soup for forty. The great hall: everyone's beds. The pigeon loft: Dot's whole family, asleep in rows. The gatehouse: the only way out. The library: books. The well roof: the water. The fancy tower: nothing. Nobody! Dust and a weathervane.

“It's the tallest,” said Dot, smaller now.

“It is,” said Rowan. “It's just not holding anything up.” Tick, who had been writing the list on his ticket, underlined NOBODY twice.

Turn the page.



Rowan sat on the edge of the well and counted on mittens. Seven beams. NINE walls that mattered even a little. So two would fall, whatever happened, and the only choice was which two.

“Every prop is a trade,” said Grandmother Mortar. “A beam here is a beam not there. Ask three things of every wall: what do we gain if it stands? What do we lose if it falls? Who's under it? Then choose, and don't look back at the one you didn't pick.”

Rowan looked at the list. Kitchen: soup for forty. Gatehouse: the way out. Hall: the beds. Loft: Dot's family. Well: water. Library: books, which could be carried. Tower: nothing.

It was almost easy. Almost! Somewhere above, another stone let go. THUMP!

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Which walls will stand?

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

Chose "Prop the gatehouse first, so nobody is trapped inside" or "Get everyone out to the meadow first, then decide" 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.

Start the series — \$49/month

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Next in this file: The Grown-Up's Ticket, your parent guide to Book 20.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

The old castle is falling down tonight — and there's only time to prop up some of its walls before sunrise! ★

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Prop the fanciest tower first because everyone loves it? Push a slipping beam harder and hurry on? Spend the night carrying out the soup pots? Seven beams, more walls than that — and somebody is under every one you don't choose.

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 20 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 Weigh the Trade-Offs — what do we gain, what do we lose, who's under it — and Learn From Every Outcome.

Storybranch

Books that branch. Minds that grow.



★ ADMIT ONE GROWN-UP ★

The Grown-Up's Ticket

Your guide to reading *The Tumbledown Castle* together

Tonight the Night Train stops below a castle of honey-colored stone whose walls, once every hundred years, get sleepy and let go. Anything not propped by sunrise will lie down. Grandmother Mortar, the armadillo who keeps the castle, has seven beams. The castle has rather more than seven walls — and one of them is a tall, gorgeous, completely empty tower with a golden weathervane that Dot the pigeon is certain must be saved first. Your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that every prop is a trade, that the fanciest wall is rarely the one that matters, and that the first beam that slips is the one that teaches the other six.

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

Weigh the trade-offs

Seeing what a choice really costs — and who pays — before making it. A beam under the tower is a beam not under the kitchen; a night spent saving soup pots is a night not spent propping walls. Every option has a price tag, and the skill is reading it.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Learn from every outcome

Treating every result — especially the misses — as information. The first beam slips in the mud; push on and the second slips the same way, stop and look and one flat stone teaches all seven.

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

Weigh the trade-offs

The habit: everything costs what it costs — say the price before you choose.

Seven beams, nine walls that matter, one night. Rowan's three questions of every wall — what do we gain if it stands, what do we lose if it falls, who's under it — turn an impossible night into a list, and the list into choices made on purpose: let the empty tower fall onto empty grass, carry the books out instead of propping the library, saw the last beam in half. Every dead end trades without noticing: the tower because it looks best, the soup pots because they're right there, and the whole night goes with them. Watch for the quiet lesson in Branch C: carrying everything out felt like being careful, and it was a trade too. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: *"if we prop THIS one, which one are we NOT propping? Who's under that?"*

PARENT MOVE № 1

The 15-Second Trade-Off Scan

At a choice page, before anyone picks, **hold up two hands**. Say: **"This hand is what we GET. This hand is what we GIVE UP. Fill them for me — what goes in each?"** Fifteen seconds, both hands, every option. Then ask which trade they'd make. Kids who can fill the 'give up' hand out loud have done the hardest part — and they notice, all by themselves, when a plan has nothing in that hand at all. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING

"If the beam goes there, who's under the wall it doesn't go to?"

"What do we lose if we let this one fall? Can that loss be undone?"

"That's either-or. Is there a way to make the trade smaller?"

✗ INSTEAD OF

"Prop the tower — it's the best one!" (*nobody lives in it; forty breakfasts live in the kitchen*)

"We can't lose ANYTHING!" (*then you lose the night instead*)

"Just pick one!" (*a saw turns one beam into two*)

SECONDARY

Learn from every outcome

The habit: a miss is a clue about the next try.

The gatehouse beam slips in the mud. Dot says push it harder and hurry; Rowan can do that, and the next beam will slip exactly the same way, because nothing was learned. Or Rowan kneels with the lantern, sees the groove in the wet ground, wedges a flat stone under the foot — and the other six go in like trees. Even the last ending is about this: propping what you can, then watching what falls and how, so the castle can be rebuilt where it's weak. A hundred years of patching, and nobody had ever watched a wall fall.

PARENT MOVE № 2

The Dead-End Post-Mortem

When a page snaps shut, **resist flipping back right away**. First: **"Ooh — that one missed! Before we go back ... what did it tell us? What would we do differently?"** Ten seconds of detective work, then flip back with full ceremony. Count out loud — **"lesson number two, collected!"** — so misses become clues.

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 "**whoooooo...**" — 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 Dot do?**" (Dot's answer at every fork is the tallest, shiniest option — "**THAT one! The tower! It's on all the postcards!**" — and she's quick and sure, which is exactly why she's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear a choice made for how it looks. And watch her learn: by the end she's putting the fallen weathervane on the loft and calling it the most useful thing in the castle.)

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.

Grandmother Mortar

The old armadillo in the leather apron, keeper of the castle for a hundred years, with a ring of keys and a trowel. Read her low, gravelly and patient, like stone settling — she never tells Rowan which wall; she asks what's under it, and waits.

Dot

The small speckled pigeon who knows EXACTLY which wall to save. Read her quick, bright and breathless — "*Obviously!*" — and let her go quiet, and thoughtful, the moment she hears what a beam costs.

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.

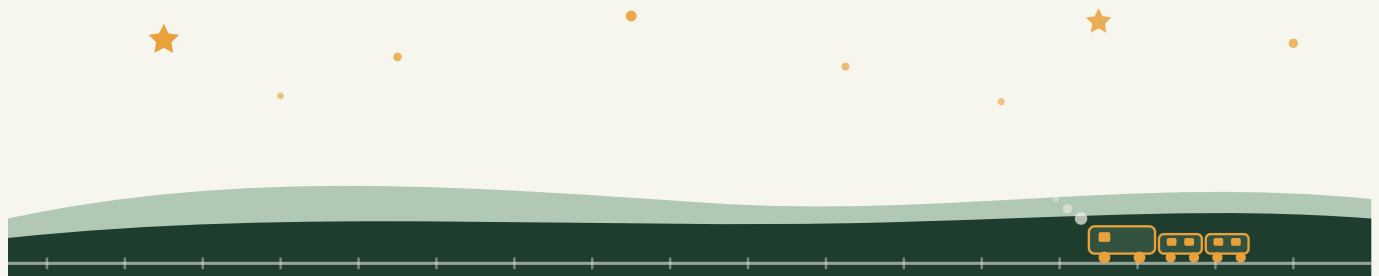
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. **"Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"**
2. **"Which wall did we choose NOT to save tonight — and what was under it? Was that a good trade?"**
3. **"When the beam slipped, what did we learn from it? What would have happened if we'd just pushed harder?"**

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.

