

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO ANYWHERE · BOOK 28

The Sandcastle Kingdom

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.

Grandmother Swell — The old grey seal who has watched Shellcomb Sands for forty years from the same dark rock. Read her slow, low and unbothered, like the sea itself — she never tells Rowan what to save; she says what the tide does, and waits.

Pinch — The hermit crab in the striped shell — builder, king, and the whole army — who wants to save EVERYTHING. Read Pinch small, fierce and very loud for its size — “HIGHER than the whole SEA!” — and let it go quiet and gentle the first time it opens the throne room door.





The Night Train came on a night that smelled of salt and wet sand. Rowan noticed the smell before the train—cold, clean, like the inside of a shell—and under it a sound like someone breathing slowly in and out. Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh. It was the sea!

Rowan opened the window. Beyond the train lay a wide moonlit beach, and on it the most MAGNIFICENT sandcastle anyone had ever built: towers and walls and a moat, a domed hall, tiny banners of seaweed, a garden that glinted. And beyond it the dark sea, lines of white foam creeping up the sand, closer each time.

“Allll aboard,” said the Conductor. “No hurry. Well—an hour, about. That’s Shellcomb Sands, and that’s the Sandcastle Kingdom, and that’s the tide coming in for it, the way it does every night. The builder’s very small, and could use help deciding.”

A whole kingdom—and the sea coming for it! Rowan grabbed the orange coat. Tick grabbed Rowan’s pocket. “I would like it noted,” squeaked Tick, “that mice do NOT swim!”

The train is waiting. Turn the page.



The builder was a hermit crab in a striped spiral shell, no bigger than Rowan's mitten, standing on the highest wall. “PINCH!” it said. “Builder. King. Also the whole army. Isn't it MAGNIFICENT?” It was! It had taken, Pinch said, all summer.

On a dark rock nearby lay a big old grey seal with a whiskery face. “Grandmother Swell,” she said, without moving a whisker. “I've watched this beach for forty years. The tide takes the low side first, dear, and the high side last, and it takes all of it by morning. It always has.”

“Not THIS time!” said Pinch. “This time we build the wall HIGHER. Higher than the whole SEA!”

Rowan looked at the kingdom—the tall tower, the domed hall, the glinting garden—and at the foam creeping up the sand, hissss, and thought: not all of it can be saved. So which part?

★ The tide is coming for the whole kingdom, and there's an hour! Where does Rowan start?

- **Help Pinch build the wall higher:** *If you choose the wall, it's what Pinch wants — and it's one wall against a whole ocean! → turn to page 5*
- **Help Pinch move the whole kingdom up the beach:** *If you choose to move it, you'll find out what sand does when you pick it up. → turn to page 19*
- **Ask Grandmother Swell how the tide comes in:** *If you choose the seal, she knows exactly which part goes first — and there's a bird's nest in the way of the answer. → turn to page 33*



They built! Rowan scooped and Pinch patted—pat, pat, pat—and the seaward wall rose, lumpy and wet and taller than Pinch by a lot. The first foam-line touched its foot and slid back. Pinch cheered. “HOORAY!”

“HIGHER!” said Pinch. “It’s WORKING!”

Rowan looked down the beach. The next line of foam was closer than the last. The one after that would be closer still—that was what a tide was. A wall could be higher than one wave. Rowan wasn’t sure it could be higher than ALL of them, and every scoop that went into the wall was a scoop that wasn’t going anywhere else.

★ The wall’s holding — for now! Keep building, or stop and look at the whole kingdom?

- **Keep building — higher, faster, the whole hour:** *If you choose the wall, you’ll spend everything on it, and the sea will only need one good wave. → turn to page 7*
- **Stop and walk the kingdom — which part matters most?:** *If you choose to look, the wall stops growing — and you’ll find out what’s really in the throne room. → turn to page 9*



— The Great Wall —

They built the whole hour. The wall grew as tall as Rowan's knee, then higher, wet and shining. Every scoop went into it. Pinch stood on top and dared the sea. “COME ON, then!”

The sea did not need daring. It sent one patient wave that came up the sand, leaned on the wall, and went round both ends, under the middle, and over the top all at once. WHOOMP! The wall sat down. Then the tower behind it, and the throne room, and the garden, because nothing had been done for any of them. Everything, at once.

Pinch sat where the kingdom had been. “It was HIGHER,” Pinch said. “Higher than one wave,” said Grandmother Swell. “Nothing on this beach has ever been higher than the tide, dear.”

Rowan looked at the smooth empty sand. Nothing saved—not even whatever had been in the throne room. “Oh,” said Tick, very small.

“We put everything in one place,” said Rowan, “and lost everything in one wave. Let me go back and CHOOSE!”

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



Rowan put down the sand and walked the walls with Pinch. Slowly, the way you look at something you might not see again.

The Great Tower: tallest, prettiest, on the low side nearest the sea—first to go. The long wall: just a wall. The garden: a ring of sea-glass, blue and green and one gold piece, glinting like treasure! And the domed throne room, on the high side, with a doorway the size of a thumb.

Rowan looked in. On a scallop-shell throne sat one tiny, worn, empty snail shell. “My first one,” said Pinch, very quietly. “I was born in that. I grew out of it. I kept it.”

Rowan understood, then, that not everything in the kingdom was sand.

Turn the page.



Rowan knelt and held up both mittens, cupped. “This hand is what we GET,” Rowan said. “This hand is what we GIVE UP. Every idea has to fill both!”

Save the tower: it was the tallest and the best, and it was on the low side, and it would take the whole hour and every scoop, and it would STILL go. Big get, bigger give-up. Save the wall: not much of a get.

Save the tiny shell: five minutes, one careful walk up the beach. Small get? Rowan looked at Pinch. No! The only thing in the kingdom that couldn't be built again tomorrow. That was the biggest get on the beach, and the smallest give-up.

“Sand comes back,” said Grandmother Swell from her rock. “It's the beach. Ask what doesn't.”

Turn the page.



END OF YOUR FREE SAMPLE

Can the sandcastle be saved?

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

Chose "Help Pinch move the whole kingdom up the beach" or "Ask Grandmother Swell how the tide comes in" 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 28.

Books that branch. Minds that grow.

The tide is coming for the most magnificent sandcastle ever built — and its tiny builder wants to save ALL of it! ★

Tonight, every choice belongs to YOU. Build the wall higher than the whole sea? Carry the kingdom up the beach in armfuls? Dig the water a road straight through a sandpiper's nest? There's an hour, there's one thing in the throne room that sand can't replace, and not everything on the beach belongs to Pinch.

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 28 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 we get, what we give up, what can't come back — and Choose What's Right.

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 Sandcastle Kingdom* together

Tonight the Night Train stops at Shellcomb Sands, where the most magnificent sandcastle ever built stands on the wet sand and the tide is coming in for it, the way it does every night. Pinch, the hermit crab who built it, wants to save ALL of it — a wall higher than the whole sea. Grandmother Swell, the old seal on the rock, has watched forty years of tides and knows exactly which part goes first. There's an hour, there's one thing in the throne room that sand can't replace, and not everything on the beach belongs to Pinch. Your child — as Rowan — is about to learn that you can't keep everything, that the tallest tower is often the smallest keep, and that the give-up hand sometimes holds something that isn't yours.

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 before making it — what we get, what we give up, and what can't come back. A kingdom of sand against a tide is the purest version there is.

✦ SECONDARY SKILL

Choose what's right

Noticing when the thing you'd spend belongs to someone else — a sandpiper's lent glass, a sandpiper's nest in the straightest line for the channel — and letting that change the trade.

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: what do we get, what do we give up — and what doesn't come back?

One hour, one tide, and a kingdom that can't all be saved. Rowan's two cupped hands turn 'save everything' into a choice: the Great Tower is the tallest, prettiest thing on the beach, and it's on the low side and would take the whole hour and go anyway; the tiny shell in the throne room takes five minutes and is the only thing sand can't replace. Every dead end is the same wish in a new shape — a wall higher than the whole sea, armfuls of everything, channel-and-wall-both — and the tide is never fooled by a half. Watch the quiet turn on page 10, when Rowan looks through the thumb-sized doorway and finds that not everything in the kingdom is sand. At ages 3–8 this looks wonderfully simple: "if we do this, what do we get — what do we give up — and what can't come back?"

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 one more question: "**Which of these comes back tomorrow, and which doesn't?**" Kids who can fill the 'give up' hand out loud have done the hardest part. (Use it at least once a night.)

✓ TRY SAYING	✗ INSTEAD OF
"If we spend the hour on the wall, what happens to everything behind it?"	" <i>HIGHER than the whole SEA!</i> " (one patient wave, and everything at once)
"Which of these can we find on the beach again tomorrow? Which can't?"	" <i>Grab EVERYTHING that isn't sand!</i> " (armfuls, and all of it in the moat)
"One whole thing, or two halves?"	" <i>The channel AND the wall — both!</i> " (half a channel is a puddle)

SECONDARY

Choose what's right

The habit: whose is that — and is it ours to spend?

Some of what's on the beach isn't Pinch's. The sandpiper lent glass for the garden, and its nest-scape sits right in the straightest line for the channel. On page 36 Rowan digs through it, hears the words 'it was only a scrape' come out, and stops — because it was only a scrape the way the throne room was only sand. The trade-off scan gets a third question here: not just what we get and what we give up, but whether the give-up hand is holding something that belongs to someone else.

PARENT MOVE № 2

The Compass vs. Clock Test

When a choice is really *fast* versus *right*, **hold up two fists** — one is the clock (the straight line through the nest), one is the compass (the curve around it). Ask: "**Which fist is 'it's only a scrape'? Which one is 'it's somebody's'? ... Which one does Rowan want to be holding when the sandpiper comes back?**" Let them tap the fist.

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 Pinch do?"** (Pinch's answer at every fork is the one where nothing gets given up — **"HIGHER!"** **"Move ALL of it!"** **"Channel AND wall!"** — and it's small and fierce and completely sure, which is exactly why it's useful. Even a 3-year-old can hear a plan with nothing in the give-up hand. And watch it learn: on page 28 it opens its claw to argue about the sandpiper's glass, and closes it.)

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 Swell

The big old grey seal who has watched this beach for forty years from the same dark rock. Read her slow, low and unbothered, like the sea itself — she never tells Rowan what to save; she says what the tide does, and waits.

Pinch

The hermit crab in the striped shell — builder, king, and the whole army. Read Pinch small, fierce and very loud for its size — **"HIGHER than the whole SEA!"** — and let it go quiet and gentle the first time it opens the throne room door.

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.

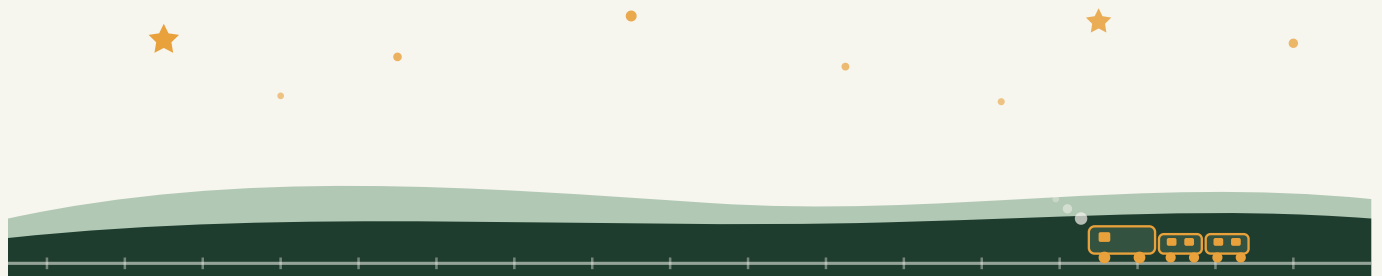
AFTER THE LAST PAGE — THREE LIGHTS-OUT QUESTIONS

1. "Which choice was the hardest tonight — and what made it hard?"
2. "What did we decide to let the tide take tonight — and what did we carry up the beach? What made the small thing worth more than the tower?"
3. "Some of the glass, and the nest, belonged to the sandpiper. How did that change what Rowan chose? What's something of someone else's that we take care of?"

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.

